



April 15, 2019

Honourable Lisa Thompson
Minister of Education
22nd Floor, Mowat Block
900 Bay Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1L2

Dear Minister Thompson:

At the April 9, 2019 regular board meeting, the Avon Maitland District School Board directed the Chair to write a letter to the Minister of Education on behalf of the Board.

The Avon Maitland District School Board always appreciates initiatives to improve the outcomes of our students and we are pleased that the Ministry is increasing focus on skilled trades and STEM which aligns with our own Strategic Plan. However, we feel that adding an “A” to STEM (arts education), would engage more students in their high school education. In this light we are concerned about the unintended consequences of increasing average class sizes in secondary, and mandating e-learning, especially in rural areas like ours in Huron and Perth Counties.

While we appreciate that the changes you propose will save money in the short term, our concerns include:

- Hands-on classes such as technology, science, agriculture, construction, etc. require small classes with a high degree of supervision to ensure effective learning; instill confidence and competency; and ensure safety. Students heading to trades, colleges and work are the majority in our Board.
- If students are not successful in high school, or cannot get the programming they need, they will face a long term decrease in earning potential and the already existing problem of a shortage of skilled workers in Ontario will be increased rather than decreased. Our two counties are already in a position of more skilled workers needed than available.
- In order to increase our labour force into the future we need to be able, mathematically, to continue to offer robust, small-class programming. This will not be possible with a higher class-size average in existing schools. That, in turn, will mean a reduction in the number of secondary schools making it even more difficult to attract/retain young families given fewer schools with a reduced breadth of programming.
- These problems will be exacerbated by large, multiple e-learning classes. But two additional issues we foresee are how will the necessary personal computers be funded? And difficulties with internet access in student’s homes will add to the inequities for rural families. As one of the first adopters of e-learning, Avon Maitland DSB has a lot of experience in what works, and, perhaps more importantly, what does not work in e-learning and we would be very pleased to share our experience with the Ministry.
- The long-term effect of no teaching positions available for new teachers in Ontario with secondary qualifications will mean no young teachers with fresh energy and learning will be in our schools for several years and it will very likely deter students from attending teacher’s college, leading to a shortage of qualified teachers down the road.

Our Special Education students will have their own difficulties with this model so we are attaching some comments from our Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) on how these changes may result in the diminution of potential of our most vulnerable students which may result in their being dependent on government financial assistance for more of their lives. We want all of our students to have a future with meaningful work and comfortable self-supporting incomes. We hope that you will continue to work with us to give all of our learners the best possible outcomes from their public education.

We truly appreciate this opportunity to engage in your on-going consultation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Colleen Schenk". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Colleen Schenk
Chair
Avon Maitland District School Board

cc OPSBA
Randy Pettapiece, MPP, Perth-Wellington
Chairs, Ontario School Boards
AMDSB SEAC

The Avon Maitland District School Board Special Education Advisory Committee has forwarded the following motion to the Board.

AMDSB SEAC supports the Board of Trustees to consider the following statements/clauses, etc., if they deem it appropriate, to include in an advocacy letter.

General:

Concerned about the learning experiences of students with special needs.

- Special Education already runs in deficit; we would like the Ministry to continue to look at overall special education funding model so we can better meet the needs of all of our students.
- Lack of specialty trained staff in rural areas: BCBAs
- Student Success model of a 'caring adult' – with increasing class sizes numbers of staff (both teachers and all others) will eventually decline; relationships are key/critical to student success; will teachers/adults have the time to help students with special needs, and at-risk students in general?
- Lack of course options for students especially in smaller rural high schools. It is already difficult to get a breadth of programming in smaller rural high schools

Agreement with the following quote from Peel DSB statement:

“In smaller classes, students are more engaged and able to focus on relevant tasks. Teachers are also able to spend more one-on-one time supporting student learning and well-being, are better able to individualize instruction, and spend less time on classroom management.”

e-learning

- We would like to see specific information regarding exemptions and what direct human supports will be in place for students to be successful. For example, AMDSB has an e-hub model, whereby a student taking an on-line course can get direct support from a teacher in their high school for support and guidance. The MOE has not indicated that they will be providing this kind of access to an adult for support and, if this is a Provincial model, then it would be appreciated if the MOE could provide this kind of support at the board level.
- Access in rural areas – WiFi and/or access to high speed in many homes is still an issue.
- Continuing support of 1:1 technology will be limited

Autism

- Lack of direct autism supports at the classroom level (e.g. EAs, BCBAs etc.)
- AQ training for teachers, one PD day, Geneva Centre training; is not enough on its own to meet the needs of students in the classroom