

September 8, 2023

Hon. Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
5th Flr, 438 University Ave.
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

Via email: minister.edu@ontario.ca

RE: GNS Insufficiencies

Dear Minister Lecce,

At the June 20, 2023, meeting of the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB), Trustees passed a motion directing the Chair to write to the Minister of Education to express the Board's concern that provincial allocations through the Grant for Student Needs (GSN) are insufficient to meet operational needs.

This decision came following Trustee review and approval of TVDSB's Preliminary 2023-2024 Budget.

Specific areas of concern include replacement staff for absences, temporary student accommodations, Educational Assistant wages, Special Education funding, statutory benefits, IT infrastructure and devices, and transportation.

Replacement Staff for Absences

Absences continue to be high in all staffing groups and have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Replacement costs for absences therefore continue to be a challenge, given the centrally bargained language in Collective Agreements as it relates to the sick leave/short term disability language. The lack of funding in this area is a significant and sustained budget pressure.

Temporary Student Accommodations

With notable increases in enrolment over the past few years, TVDSB is incurring substantial expenses for temporary accommodations (portables). Temporary accommodations costs for the board over the past four years, including the current year's projections, total \$20.1 million, whereas Ministry funding for this expense totals only \$6.4 million. The 2023-2024 temporary accommodation funding provided is only \$1.4 million.

Educational Assistant Wages

Salary amounts for Educational Assistants are significantly lower at TVDSB than surrounding areas. With the recently centrally negotiated and ratified CUPE Collective Agreements, the opportunity to conduct local market value job evaluations and wage adjustments has been eliminated for this group of staff. In addition, the Ministry has not provided any additional funding to address this issue.

Special Education Funding

Special Education expenses are budgeted to exceed the special education funding by \$3.4 million in 2023-2024 (consistent with the prior year). Recognizing that the need here is significant, Trustees passed a motion at the Board meeting on June 27, 2023 to write a separate letter requesting that the government address chronic shortfalls in provincial funding for Special Education. This letter will be forwarded separately.

Statutory Benefits

On June 6, 2023, TVDSB wrote a letter urging the Ministry to address the substantial impact on our budget of longstanding increases in Employment Insurance (EI) and Canada Pension Plan (CPP) benefit expenses. Since 2019, TVDSB has estimated approximately \$12.2 million in additional EI and CPP statutory benefit expenses in excess of funding because of increases in maximum earnings amounts and rate changes. Additional increases are projected in the coming years.

IT Infrastructure and Devices

Additional funding for computing devices was received during the pandemic. This funding supplemented some of the board's immediate short-term needs during remote learning to support students and staff. There is a continued need to sustain additional funding for student and staff computing devices in response to ongoing replacement and curriculum needs.

Cyber threats and security and privacy requirements to protect and support in-person and remote learning have resulted in increased costs in software and hardware needed to maintain these complex networking systems and infrastructure. There is an immediate need for sustained additional funding for this critical technology infrastructure.

Transportation

The Ministry of Education's new Transportation Funding formula announced for the 2023-2024 school year is deficient as it does not provide funding for minivans. Nineteen percent of the TVDSB's Transportation Consortium routes are contracted with bus operators for minivans, the majority of which are for special education students. This has resulted in a decrease in funding of \$13.5 million that is being provided

temporarily as transition funding. We ask that the Ministry address this issue in the 2024-2025 GSNs in order to support the needs of TVDSB's most vulnerable students. As one of the fastest growing school boards in Ontario, TVDSB faces unique and unprecedented pressures. If the GSN is not adjusted, our school board will continue to be met with serious challenges serving the needs of Thames Valley schools, staff, and communities. Moreover, permanent staffing and program reductions will be necessary. As I have done through past letters and Ministry calls, I will continue to advocate on behalf of my fellow Trustees and the entire school board for immediate action to address these critical and time sensitive issues.

I would like to extend an invitation for you to visit Thames Valley so that we can further collaborate on addressing this unprecedented growth.

The Executive Assistant to the Chair's Office, Danielle Hancock, would be happy to arrange a meeting, and can be reached at d.hancock@tvdsb.ca or (519) 452-2000 Ext. 20219.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "L. Pizzolato".

Lori-Ann Pizzolato
Chair of the Board
Thames Valley District School Board

cc: Trustees