

PARENT VOICE IN EDUCATION PROJECT

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Parent Voice in Education Project

REPORT



Ontario

Report of the Parent Voice in Education Project

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A. Letter to the Minister of Education

To the Honourable Gerard Kennedy
Minister of Education
Ontario

Dear Minister,

I am pleased to submit to you the report of the **Parent Voice in Education Project (PVEP)**. When you named a group of parent leaders to the project on 6 November 2004, you asked us to make recommendations on the establishment of an independent, representative province-wide parent body that would be accountable to parents. To do so, the project members believed that consultation with parent communities was the key. We are happy to report that our recommendations are, in large part, the result of the dialogue that we have had with those communities during these last few months.

Through the use of the members' widespread networks, we were able to reach parents throughout the province. Our discussion paper, which served as the basis of our consultation, generated enthusiasm and interest in all areas of the province and within the four publicly funded education systems. It is obvious from the quality of the responses that individuals and parent groups took the time to reflect on the questions asked. The responses were fairly consistent. Parents want their school councils to be effective. They wish to be able to contribute more on an individual level to the education of their children. They want to help strengthen the public education system as a whole. We would like to thank all the individuals and groups who sent us submissions. We know how much we asked of them under such tight timelines.

Our analysis of the submissions and extensive discussions between the members resulted in recommendations that outline strategies to strengthen the parent voice at the local level, support the school system in welcoming parents and establish a provincial structure to ensure parents at the school and board level receive the support they need and are consulted on important issues affecting education.

We believe that a strong and independent parental voice in every school, and throughout all communities, requires support from the Ministry of Education and school boards. It is our belief that empowering the parent voice at the local level is the key approach to increasing parental involvement. Our recommendations have been drafted in that light.

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to strengthening the public education system in Ontario. We look forward to the implementation of these recommendations.

Gabrielle Blais, *Chair*

March 31, 2005

B. Executive summary and recommendations

On November 6, 2004, Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy appointed twenty parent leaders from across the province to the Parent Voice in Education Project. Our task was to give advice on how to create an independent, representative province-wide parent voice that is accountable to parents.

Our starting point was to ask parents for their input. We produced a Discussion Guide asking parents how they wanted to increase their involvement in education at the local and provincial level. We were amazed by the number and quality of the responses we received.

We distributed copies of the Discussion Guide to all schools in Ontario. We organized eleven public meetings in eight communities and supported parents who were holding their own meetings. We used the Ontario Parent Council web site to keep parents up to date and encourage online submissions. We developed a network of Corresponding Associates who received updates and provided us with valuable insights.

We received more than 1,150 submissions from parents and organizations representing thousands of voices. We reviewed research on parent involvement, previous government reports and legislation, the role of the Ontario Parent Council and the evolution of school councils. We looked at the successes and the barriers to increasing parental involvement at all levels of the education system.

Though there was a wide range of response to the Discussion Guide, we saw three key areas where parents wanted the PVEP to take action. They wanted to see the parent voice empowered within the education system; they wanted the system transformed so that it was a more welcoming and inclusive environment for parents; and they wanted the differences among Ontario's diverse communities recognized and addressed.

Parents recommended that the province develop a more effective system of communication for parents, including two-way communication from the local to the provincial level, and communication among parents at the local and regional levels.

Parents also told us they wanted more information. They wanted more regular updates on their individual children's education, and they wanted access to information about the education system as a whole – about how the system works, who is responsible for what, how education is funded, what the appropriate channels are to address specific concerns, and how to be meaningfully involved in their children's education.

A recurring theme in the submissions was the need for schools to be more welcoming. Parents said they wanted to be partners in the education of their children and they would like to feel that their contribution is welcomed and valued. They told many stories of the difference a principal could make to the culture of a school. We know that parent involvement is most successful where principals, teachers and parents work together in the best interests of each child.

Parents made many suggestions about what kind of structure or model could support their involvement. However, they very clearly did not want more layers of bureaucracy or other

mechanisms that would filter or “translate” their voice. Parents said they wanted to have the parent voice heard and their local involvement enhanced. Few people believed that a province-wide structure was *the* answer. Rather, they saw a parent voice at the provincial level as something that would support and enable parents to speak directly to the Minister and other decision makers.

We hope that the structure we have suggested will enhance parental involvement at all levels. We believe that there must be a new and fundamental commitment to parental involvement that connects the provincial level directly to parents at the school level. This new approach to parental involvement must be embedded at the Ministry level so that it can permeate the system.

- 1.** We recommend that the Minister of Education champion the integral role of parental involvement in a child’s education and that this be a key message in all communications to students, parents, educators and the public.
- 2.** We recommend that the Minister of Education develop and begin implementation of a provincial Parental Involvement policy.
- 3.** We recommend that the Minister of Education establish an Office of Parental Involvement within the Ministry of Education to develop, implement, support and monitor compliance with the provincial Parental Involvement policy, including the existing legislation on school councils, at all levels of the education system.
- 4.** We recommend that the mandate of the Ministry of Education’s District Offices be changed to include, as a major function, supporting parental involvement and school council effectiveness at the school and board level. This will include:
 - a) Working with the Office of Parental Involvement in the implementation of the provincial Parental Involvement policy at the board and school level
 - b) Supporting school boards by expanding capacity for parental involvement at the school level (training principals, teachers and school councils)
 - c) Facilitating two-way communication from the board and school level to the Ministry of Education regarding parental involvement
 - d) Organizing district-wide town halls and policy consultations in each Ministry district including one per year with the Minister
 - e) Providing an annual report on the state of parental involvement at the regional level to the Office of Parental Involvement.
- 5.** We recommend that the Minister of Education require school boards to:
 - a) Accept responsibility and ownership for the advancement of parental involvement at the Director of Education / senior staff level
 - b) Form Parent Involvement Advisory Committees (PIACs), chaired by a parent, to advise the Director of Education on how to increase parental involvement

Their mandate will include:

- i. creating an annual implementation plan at the start of each year to facilitate parent participation at the school and board level
 - ii. developing strategies to help school councils reduce the barriers to parental involvement in their children's education
 - iii. establishing a protocol on information dissemination to parents and school councils
 - iv. producing and distributing a directory of parent organizations (ethnic, advocacy and student needs) to all school councils
 - v. providing an annual report to the District Offices on parental involvement in the school board, including a summary of involvement in each school
- c) Ensure that principals have the proper supports to carry out their responsibilities for fostering parental involvement at the school level
 - d) Ensure that Directors of Education are accountable for fostering parental involvement at the board level
 - e) Facilitate district meetings and a network of communications for all school councils between the school board and councils and among the school councils.

6. We recommend that school councils:

- a) Create an action plan at the beginning of the school year to address gaps or opportunities for parental participation; this plan should be reviewed halfway through the school year
- b) Publish an annual evaluation of parental involvement in their school and recommend strategies for increasing parental involvement (e.g., information, training, translations.) The report will be forwarded to the board's PIAC
- c) Have a specific focus on engaging parents and fostering parental involvement generally within their school community.

7. We recommend that the Minister of Education establish an advisory Board of Parents to be selected by, and accountable to, parents through an open and transparent selection process. The Board of Parents will:

- a) Facilitate the development and implementation of the provincial Parental Involvement policy at all levels of the education system
- b) Monitor the state of parental involvement across the system
- c) Promote the use of multiple methods for two-way communications between parents and the Minister of Education
- d) Receive annual reports and data from school boards and the Ministry of Education's District Offices on parental involvement
- e) Receive administrative support from the Office of Parental Involvement

- f) Advise the Minister of Education on issues regarding parental involvement and identify those issues that require province-wide consultation to solicit parent input
- g) Consider and advise on a range of communications and outreach strategies (surveys, town halls, electronic, existing groups, public consultations)
- h) Nominate parent representatives to Ministry committees
- i) Have a membership of three parent representatives from each of the Ministry's six regions (at least one representative would be from a school council and one would be a parent not connected to a school council) taking into account the above-mentioned criteria
- j) Be selected by the current Board of Parents through an open and transparent application process.

C. What we did

On November 6, 2004, Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy appointed twenty parent leaders from across the province to work on the Parent Voice in Education Project. Our task was to give the Minister advice on how to create an independent, representative province-wide parent voice that is accountable to parents. At our first meeting, a number of principles emerged that would guide our work:

- The consultation process would be a genuine discussion with parents and we were prepared to listen.
- We would reach out to as broad a cross-section of Ontario's parents as possible.
- We would have no pre-conceived ideas of the right answer.
- All types and forms of parental involvement would be recognized and respected.

We decided that our starting point was to ask Ontario's parents for their input. The desire to reach as many parents as possible and give parents the chance to make their voices heard led us to ask for extensions. The Minister granted an extension from February 18, 2005 to March 31, 2005.

A number of consultation strategies were considered. We produced a Discussion Guide to help parents give us their best ideas and suggestions. It asked parents three questions:

- 1.** What is the best way for the Minister to hear the parent perspective on education issues?
- 2.** How do you wish to be involved with your child's education and what support do you need to make that happen?
- 3.** If there is a province-wide parent body:
 - a) What do you think its role should be?
 - b) How would it ensure representation that reflects the diversity of Ontario?
 - c) How could it be independent and separate from Ministry and school board influences?
 - d) How do you think this body should be funded?

These questions were designed to be as open-ended as possible to ensure that we would not lead parents in any one direction. Four possible models were developed to act as a stimulus to the discussion. We did not endorse any one model.

We realized that with such a large province, most parents would not be able to come to centrally organized meetings. They would answer questions on their own, with their school council or with their board-wide parent group. For that reason the Discussion Guide had to be accessible and provide enough context for parents to answer the questions by themselves in a meaningful way.

We organized eleven public meetings in eight communities across the province and supported parents who were holding their own meetings. Parents themselves organized more than forty meetings in their own communities.

Forty-five thousand copies of the Discussion Guide were published in both English and French. In addition, summaries of the Guide were prepared in six additional languages to reach parents without English as a first language. The Discussion Guide was distributed electronically, by mail and posted on our web site. While the Discussion Guide received wide distribution, getting the document into parents' hands was a difficult process. There was no central distribution point to ensure that parents could be easily reached by the Ministry. We had to rely on the goodwill of local boards and principals to get the information out to parents. Some boards supported the work of the Project with enthusiasm while others did not.

We used the web site of the Ontario Parent Council to keep parents up to date. Information and updates were posted on the web, including background material such as research and reports done in other jurisdictions and eventually a sample of the submissions. Online submissions became the primary way for parents to make submissions. The web site presented many possibilities for making information more accessible and this project only scratched the surface of the potential of the Internet.

We also used the media to get information out to parents and other interested members of the public. Media releases, opinion pieces, ads, public service announcements and interviews were used to build public awareness of the project. The most effective tools were emails, web networks, and web postings.

We developed a network of Corresponding Associates. These were parents and interested members of the public who wanted to follow our progress and assist us in the consultations. Corresponding Associates received updates and provided us with valuable insights. They also assisted us in reaching out to other parents and acted as lead parents at the public meetings. They were a welcome addition and we thank them for all their help and advice.

Despite the organizational challenges, the consultation was a success. In the end, we received more than 1,150 submissions from parents and organizations representing thousands of voices. Over 500 parents attended the official public meetings and we responded to more than 680 email and phone enquiries.

D. Background information on parental involvement

Research shows that children do better in school when parents are involved in their education. They have better attendance, lower dropout rates and higher rates of achievement. Parental involvement is a broad term and includes such things as good parenting, helping with homework, serving on school councils and board committees, communicating and meeting with teachers and volunteering in the classroom or on school trips. All forms of parental involvement are beneficial. In every form, parental involvement in education shows children that their parents care about what they are doing and learning, and that they value a good education. Research continues to examine the role and types of parental and community involvement in education and how it can influence student achievement.

Lack of planning and lack of mutual understanding between staff and parents are barriers to effective parental involvement. It is important to communicate regularly with parents from the time their child first enters school, emphasizing that they are valued partners and that their involvement and support make a great deal of difference in their child's school performance. It is also important to provide information, training and support to parents to help their child at home. It is especially important to engage parents who have been marginalized for reasons such as language, poverty, lack of familiarity with the education system, etc. These students benefit the most from parent participation in their learning. Successful parent participation efforts are those that offer parents a variety of roles and activities from which to choose. A continuum of options for parent participation recognizes that parents will make different choices.

Provincial legislation

In the fall of 1993 the Minister of Education and Training introduced Bill 125, an amendment to the Education Act that established the Ontario Parent Council (OPC.) When first established, all OPC members had children in elementary or secondary schools at the time of their appointments and had demonstrated an interest or involvement in education and community issues.

In 1994 the government asked the OPC to investigate the establishment of local school councils across Ontario. Parental involvement in education varied greatly from one community to another, and the involvement depended largely on the attitudes of school boards and the strength of local parent associations. The OPC report recommended that:

- parental participation at the local school level be established through an amendment to the Education Act and
- a school parent council be required for every school to ensure equity of access and consistency of approach for parents across Ontario.

In January 1995 the Royal Commission on Learning (RCL) released its report *For the Love of Learning*. At the heart of its conception of a new approach and commitment to community education and shared responsibilities was the recognition of the need for a local structure that would place the school at the hub. The first of its four main engines or levers for change was the school-community council. The RCL envisioned a new alliance between the school, home and community with representation from parents, teachers, local religious and ethnic communities, health and social service agencies, service clubs, organizations and business. It would aid principals in determining the kind of alliances needed, and resources available, in their communities. As a result of school councils' broad representation, they could assist principals by advising them how parents can best be contacted and encouraged to participate more in the education of their children and in the life of the school. The RCL saw the role of the school-community councils as complementary to the role of school boards, providing the depth of response to local conditions that had been lost at the school-board level.

The RCL recommended that school boards and principals take the lead in establishing and supporting school-community councils and encouraged them to develop the kind of alliances best suited to their area. Principals and councils must be given substantial support by supervisory officers to act as leaders at the board level. Principals and school-community councils would also require greater local autonomy and budget control. They also recommended the Ministry of Education and school boards work together to ensure that school principals have access to community liaison staff to assist them in strengthening school-community linkages.

The RCL report identified some of the specific types of parental involvement that research indicated would best support student learning, such as parents showing a close interest in their children's school progress, helping with homework and home projects and attending various school performances and sports events.

In April 1995 the Ministry of Education and Training issued Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No. 122: School Board Policies on School Councils that directed school boards to develop policies that would establish school councils by June 1996. Every school in Ontario would have a council composed of parents, teachers, the principal, a non-teaching staff member, another person from the community and, for secondary schools, a student. Each council must be chaired by a parent and parents must make up the majority of members. If any of the following associations were established at a school, then one member of that association could be appointed to the school council by its association: the Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations (OFHSA), the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE) or Parents partenaires en éducation (PPE.) School councils were to be consulted on matters that directly affected their children's education such as curriculum goals and priorities, codes of behaviour, school budget priorities, extra-curricular activities, the school year calendar and the selection of principals.

In 1997 the Education Quality Improvement Act mandated that there be school councils in all publicly funded schools in Ontario. By mid 1997 most school boards had completed their school council implementation plans and school councils were forging their own way. However, not all school councils were equally positioned in terms of their experience, advancement, work and the type of support they received from their boards. Frustrations

were beginning to surface from a need for more specific guidelines and clearer accountability measures.

In January 1998 school boards in Ontario were reorganized. Seventy-two new district school boards were established for Ontario's four school systems:

- 31 English-language district school boards
- 29 English-language Catholic district school boards
- 4 French-language district school boards
- 8 French-language Catholic district school boards.

Part of the mandate of the Education Improvement Commission (EIC) was to review the future role of school councils. The EIC conducted an extensive review of the developing research on parental involvement and conducted a province-wide consultation with parents, educators and other interested parties.

The EIC report entitled *The Road Ahead III: A Report on the Role of School Councils* (1998) summarized the status of school councils, how people were responding to their new roles and responsibilities and how they might move forward to become more effective. The EIC found that most parents wanted their school councils to remain advisory bodies but felt that their advice was not always considered and that the mandate and purpose were unclear. While there were some excellent examples of close working relationships between school councils, schools and boards, the EIC noted the need to develop consistent expectations for school councils across the province.

The report also highlighted three specific areas in which school councils might move forward to focus on improved student learning:

- fostering parental and community involvement in education
- participating in the school improvement planning process
- influencing decisions made by principals, school boards and the Ministry of Education and Training.

In 2000 following consultations with parents, school councils and provincial organizations across Ontario, the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education confirmed a number of the recommendations from the EIC. Parents wanted their voices to be heard through school councils. However, they wanted the advisory role of school councils to be clear and consistent province-wide. They wanted school boards and principals to be clear about their roles and responsibilities. Ontario Regulation 612/00 was intended to give new purpose and direction to school councils.

Regulation 612/00 states that the purpose of school councils is, through the active participation of parents, to improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents. A school council's primary means of achieving its purpose is by making recommendations to the principal and board. The companion, Ontario Regulation 613/00, defines specific duties for principals related to school councils. Both regulations required school boards and principals to solicit views from school councils and report back to school councils on any advice received.

Also in 2000 the EIC released a resource to help schools, parents and school councils, *School Improvement Planning, A Handbook for Principals, Teachers and School Councils*. When the EIC mandate ended just after the handbook was published and distributed in print and CD-ROM to schools, the adoption and use of this resource was left up to individual boards and schools. The handbook provided clear direction to local site-based teams, including parents and school councils, on how to collaborate in stimulating a range of effective types of parental involvement through locally developed action plans.

The Ontario Parent Council

Established in 1993 by section 17.1(1) of the Education Act, the mandate of the Ontario Parent Council (OPC) was to provide advice to the Minister of Education on issues related to elementary and secondary education and methods of increasing parental involvement in elementary and secondary school education. Most recently, it consisted of twenty members appointed by the Minister of Education, including six school council nominated members; one member from each of the following provincial parent organizations - Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations (OFHSA), Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE), and Parents partenaires en éducation (PPE); and eleven members “at large”. The chairperson was appointed by the Minister of Education.

Between 1999 and 2004, the top two reasons people contacted the OPC were:

- 1.** Lack of recourse: parents expressed concerns over the lack of recourse when they experience problems with their school, principal or board. Many parents wished the OPC could intervene or that there would be an education ombudsman to enforce laws or regulations.
- 2.** School councils: operations, lack of support, lack of control of school funds.

Among other things, the OPC recommended that:

- email addresses for school councils and an accurate database be available to all school council chairpersons
- legislation be enacted to stipulate the allocation of district board funds and other resources to their school councils
- an interactive web site for school councils be set up and maintained by the Ministry to allow school councils and parents to communicate, exchange information and share best practices.

E. What parents said to us during the consultation

We began by asking parents three questions about what they thought would improve parents' participation in the education system at the local and provincial level. We were amazed by the number and quality of the responses we received.

Since open-ended questions do not usually produce easy statistics, it was difficult to track all the suggestions or see an absolute consensus about the possible options. The tracking of "what parents said" was challenging but rewarding because we heard such a wide range of ideas and suggestions on how the parent voice could be strengthened and what had prevented parents up to now from having the voice and influence they wanted.

Within the many suggestions made by parents were some very strong trends. We saw three key areas where parents wanted the PVEP to take action:

- empowerment of the parent voice
- the transformation of the system into a more welcoming and inclusive environment for parents
- recognizing and addressing the differences among Ontario's diverse communities

Empowerment of the parent voice

Parents welcomed the opportunity to comment on ways to strengthen their voice at the local and provincial levels. They had many ideas that they were willing to share. They talked about the successes they had had in making a difference in the life of a child, family or school. They often thanked us for coming out, listening and agreeing to take back the message.

Parents also enjoyed meeting other parents from their area and exchanging ideas. They mentioned that this type of public meeting should happen on a regular basis. It was a chance to give input and to build networks across a board or a community. We heard many ways to build on the process that had been started in the consultations.

Listening to parents

In response to the question about the best way for the Minister of Education to hear the parent perspective, parents suggested the development of a more effective communication system and they talked about the importance of supporting a network of parents, especially at the local level. Town hall meetings, surveys, public meetings, email networks, informative web sites, paper-based information for those that did not have access to the web, the use of school newsletters and communications distributed through libraries, child care centres and community centres were mentioned as important tools that parents could use to communicate

with each other and school boards. The Minister of Education could also use these vehicles to communicate with parents.

Parents expected that all communications would be two-way conversations. They wanted information from the Minister of Education, the Ministry of Education, the school board, the school and the teacher. At the same time, they wanted a way to have input and for this input to be heard and responded to by those in positions of power. Many parents said that they wanted to be able to communicate directly with the Minister of Education, and they stressed the importance of a grassroots approach. They suggested that the Minister come to regular meetings in their regions, but they acknowledged that it may not always be possible to speak directly to the Minister. They said they wanted direct communication with someone who would be willing to listen and have the power to respond or act on the information.

Parents pointed out repeatedly that they did not want to run their schools – they wanted to have influence and leave the running of the schools to those who are charged with doing so.

Along with this enthusiasm, many of the more experienced parents cautioned us, “We have been asked before and little has changed. When is someone going to act on our suggestions?” A number of parents mentioned that they had made presentations to the Education Improvement Commission in 1998 and to the Parliamentary Assistant’s School Councils Consultation Paper Committee in 2000 and at the Rozanski hearings in 2001. These public consultations had raised hopes that change was possible, yet parents felt that the reports had been ignored. We committed that we would listen closely and make recommendations that would be compelling and constructive. We note here that the Minister of Education met with the PVEP members and, at that meeting, clearly reaffirmed his commitment to bringing parents to the table in a meaningful way.

“Face-to-face meetings throughout Ontario would give equal representation to all Ontarians, especially those in the North.”

parent, Marathon

“Parents not only want a voice, they want to know that someone is listening and will respond in a timely fashion.”

Dufferin-Peel schools

Providing information to parents

The submissions we received reflected two types of parent needs. Many parents wanted to be more involved by helping their individual child. They wanted clear, accurate information about what and how their child was doing in school and information about what they could do to help. They wanted to be able to support the child at home and talk with the teacher in a respectful and understandable way. Parents wanted the school to be open to their participation in a variety of school activities that may take place at home, at the school or in the community.

Other parents wanted to take a more active role in policy development and decision-making at the school and board levels. Parents wanted information about decisions being made at

the school, board and provincial level. They wanted to know how to comment on policy in a timely manner. We found that most parents interested in this level of work wanted access to detailed information.

Communicating with parents

We believe that there needs to be better, more consistent and more frequent communications for parents. Things such as a parent handbook with information on how to be involved in effective ways, how the system is organized, how to receive information, and a directory of parent groups and resources would be very

“We also believe that the role of school councils should be enhanced and given more support by the Ministry.”

parent, London

helpful, especially for newcomer parents. The Ministry should maintain a parent web site and email list to distribute information. We are asking that the Ministry of Education District Offices include supporting parent involvement as a major function in their mandate. This will entail organizing public meetings for parents to hear about provincial education issues and for the Minister to hear from the grassroots about what is working and what is not. We believe that school boards should develop a protocol for parents to seek answers and information at the school, board or regional level.

The transformation of the system into a more welcoming and inclusive environment for parents

Early on in our discussions, we identified that there is no clear ownership for parental involvement in the system. We believe that everyone, at all levels in the education system, from the Minister of Education to each parent in a school, needs to take responsibility for increasing parental involvement. We built our recommendations based on this belief and have tried to pinpoint specific strategies and tactics at the local, board and provincial level to effect this transformation.

In their submissions, parents frequently said they would be more involved if they felt more welcomed in their schools. As we have heard for many years, parents want to be partners in the education of their children and they would like to feel that their contribution is welcomed and valued. They believe that when the school and the teachers see parents as partners, rather than threats, the child will benefit and the school will flourish.

Supporting parents

Parents told many stories of the difference a principal can make to the culture of a school. Principals who genuinely open the doors of the school to all parents can unlock the talents of the parent community and magnify the resources available to the classroom and school. We know that principals need support, encouragement and training to help them.

We heard many stories of individual and group efforts that truly made an impact on the life of the school. One parent, for example, told us that when there was a problem in the community, the whole community came together to talk about the problem and find a solution. While we realize this type of solution is not possible in all communities, it reflects the value of involving the community and tailoring our recommendations to the reality of the local communities across the province. One solution will not fit all of Ontario.

“I have a wonderful school council at my child’s school. The principal and staff are open and approachable.

That’s all I need.”

parent, Mississauga

The flip side of this desire to be empowered was the frustration and anger we found when parents were ignored and not asked to help. Parents told us of many examples when they spent literally hundreds of hours being bounced from the teacher to the principal to the board to the Ministry and back to the school with no answer and no help for their child. Parents became frustrated watching their child struggle with a system that appeared indifferent to their needs. Excuses such as “there isn’t any money” or “it is not my responsibility” were interpreted as “we don’t care about the needs of your child.”

Parents also expressed a different type of frustration. They have heard the refrain that “education is a partnership” or that “it takes a village to educate a child” but they have felt shut out by the system. The past ten years have been hard on parents. Many in the urban areas have seen resources stripped away and those in rural areas have seen schools closed and the promised new money did not come through.

Parents would like to see the system change to welcome their involvement. We believe that we need to change the climate to make schools welcoming and reduce barriers to effective parental involvement. By transforming the school system, the local school must be more open and accepting of the full range of parents. The school

“We need you [Minister] to listen and give credit to the time, treasure and talent that exists in this province on school councils today.”

parent, Mississauga

needs to reach out into the community to welcome all parents. This takes time, energy and support. This support must be done through encouragement, training and accountability. By holding the system accountable, many parents told us the people in the system will see that parental involvement is truly valued. What is valued and evaluated is what gets done.

Supporting school councils

We heard clearly that parents have accepted and welcomed the development of school councils. School councils are a fact in many parts of the province. Yet still not all schools have school councils. Many school councils are still struggling to function and reach out to their parents. Parents are looking for healthy and sustainable school councils.

Supporting principals and teachers

Parental involvement is most successful where principals, teachers and parents work together in the best interests of each child. This requires a common understanding and respect for everyone's role in this partnership. Many problems stem from a lack of understanding or knowledge about where to go for help when issues arise. Some school councils have no clear understanding about what their role is or what it should be. We believe that improved communications and better training for both school councils and principals will improve parental involvement at the school level. Parental involvement training should be integrated into principal and supervisory officer training programs.

“Parents should feel a sense of ownership of their child’s school without interfering with the integrity of the teaching process.”

parent, Coldwater

Teachers also have a role to play in ensuring that all parents feel welcome in their children's schools. Faculties of education should include training for teachers in ways to support and encourage parental involvement, and there should be in-service training for school staff and school council members.

Flexible structures for parents

Parents made many suggestions about what kind of structure or model could support their involvement. However, they very clearly did not want more layers of bureaucracy or other mechanisms that would filter or “translate” their voice. Parents said they wanted to have the parent voice heard and their local involvement enhanced. Few people believed that a province-wide structure was *the* answer. Rather, they saw a parent voice at the provincial level as something that would support and enable parents to speak directly to the Minister and other decision makers.

Parents did not want this voice to be a tool of the provincial government. They wanted any parent voice to be accountable to parents rather than the Minister of Education.

Recognizing and addressing the differences among Ontario's diverse communities

In response to the question on diversity, many parents felt that it would be impossible to address this issue on a province-wide parent body given Ontario's size and complexity. However, parents do want to see schools and school boards make an active effort to reach out to the diverse parent voices in their jurisdiction. We agree and believe that communication strategies and links need to be strengthened to ensure that the voices of diverse parents are included. There are still many parents outside the school council system who want to be included. School councils need help and support to be more inclusive. There are also

parents who may not want to be on school councils, but, with support, could be more effectively involved in their children's education and schools.

We do know that there are many differences among the regions of Ontario and that strategies that work in one area may not be effective in another. Parental involvement strategies need to be flexible.

On the issue of funding, parents were very clear – they were doing enough fundraising. They felt strongly that any provincial parent group should be funded by the provincial government. They also felt that the issue of independence was not relevant since this could be addressed through an open and transparent application and selection process.

One of the many interesting ideas raised in the submissions was the notion that society itself should recognize the value of parental involvement. It was suggested that employers should allow parents time off (one or two days per year) to volunteer in their children's school during the day.

“Il serait important d’avoir une représentation proportionnelle des diverses minorités.”

parent, Sarnia

F. Recommendations

At the Ministry of Education

We believe that there must be a new and fundamental commitment to parental involvement that connects the provincial level directly to parents at the school level. This new approach to parental involvement must be embedded at the Ministry level so that it can permeate the system.

As the champion of parental involvement, the Minister of Education needs to deliver the message that parental involvement is integral to a child's education. The Ministry of Education needs to have a clear leadership role in signalling to the system that increasing parental involvement is a priority.

Recommendation #1

We recommend that the Minister of Education champion the integral role of parental involvement in a child's education and that this be a key message in all communications to students, parents, educators and the public.

Our starting point is the development of a province-wide Parental Involvement policy. In addition, there should be an Office of Parental Involvement within the Ministry that will establish, support and monitor implementation of the Parental Involvement policy that includes strategies identified in this report.

Recommendation #2

We recommend that the Minister of Education develop and begin implementation of a provincial Parental Involvement policy.

A provincial policy would provide clear direction to the Ministry of Education, school boards and local schools on steps needed to strengthen parental involvement. This policy should include training for school councils and principals on fostering greater co-operation and providing all new parents with a welcome package that would include information about the system, the school and the local parent groups. The policy would also ensure school councils had the resources to attend conferences and school board meetings, cover the costs of preparing documents and acquire training.

Recommendation #3

We recommend that the Minister of Education establish an Office of Parental Involvement within the Ministry of Education to develop, implement, support and monitor compliance with the provincial Parental Involvement policy, including the existing legislation on school councils, at all levels of the education system.

The Office of Parental Involvement will include senior staff who report directly to the Deputy Minister of Education. Its functions will include:

- Developing the provincial policy on parental involvement
- Establishing the supports necessary to monitor implementation of the policy
- Assuming ownership for the ongoing implementation and review of existing legislation on school councils
- Developing information and resources for parents and system participants including information about how the education system works, where decisions are made and effective forms of parent involvement
- Promoting and facilitating two-way communications between parents and the Minister
- Providing research and conducting surveys
- Facilitating training and developing resources for both school staff and parents
- Creating a repository for parental involvement information (best practices, resources, research, etc.)
- Supporting the Ministry of Education's District Offices in organizing town halls and other public consultations for parents
- Maintaining a parent involvement web site
- Creating an email directory of school council members
- Conducting an audit of existing parental involvement initiatives
- Reviewing reports from the Ministry of Education's District Offices on the status of action taken to increase parental involvement at the board level
- Stimulating the integration of parental involvement training into the faculties of education in Ontario, and into the qualification requirements for principals and supervisory officers.

At the Ministry of Education's District Offices

We believe that the Ministry's District Offices can provide important and effective support for schools and school boards in implementing the Parental Involvement policy.

Recommendation #4

We recommend that the mandate of the Ministry of Education's District Offices be changed to include, as a major function, supporting parental involvement and school council effectiveness at the school and board level.

This will include:

- a)** Working with the Office of Parental Involvement in the implementation of the provincial Parental Involvement policy at the board and school level
- b)** Supporting school boards by expanding capacity for parental involvement at the school level (training principals, teachers and school councils)
- c)** Facilitating two-way communication from the board and school level to the Ministry of Education regarding parental involvement
- d)** Organizing district-wide town halls and policy consultations in each Ministry district including one per year with the Minister
- e)** Providing an annual report on the state of parental involvement at the regional level to the Office of Parental Involvement.

At School Boards

Recommendation #5

We recommend that the Minister of Education require school boards to:

- a)** Accept responsibility and ownership for the advancement of parental involvement at the Director of Education / senior staff level
- b)** Form Parent Involvement Advisory Committees (PIACs), chaired by a parent to advise the Director of Education on how to increase parental involvement. Their mandate will include:
 - i. creating an annual implementation plan at the start of each year to facilitate parent participation at the school and board level
 - ii. developing strategies to help school councils reduce the barriers to parental involvement in their children's education
 - iii. establishing a protocol on information dissemination to parents and school councils
 - iv. producing and distributing a directory of parent organizations (ethnic, advocacy and student needs) to all school councils
 - v. providing an annual report to the District Offices on parental involvement in the school board, including a summary of involvement in each school
- c)** Ensure that principals have the proper supports to carry out their responsibilities for fostering parental involvement at the school level
- d)** Ensure that Directors of Education are accountable for fostering parental involvement at the Board level
- e)** Facilitate district meetings and a network of communications for all school councils between the school board and councils and among the school councils.

At Schools

Recommendation #6

We recommend that school councils:

- a) Create an action plan at the beginning of the school year to address gaps or opportunities for parental participation; this plan should be reviewed halfway through the school year
- b) Publish an annual evaluation of parental involvement in their school and recommend strategies for increasing parental involvement (e.g. information, training, translations.) The report will be forwarded to the board's PIAC
- c) Have a specific focus on engaging parents and fostering parental involvement generally within their school community.

Provincial Board of Parents

We believe that an advisory group of parents can help drive the process and support the work of the Office of Parental Involvement. While the focus of this group will primarily be to advise the Minister on Parental Involvement policy, it will also occasionally act as a sounding board for the Minister of Education when he or she needs to decide which issues should involve broad consultation with parents.

While parents were overwhelmingly against ministerial appointments to any provincial parent group, they also were divided on the wisdom of having parents elected through school councils only. Since school councils are not always representative of the entire school community, there were concerns that this may exclude some parents. We felt that there must be a way to reach parents not traditionally connected to school councils. We believe that to meet the need for balanced and diverse membership, there will have to be an application process. However, we also agree with the parent submissions that this process must be transparent and accountable. Accordingly, we are recommending a process where parents choose parents, free from any outside influences. There should be a clear and open selection process with well-understood eligibility criteria. In our view, this is the best way to meet the goals articulated in the submissions concerning balancing the membership, respecting the diversity of Ontario and opening up the process to as many parents as possible.

We believe that to be eligible to serve on the Board of Parents, an applicant should be a parent with a child or children in one of the four publicly funded school systems for 50 percent of their term of office (this is to ensure that secondary parents can bring their experience to the Board of Parents and not have to vacate their seat early if their child graduates from secondary school before the end of their term). The parent should also be able to demonstrate a level of involvement beyond his or her own child.

Secondary factors will be taken into consideration when appointing members to reflect a balance:

- among the six districts of Ontario
- among the four publicly funded school systems
- in language and religion
- between urban and rural school boards
- between elementary and secondary schools
- of experience with other parent groups and organizations
- between male and female members.

We recognize that many communities have traditionally not been at the table. It should be noted that several members of the PVEP felt strongly that there should be representation from the First Nations and ethnic communities as well. We agree that the importance of including all voices should be taken into consideration in the selection process.

Recommendation #7

We recommend that the Minister of Education establish an advisory Board of Parents to be selected by, and accountable to, parents through an open and transparent selection process. The Board of Parents will:

- a)** Facilitate the development and implementation of the provincial Parental Involvement policy at all levels of the education system
- b)** Monitor the state of parental involvement across the system
- c)** Promote the use of multiple methods for two-way communications between parents and the Minister of Education
- d)** Receive annual reports and data from school boards and the Ministry of Education's District Offices on parental involvement
- e)** Receive administrative support from the Office of Parental Involvement
- f)** Advise the Minister of Education on issues regarding parental involvement and identify those issues that require province-wide consultation to solicit parent input
- g)** Consider and advise on a range of communications and outreach strategies (surveys, town halls, electronic, existing groups, public consultations)
- h)** Nominate parent representatives to Ministry committees
- i)** Have a membership of three parent representatives from each of the Ministry's six regions (at least one representative would be from a school council and one would be a parent not connected to a school council) taking into account the above-mentioned criteria
- j)** Be selected by the current Board of Parents through an open and transparent application process.

The question of whether the Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations (OFHSA), the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE) and Parents partenaires en éducation (PPE) should each hold a guaranteed seat on the Board of Parents generated a vigorous discussion. Members spoke about the advantages in having the three parent organizations that had held seats on the Ontario Parent Council serve on this new body. Others were of the view that the Board of Parents would be open to all parents and no one parent organization would be recognized over another as being more representative of a parent constituency. After a vote, it was decided that the three parent organizations would not have an automatic seat on the Board of Parents. Lesley Schuurs and Tammy Gillespie strongly disagreed with Recommendation #7. Instead, they recommended that the Board of Parents include representation appointed by each parent group recognized in Regulation 612.

However, we want to state clearly that while these three parent organizations do not have an automatic or designated seat on the provincial Board of Parents, they and other parent organizations continue to be provincial organizations that are parent leaders. We fully expect that the Minister of Education would continue to consult with these three bodies and other parent organizations, meet with them, seek nominations for parent representatives and consider the policy recommendations from all organizations. The intent of our recommendation is to broaden the participation of parents, not reduce it. The three groups named above and other parent groups have an important and ongoing role to play in the development of educational policy and direction. The provincial Board of Parents will push for broad consultations in the parent community and not act as the sole voice of parents.

It was further proposed that to oversee the implementation of the new Board of Parents, the PVEP should have its mandate extended for six months to September 30, 2005. Its job would be to oversee the transition to the new Board of Parents by finalizing criteria, soliciting applications and selecting half the members of the new Board of Parents. It would also ensure continuity as work began on the transition from the Ontario Parent Council to the Board of Parents and the establishment of the Office of Parental Involvement.

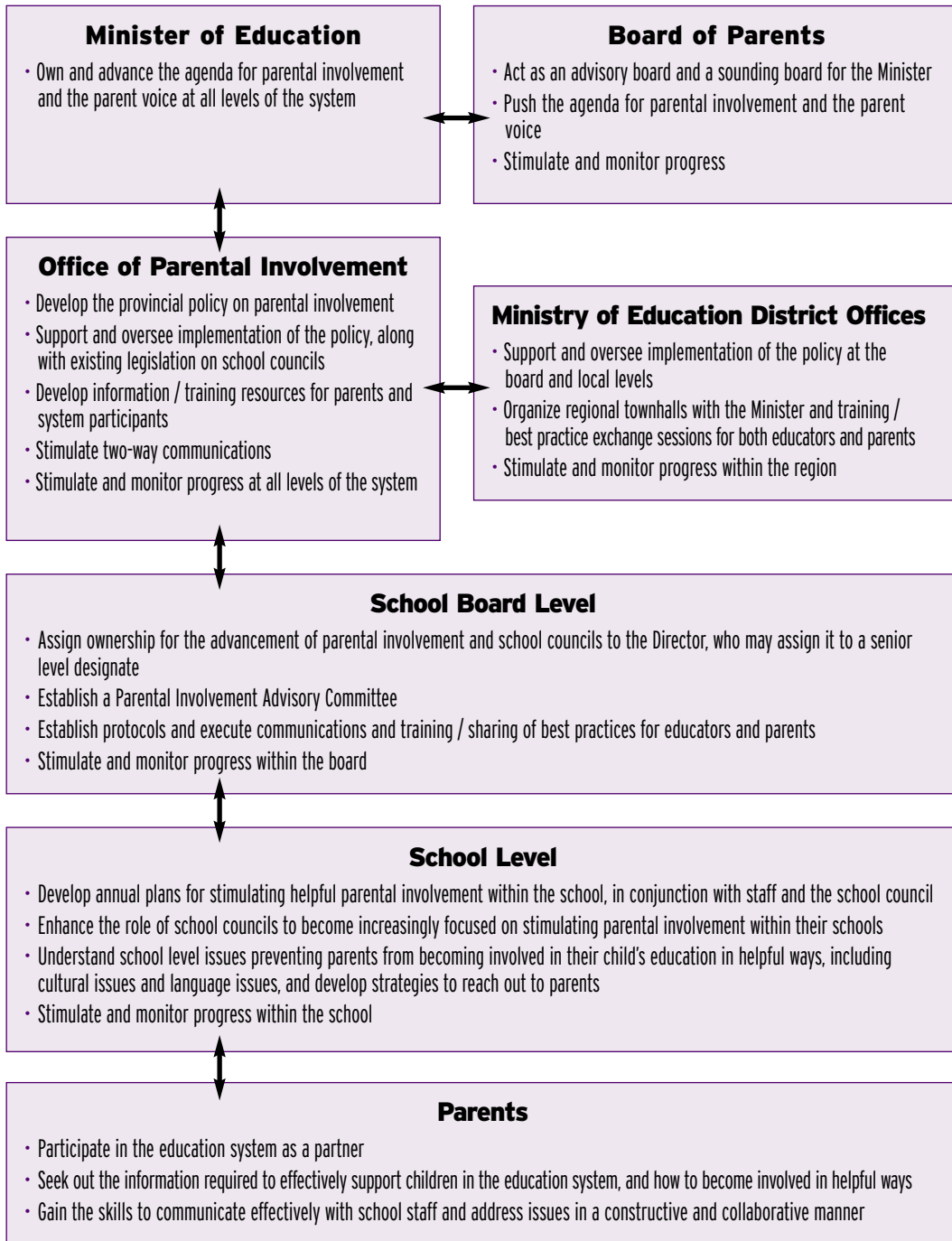
Members of the Board of Parents would serve a three-year term. There would be a fifty percent turnover in membership every eighteen months to preserve stability and create opportunities to bring in fresh perspectives. To oversee the start-up, the first Board would begin with half of its members from the existing PVEP who would serve eighteen months. The other half would be new parent representatives who would serve for three years.

We hope that these recommendations can make a difference in the day-to-day life of the more than 4,700 schools in Ontario. We found this process an exciting opportunity. We hope that we have given expression and shape to some of the ideas sent to us by parents across Ontario. We encourage the Minister of Education to take action and keep the doors open to parents across the province.

Appendices

Appendix A

Chart with sample functions to advance parental involvement in Ontario



Appendix B

Parent Voice in Education Project mandate

- Parents have the right to have a strong, independent, and representative voice at the provincial level in the development of provincial policy.
- Parents are best able to decide how they should communicate with the Minister of Education and with their own parent constituencies.
- Positive results of parent participation in schooling include improved achievement, reduced absenteeism, improved behaviour, and restored confidence among parents in their children's schooling.

The Parent Voice in Education Project will report to the Minister of Education on how to establish an independent, representative province-wide parent body that is accountable to parents. The parent body would serve as the legitimate voice of parents at the provincial level in the development of provincial policy.

In developing its plan, the Parent Voice in Education Project is asked to consider how the recommended province-wide parent body will:

1. Assist in developing parent involvement and participation in the education system at the local, regional, and provincial level and increasing individual parent involvement in children's education
2. Be structured to provide advice to the Minister on behalf of parents, including making appointments to the Education Partnership Table
3. Ensure the most complete representation possible
4. Solicit the views of parents on an ongoing basis

In making these recommendations, the Parent Voice in Education Project is asked to:

1. Consider how the parent body could be supported within existing funding; and,
2. Evaluate the concept of operating with a mix of public, parent, and private funding in order to serve as a truly independent parent voice.

Appendix C

Parent Voice in Education Project membership

Gabrielle Blais, Chair
Orleans

Elizabeth Hayes
Windsor

Laurie Philip
Moose Factory

Alimamy Bangura
Toronto

Brenda Hopkins
Salford

Michele Piccini*
Dundas

Penny Boyce Chester
Toronto

Gord Kerr
Gormley

Lesley Schuur
Ingersoll

Denis Constantineau
Sudbury

Annie Kidder
Toronto

Claude Seguin
Gloucester

Gregg Dame
Port Colborne

Manon Lemonde
Oshawa

Robert Selvadurai*
Toronto

Cathy Dandy
Toronto

Nancy Lewington
Hamilton

Anita Srinivasan
Mississauga

Tammy Gillespie
Marathon

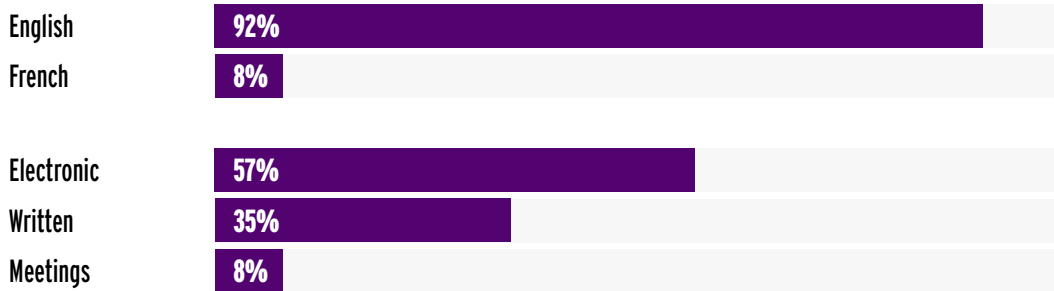
Lamar Mason
Ottawa

Dale Thomson
Echo Bay

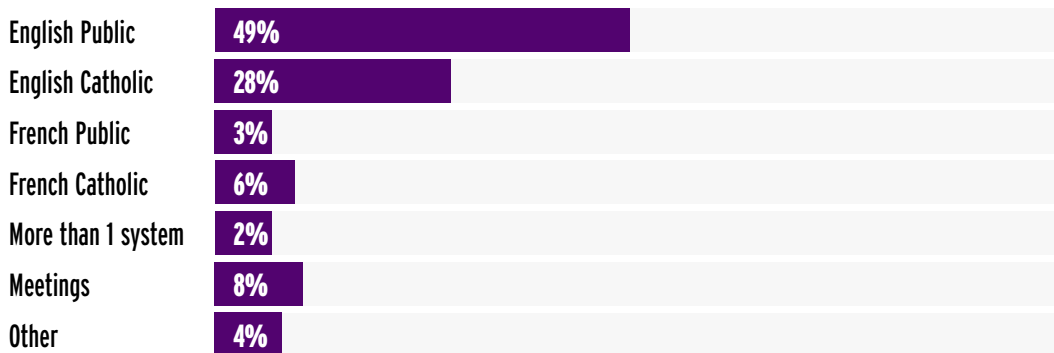
*Robert Selvadurai replaced Michele Piccini who was unable to serve for the entire term of the project.

Appendix D

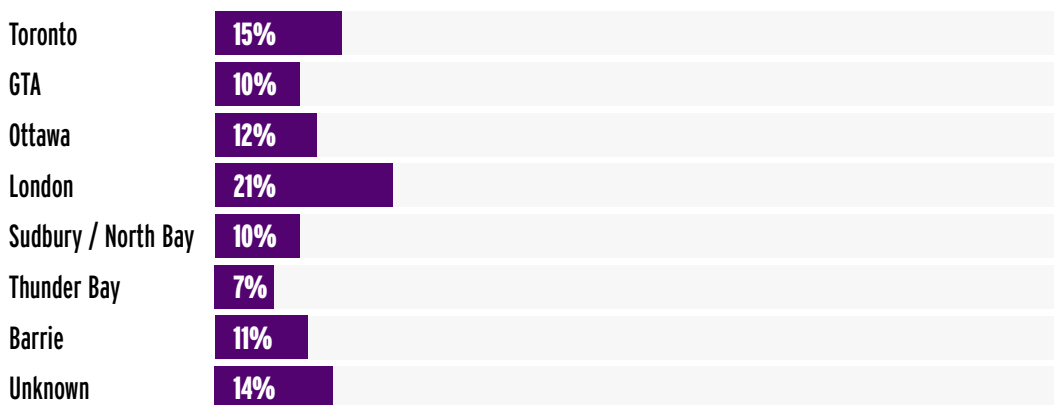
Overview of the Parent Voice in Education Project submissions



Submissions by School System



Submissions by Ministry of Education District



Appendix E

School boards by Ministry of Education Districts

Barrie District

Bluewater DSB
Bruce-Grey CDSB
Durham CDSB
Durham DSB
Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB
Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington CDSB
Simcoe County DSB
Simcoe Muskoka CDSB
Trillium Lakelands DSB

London District

Avon Maitland DSB
Brant Haldimand Norfolk CDSB
Grand Erie DSB
Greater Essex County DSB
Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB
Hamilton-Wentworth DSB
Huron Perth CDSB
Lambton Kent DSB
London CDSB
Niagara CDSB
Niagara DSB
St. Clair CDSB
Thames Valley DSB
Waterloo CDSB
Waterloo Region DSB
Windsor-Essex CDSB

Ottawa District

Algonquin and Lakeshore CDSB
CDSB of Eastern Ontario
Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est de l'Ontario
Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario
Conseil scolaire de district catholiques de l'Est ontarien
Hastings & Prince Edward District School Board
Limestone District School Board
Ottawa-Carleton CDSB
Ottawa-Carleton DSB
Renfrew County CDSB

Renfrew County DSB
Upper Canada DSB

North Bay / Sudbury District

Algoma DSB
Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Aurores boréales
Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Grandes Rivières
Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Nouvel-Ontario
Conseil scolaire de district catholique Franco-Nord
Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Grand Nord de l'Ontario
Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Nord-Est de l'Ontario
DSB Ontario North East
Huron-Superior CDSB
Near North DSB
Nipissing-Parry Sound CDSB
Northeastern CDSB
Rainbow DSB
Sudbury CDSB

Thunder Bay District

Keewatin-Patricia DSB
Kenora CDSB
Lakeland DSB
Northern District School Area Board
Northwest CDSB
Rainy River DSB
Superior North CDSB
Superior Greenstone DSB
Thunder Bay CDSB

Toronto and Area District

Conseil scolaire de district catholique Centre-Sud
Conseil scolaire de district des écoles catholiques de Sud-Ouest
Conseil scolaire de district du Centre Sud-Ouest
Dufferin-Peel CDSB
Halton CDSB
Halton DSB
Peel DSB
Toronto CDSB
Toronto DSB
Upper Grand DSB
Wellington CDSB
York CDSB
York Region DSB

Appendix F

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