

Thank you for the opportunity to once again provide input in establishing budget priorities for the 2017/18 school year. APSSP members value the open dialogue we share with the Finance Committee members regarding the difficult decisions that arise during the budget process.

The members of the Association of Professional Student Services Personnel (APSSP) include Child and Youth Counsellors, Psychological services, Speech and Language Pathology services including Communicative Disorders Assistant, Social Workers/Attendance Counsellors, Orientation Mobility Instructor and ABA Facilitator. APSSP members provide evidence-based programs and interventions that are equitable and support the priorities identified in the Board's strategic plan, and reflect initiatives and policies implemented by the Ministries of Education, Child and Youth Services, Health and Long Term Care, and Community and Social Services. We are guided by the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations and are committed to supporting all students realize their full potential.

Driven by Ministry initiatives in recent years, there has been a focus on mental health within our schools. Following amendments to the Education Act in 2009, promoting well-being became a responsibility of every school board. Further to this, in June 2011, Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy was released. Supporting and Promoting Well Being within Our Schools is one of the four goals established by the Ministry; more recently, in their discussion document Ontario's Well Being Strategy For Education (May 2016), the Ministry of Education is seeking input to develop a shared vision of how we can best support the well-being of all students K-12 across the province.

The Ministry identifies four key areas that help promote student well-being:

- Positive Mental Health
- Safe and Accepting Schools
- Healthy Schools
- Equity and Inclusive Education

It shares the following statistics:

Emotional Well-Being* Percentage of youth (aged 11–15) who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I often feel lonely” 2010 19.7% 2014 24%

Mental Health** Percentage of students reporting “moderate” to “serious” psychological distress 2013 24% 2015 34%.

These measures of student well-being alert us to the need for continued support in a number of areas.

It is estimated that 10% of school age children have communication disorders. Similarly, one in five children/youth will struggle with mental health issues. Suicide accounts for 24% of all deaths among 15-24 year olds and 20% of all Canadians will personally experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

The Ministry acknowledges that ‘while the high school graduation rate has improved significantly over the past decade, there is some evidence of increasing concerns in the areas of emotional well-being and mental health. Students cannot achieve academically if they feel unsafe at school or are bullied online. They cannot be expected to reach their full potential if they have mental health issues and if we do not provide the support they need.’

Within our schools in the Durham Catholic District School Board, many more students with mental health concerns are coming to the attention of members from all disciplines of APSSP. Anxiety in children and youth has sky rocketed, attendance challenges are pervasive in all our schools, and the incidence of violent acts, often directly affecting staff, has increased. At the high school level, a large percentage of attendance problems are related to mental health concerns (often the onset of mental health problems is during adolescence). The number of formal ASISTs (formal suicide interventions) and VTRAs (Violent Threat Risk Assessment) that are completed within our schools have increased; the number of students requiring the services of the Behaviour Resource Team (BRT) and Durham Catholic Autism Resource Team (DCART) is also increasing. As a result, staff often have to prioritize the students on their caseload, and services to other high risk students is delayed.

In particular, at the high school level, there are limited resources available to specifically address anxiety, school reluctance and the social emotional challenges faced by students with oral communication and pragmatic challenges. A collaborative team approach including APSSP personnel (SW, CYC, psychology, SLP), educators and community partners is essential to address the social emotional needs of the student, support their reintegration into school, and develop Individualized Education Plans that accommodate the learning strengths and needs of the individual.

The services provided by disciplines represented by APSSP are vital if we are to ensure all students with the DCDSB are provided with the appropriate supports and afforded the opportunity to succeed. As school board employees with an understanding of the education system and priorities identified by the Board and Ministry we are uniquely qualified to provide services and interventions to students who have academic, behavioural, learning, speech/language and mental health challenges that impact their ability to succeed in school.

We appreciate the fiscal challenges the Board faces, however APSSP believes that enhancement in staffing, at the high school level, would help remove barriers to learning for students with mental health challenges and would also support the Board's and Ministry requirement to ensure that students are in school. Further, initiatives like VTRA, BRT and DCART could be more effective if we could reach more students in a timely manner. Going forward in the budget process, we encourage the Board to prioritize and increase the supports provided by Professional Student Services Personnel in our high schools.

Respectfully submitted by Nicola Dunning

On behalf of Association of Professional Student Services Personnel.