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:. ontario library association

Federation of
ONTARIO
PUBLIC
LIBRARIES

Getting Ontario Up to Speed:

Helping Communities Recover from COVID-19 by Protecting Ontario's Libraries

Fall 2020 Ontario Budget Submission

Ontario's libraries are cost-effective, close to home, and adapt to the priorities of the people and communities they serve. Local public libraries reach 98% of Ontarians in hundreds of communities of all sizes, and students across Ontario depend on their school libraries and teacher-librarians to succeed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how much Ontarians in all communities rely on local libraries in their daily lives – to work, to learn, to connect to community and government services, to find or train for a job and to access health information

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario's libraries have worked tirelessly to meet the evolving and rapidly changing needs of the people they serve. When local public and school libraries were physically closed for several months, they nevertheless stepped up and continued to deliver critical services and supports to their communities and students. In the past several months, as Ontario communities and services have re-opened, and students are returning to class, libraries and library staff have taken careful steps to open their physical doors and offer a wide range of resources and services in a safe, effective manner.

As the Ontario Government carefully balance the ongoing re-opening of the province and economy while managing an upsurge in COVID-19 cases, protecting Ontario's libraries while making smart, targeted investments is essential to Ontario's recovery and making sure that small, rural and Northern communities and schools aren't left behind.

MODERN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Public libraries are always evolving to meet the changing needs of communities. For example, public libraries in large and small communities:

- Provide access to digital resources and e-books in-branch and from the comfort of home, allowing community members to access when and where it suits them;

- Have maker spaces, coding labs and other next generation experiential learning to help children and adults alike develop modern job skills;

- Work with local economic development, employment and social services agencies to assist community members in upgrading their skills and finding a job;

- Partner with ServiceOntario to provide local access through hundreds of public libraries, saving people time and helping them complete these important transactions much closer to home.

Recommendations

As part of the Ontario Government's ongoing focus on economy and the people of Ontario, protecting Ontario's libraries and supporting them through carefully targeted investments will make sure that all people – no matter where they live or learn – will continue to have access to the modern, cost-effective resources and services they need through their local libraries.

- **Maintain critical provincial funding for Ontario's public libraries at current levels** and work with municipalities to prevent unsustainable cuts to public library funding.

- **Leverage Ontario's broadband action plan funding** to ensure that modern broadband connectivity is available in more public library branches in communities across Ontario.

- **Provide critical e-learning support through fair access to modern, digital resources** for the people of Ontario – no matter where they live – by creating an Ontario Digital Public Library.

- **Preserve the proven impact of school libraries on student achievement and success** by requiring that provincial funds currently allocated for school libraries, teacher-librarians and school library professionals are used for this intended purpose.

Photo Credit: Ottawa Public Library

Photo Credit: Vaughan Public Libraries

Photo Credit: Cambridge Public Library

Photo Credit: Dryden Public Library

Photo Credit: Trent Lakes Public Library

Maintain critical provincial funding for Ontario's public libraries at current levels and work with municipalities and the Federal government to prevent unsustainable cuts to public library funding.

Unlike most sectors in Ontario, provincial funding for public libraries has been frozen for over 22 years. Despite no net increase in provincial or municipal funding over this period, public libraries have effectively managed their resources, evolved to meet the needs of their communities and embraced major leaps in technology.

The Ontario government's 2019/20 Budget maintained provincial Libraries Sector Support funding provided directly to Ontario's public libraries. While representing a small portion of local public library budgets, which are mostly municipally-supported, provincial funding nevertheless provides critical funding support for operations (such as the Public Library Operating Grant), shared resources, broadband connectivity and pay equity. Unlike most sectors in Ontario, provincial funding for libraries has been frozen for over 22 years. Despite no net increase in provincial or municipal funding over this period, public libraries have effectively managed their resources, evolved to meet the needs of their communities and embraced major leaps in technology.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ontario Government expedited the release of in-year provincial funding for public libraries. This was a welcome recognition of the importance of local public libraries and the financial pressures they are facing in this difficult time.

Continuing to maintain this critical provincial funding at existing levels is vital to supporting local public libraries as they confront and adapt to the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, over 90% of public library funding is provided by the local municipal government. The substantial and immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on municipal finances has created cash-flow issues for many municipalities, and our public libraries are experiencing municipal government requests for staff downsizing, furloughs and budget cuts. In an April 2020 survey of public libraries conducted by the OLA[i], 51% of respondents reported staff layoffs.

We understand that municipalities are facing significant revenue pressures as a result of COVID-19. However, municipal funding cuts, if maintained, will have direct impacts on the ability of many public libraries to continue their operations. The potential risk to public libraries is greatest in those communities where public libraries are most vital: rural and Northern communities.

OLA and FOPL strongly urge the Ontario government to include public libraries in the development of the province's recovery strategy for municipal services and programming, and to work with the Federal government and municipalities to ensure that our communities have the funding they need to protect jobs and the vital importance of local public libraries.

Leverage Ontario's broadband action plan funding to ensure that modern broadband connectivity is available in more public library branches in communities across Ontario.

For many Ontarians, public libraries are their best and only access to reliable internet services. Even with the physical doors closed, the demand for public library broadband increased during the lockdown period. Libraries have reported a steady stream of people parked or seated outside the library to use the Wi-Fi.

MAKING A LOCAL IMPACT

For residents of **Callander**, located on Lake Nipissing, the nearest standalone ServiceOntario branch is 30km away in North Bay. Since many members of the community don't have fast or reliable internet in their homes or even regular access to a car, **they rely on their local public library to access ServiceOntario**.

Through the Ontario Government's ServiceOntario at the Libraries initiative, **Callander Public Library** staff assist and guide people who need help completing their ServiceOntario transactions, helping both the people and the province **save time and money**.

These are people working remotely, applying for government relief, and participating in remote learning for K-12 or university & college.

The COVID-19 emergency has magnified the weaknesses and opportunities in the role of public libraries in every Ontario community. Unfortunately, many Ontario communities are still unable to access the modern broadband internet services that are taken for granted in urban and suburban areas. Without it, Ontarians living in these communities face real challenges as "second-class" digital citizens.[iv]

Ontario's Public Libraries are an essential access-point for equitable, reliable access to broadband internet and computers. This is especially vital for many rural and Northern communities where at-home connectivity is limited, and for hundreds of thousands of Ontarians that cannot afford in-home internet services. Without public libraries to depend on, many rural and Northern Ontarians have limited options for accessing technology and broadband internet.[v]

However, in many libraries access to these services is limited by the availability of broadband and online resources. Many branches still do not have high-speed broadband access or have outdated internet infrastructure that does not meet today's needs and the demand for digital access across Ontario communities. Without modern broadband access through the public library, many rural and Northern Ontario residents are being left behind with social distancing measures still in place for schools, colleges & universities, apprenticeships and workplaces. As a result, many rural and Northern Ontario residents won't have the critical access they need to study and work in the critical months and years ahead.

We must build the infrastructure our libraries need now. Provincial investment in public library broadband infrastructure is needed to fill the gap and rapidly extend this connectivity to more people, from students & job-seekers to seniors. Ontarians require broadband access in their communities to take part and advance in an increasingly digital economy and society.

These investments have the distinct advantage of building upon the well-established role that public libraries play as local technology access points, modernizing broadband access to ensure that people living in rural and Northern communities have the same opportunities to study, train, work and learn as all Ontarians

Provide critical e-learning support through fair access to modern, digital resources for the people of Ontario – no matter where they live – by creating an Ontario Digital Public Library.

Public libraries are focused on meeting the needs of their community. Increasingly, this means providing digital and online resources. These not only contribute to student success and life-long learning, but also towards entrepreneurship and job readiness. However, these are expensive, especially when purchased on a patchwork, library-by-library basis.

Many public libraries in Ontario struggle to pay for or are unable to afford the high-quality resources available in larger urban and suburban communities. People living in Ontario communities of less than 5,000

PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE TECHNOLOGY HUBS

Public libraries are increasingly focused on meeting the needs of their community for digital and online resources and services that can be accessed through the library or at home. Digital adoption by public libraries is happening at an incredible pace:

- Since 2000, Ontarians have accessed their local public library digitally 1.3 billion times.[iii]

- In 2018, 284,000 Ontarians enrolled in over 700,000 online courses through local public libraries across Ontario.[iii]

- Ontarians borrowed 494,026 e-books from local public libraries in 2018. Rural Ontario residents accessed twice as many e-books per capita through the library as people in urban communities.[iii]

people have access to less than half the selection of e-books and a third of the online databases available to residents in Toronto, Ottawa, and Hamilton. However, those living in rural areas accessed twice as many e-books per capita through the library as people in urban communities.[vi]

Over 80% of libraries serving populations of under 5,000 have no subscriptions to e-learning platforms at all. These resources are invaluable for job training and re-training, lifelong learning, and homework help.[vi]

Creating an Ontario Digital Public Library through a targeted provincial investment would leverage the province's significant purchasing power to **give all Ontarians access to a common set of high-quality e-learning and online resources through their public library** – at home or in the library. People living in small, rural, Northern communities and First Nations would be able to access the same wide range of digital resources as in big city libraries.

Preserve the proven impact of school libraries on student achievement and success by requiring that provincial funds currently allocated for school libraries, teacher-librarians and school library professionals are used for their intended purpose.

Access to a properly staffed school library, no matter where you live in the province, is a proven, essential part of student success. School libraries foster students' love of reading, which research has shown has a positive impact on success in science and math, literacy scores, and students' social and civic engagement.[ii] Schools with trained library staff see better outcomes on the Grade 3 and 6 EQAO assessments.[ii] For secondary students, teacher-librarians and school library professionals are instrumental for building research and information literacy skills to prepare students for college and university.

Over the past two decades, hundreds of thousands of students across Ontario have lost access to school libraries along with the critical resources they provide. Now, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this frightening trend and has put this critical resource at immediate risk for nearly every student in Ontario.

Across Ontario, an alarming number of school boards have drastically reduced or eliminated their school library staff at either the elementary or secondary level as part of their back-to-school plans, and with them access to school library programming and in-person school library resources. Although some access to virtual library resources may still be available, without the support of teacher-librarians and school library professionals, it will be extremely difficult for teachers and students to navigate and use these resources effectively.

School libraries are critical to successful online learning, ensuring students achieve curriculum objectives, and curating the digital and print resources students need to succeed. During the early months of the pandemic, teacher-librarians and school library professionals were instrumental, assuming a key role in providing leadership in helping students, teachers and parents adapt to a distance learning approach.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES HELP ONTARIO STUDENTS LEARN REMOTELY
Gabriel – Haliburton, Ontario

"I am in the Bachelor of Music program at Western University, and I have been using the Wi-Fi a few times a week for an average of about an hour and a half for each session since the university closed.

I have needed it for conference calls using the program Zoom for my lectures…I have been incredibly grateful for the use because, in the part of the Minden/Carnarvon area in which my family lives, the internet is too slow to do what would be necessary to complete classwork and lectures."

While we understand these are unprecedented times for school boards, these decisions present an unacceptable risk that will have dramatic impacts on student learning and success today and in the future. Experience over the past two decades in Ontario has consistently demonstrated that when school libraries are closed and school library professionals are eliminated, libraries do not come back and students pay the price.

That is why Ontario cannot afford to sacrifice long-term student success by putting school library programs at risk. These are more essential than ever and must be maintained in our schools.

Ontario's Ministry of Education has a well-established per-student funding formula that determines the amount of money that is to be invested in school libraries. However, under the current Grants for Students Needs structure, school boards have significant flexibility to re-allocate these provincial dollars for unrelated priorities.

The Ontario Government must take steps to ensure that funding for school libraries is protected for the future. We strongly urge the Ministry of Education to maintain the funding currently allocated to school boards for school libraries and library staff under the Ministry's formula, and to enhance the accountability and transparency of this provincial investment by mandating that these funds are spent on these priorities. Enhancing the transparency and accountability from school boards for the use of these allocated funds will protect and restore access for all Ontario students following the pandemic emergency – no matter where they live. Furthermore, this approach can be achieved while respecting the independence of school boards and ensuring sufficient local flexibility on how best to apply this funding.

Photo Credit: Elisabeth Lion

Ontario Library Association / Federation of Ontario Public Libraries

The **Ontario Library Association (OLA)** is the oldest continually-operating non-profit library association in Canada, with over 5,000 members comprised of library staff and supporters from public, school, academic, and special libraries.

The **Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL)** represents 246 public library systems in Ontario, including 45 First Nations public libraries, in communities throughout the Province.

Together, OLA & FOPL are committed to ensuring that libraries can to continue to play a critical role in the social, education, cultural and economic success of our communities and schools.

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i   Ontario Library Association (2020) Ontario Public Library Responses to COVID-19

ii   People for Education (2011) Reading for Joy, & Ontario Library Association, People for Education & Queen's University Faculty of Education. (2006) School Libraries and Student Achievement in Ontario

iii   Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries. (2018). Ontario Public Library Statistics

iv   The Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA). (2020) Survey on internet use during COVID-19

v   Sullivan, B and Kernohan-Berning, E. (2020) The wrong side of the digital divide. Open-Shelf (May 31, 2020) & Nordicity. (2018) Technology Access in Public Libraries: Outcomes and Impacts for Ontario Communities. Toronto Public Library.

vi   Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (2019) Ontario Public Library Operating Data 2009-2018: Overview, Primer on Library Statistics, and Collected Tables. Compiled by: Molyneux, R, & Abram,S.