

Plan to Strengthen Rural and Northern Education

Message from Minister Hunter

When rural students are provided with meaningful opportunities for an excellent education, rural communities thrive.

During our recent engagement, we heard many ways in which students in rural and Northern communities would benefit from additional targeted support with the flexibility to address the unique needs of each community. We also heard about how our publicly funded education system must do more to engage communities and pursue shared use of space when making decisions about the future of schools.

That's why we are taking immediate steps towards overhauling the process that school boards use when reviewing their schools. As well, we are investing in new supports for rural and Northern students that will be tailored to the unique needs of their communities. Our government is committed to working with school boards and communities to make changes that best support all of our students.

Rural education engagement sessions

About the engagement

From April 21st to June 9th, the government hosted a province-wide engagement to seek input from parents, students, communities, municipal governments and school boards on how to strengthen education in rural and northern Ontario. People across Ontario were invited to read a discussion paper and provide input in-person or online.

In-person sessions

Public and stakeholder engagement sessions were held in 10 rural and Northern communities across the province:

- Merrickville
- Honey Harbour
- Thedford
- Markstay
- Markdale
- Wawa
- Nipigon
- Lakefield
- Picton
- Amherstburg

By the Numbers

- Over **640** people participated in the in-person sessions
- Approximately **500** people completed online surveys or sent emails

Ontario's Plan to Strengthen Rural and Northern Education

1. Strengthen the Pupil Accommodation Review Process

What We Heard:

- The process that school boards use to review their schools must be improved, in particular for rural communities.
- The process must be more inclusive of community and student perspectives, and balanced with input related to community impact.
- Clear principles and goals for student achievement and well-being should be established for pupil accommodation reviews, rather than just cost savings.

What We're Doing:

- Overhauling the [pupil accommodation review process](#) over the coming months. School boards will not begin new accommodation reviews while the process is being revised, though they are encouraged to continue to pursue joint-use projects between school boards. Revisions to the process will give consideration to:
 - impact on communities and student well-being
 - longer timelines
 - more accommodation options
 - clearer roles for students as well as staff and elected officials from both school boards and municipal governments.

2. Supporting Quality Education in Rural and Northern Communities

What We Heard:

- Quality education exists in rural schools in communities across Ontario. But there is a need for enhanced access to transportation options, mental health and other services, as well as experiential and technology-enabled learning opportunities.

What We're Doing:

- Investing an additional \$20 million, starting in September 2017, through the new Rural and Northern Education Fund. This funding will be dedicated to school boards to enhance education for students in rural and Northern communities.
- This funding will be based on a new rural formula, based on number and location of students in small and rural communities.
- School boards will target funding for rural education based on local needs and report publicly on how the funding is used, such as:
 - improve programming and support services in rural schools, such as French immersion, arts education and guidance counselling
 - continue the operation of rural schools
 - enhance student transportation options such as late bus runs and mobile e-learning through tablets or Wi-Fi
- Working with school boards and teachers to support and promote effective teaching techniques for classrooms with three or more grades in small schools.

Other New Supports for Quality Education in Rural and Northern Communities

- Improving access to e-learning and a [minimum broadband speed](#) of 1 Megabit per second per student in rural and Northern schools across Ontario, over the next four years, through new and updated network infrastructure and improved network capacity.
- Enhancing access to [dedicated support for students with special education needs](#) in rural and Northern Ontario, including more mental health and behavioural support professionals.
- Expanding experiential learning opportunities for rural and northern students working with local industries such as agriculture, food processing, mining and forestry through the [Career Kick-Start Strategy](#), including growing the percentage of Grade 11 and 12 students participating in Specialist High Skills Major programs from 14 per cent to 25 per cent over the next three years.

3. Supporting the Sustainable Use of School Space in Rural Communities

What We Heard:

- Greater and earlier communication and collaboration must be encouraged between school boards, municipal governments, community partners, and the province about long-term joint community planning.
- More provincial support and guidance must be provided on how to pursue community partnerships in school space.
- To enable greater use of shared space between school boards and with community partners, additional supports will be required to address the unique issues that may arise.

What We're Doing:

- Revising the Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline (CPPG) over the coming months to encourage school boards and municipal governments to have more open communication with and community partners in discussions around shared space in schools.
- Providing additional planning and financial supports for school boards that work together to share school space, while reviewing all capital proposals submitted by school boards for new schools or additions to ensure joint-use opportunities between boards have been explored before funding is granted.

Other New Supports for Sustainable Use of School Space in Rural Communities

- Moving forward with the recommendations in [Community Hubs in Ontario: A Strategic Framework and Action Plan](#), including working with the Ministry of Infrastructure to build a [resource network](#) that will support community hubs and provide school boards with \$50 million in capital funding in 2016-17 and 2017-18, to retrofit available school space for use by community partners or to replace existing community space, for example, in schools that may close or be sold.
- Working with community stakeholders, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and the Ministry of Infrastructure will develop joint approaches to support better coordination of service delivery and integrated local planning in rural and northern communities, including better communication around school board capital planning.
- Investing a historic annual \$1.4 billion in [school renewal](#) and repairs to ensure all schools, including those in rural and northern communities, are safe and healthy learning environments in a state of good repair.