



Ontario Catholic School
Trustees' Association

Ontario Report for CCSTA October 2021

Opening of the 2021-22 School Year

Following is a high level overview of some of the issues, challenges and celebrations surrounding the opening of this school year, as reported by our members:

Challenges/Issues

- Navigating school closures, contact tracing/case management, health & safety protocols, Ministry reporting and development of re-opening plans for return to school has and continues to place significant pressure on board staff.
- COVID19 has exasperated the challenge of staff absenteeism.
- Staffing shortages and difficulties filling open vacancies is a daily struggle for many boards but especially so in our northern regions.
- The Ontario education funding model is heavily contingent on enrolment and while some boards have experienced growth, others have experienced an unexpected decline in enrolment resulting in budget pressures.
- COVID Funding: the current ½ year release/restriction of additional COVID emergency funding has made it difficult for many boards to plan for the year ahead given increased costs associated with new protocols and staffing needs.
- The pandemic has heightened concerns about mental health in school communities. Boards are concerned about students who may have become disengaged during this time. Boards are dedicating significant efforts towards encouraging and re-integrating these students. More funding and support is needed for the work of re-integration.
- Similarly, students of diverse backgrounds have been disproportionately affected and boards report the need for more resources and funding to support the work of equity.

- Faith Formation – the pandemic and related health protocols have created distance between families, staff and parishes. Strengthening the connections between the local deanery, schools and parishes is a priority for many boards this year.
- Uncertainty over the future of virtual schools. This is a very expensive model to maintain and with limited instructional or social benefits to students.
- Boards report that one of the most significant challenges has been the ongoing lack of meaningful consultation and insufficient notice of and support for provincial directives.

Points of Celebration

- The courageous dedication and level of caring service provided to students and families by staff at all Catholic school boards in Ontario is a major point of celebration.
- The return to in-person learning is celebrated by all boards across the province. *“Nothing is more important than keeping schools safe and open where students can benefit from in-person learning, the relationships between teacher and student, and the positive impacts of learning together has on student attendance, engagement, mental health and well-being.”*
- *“We celebrate our students and staff – their incredible endurance, resilience and commitment to Catholic education are acknowledged often at Board meetings and through our Director via email, messaging and social media.*
- *“We celebrate our senior and school administrators for their cautious and measured approach in preparing our schools for the return of students. Their energy and shred knowledge enable Principals to be prepared for the first day of school and greet students and staff in a calm and safe manner; knowing schools and the board office are safe environments.”*
- Faith formation: during the COVID-19 restrictions, candidates for the sacrament of Confirmation were able to prepare with the aid of Google Meet, Google Jamboard and other digital tools.
- Catholic school boards across Ontario honoured Canada’s Indigenous people, and remembered and reflected upon the lost children and the survivors of residential schools, through various activities, programs and commemorative events on The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (Sept. 30) and throughout the year. Highlights of board activities are displayed on a section of the OCSTA website here:
<https://www.ocsta.on.ca/national-day-for-truth-and-reconciliation/>
- Virtual Linkage Sessions and Outreach to Stakeholder:
 - a northern board created forums where the Board of Trustees engages board stakeholders in a dialogue/round table, regarding the contributions and benefits of the board to the greater community. Recognizing the value of having these sessions “in-person” these sessions were paused with the onset of the pandemic in March 2020.
 - The board was pleased to announce the planning of the first “virtual” forum with community stakeholders. The session will feature trustee-led dialogues through “virtual

breakout rooms” with each municipality, guided by key future-focused questions to assist the Board in reviewing its goal statements and for future planning.

- Ongoing work in equity – boards report focus on meaningful activities that support equity, including:
 - Book studies
 - Updating hiring practices
 - Hiring an Equity Officer
 - Consultations with parents including sessions specifically focused on BIPOC parents
- Great success reported regarding summer programs that supported students as they prepared to be welcomed back to school in the fall.
- Parent Webinars were held in the summer to share information and resources with the community about the challenges of parenting through the pandemic,
- Wellness Gardens Project – connected students with mental health supports and experiential, therapeutic learning opportunities