



Bluewater District School Board

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March 9, 2020

The Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
315 Front Street West, 14th Floor
Toronto, Ontario M7A 0B8

Dear Minister Lecce:

On behalf of Bluewater District School Board, we wish to express our concern over the legislated increases to the average class size in secondary schools. Bluewater District School Board is a rural school board with approximately 17,000 students spread over 8,600 square kilometers. We have nine secondary schools, seven of which are part of grades JK-12 or 7-12 configurations.

Bluewater District School Board recognizes that the debate on class size is a robust one, and the research can support many different scenarios. We would like to focus our comments on the impact of larger class sizes on course options for rural students, and what the reduction in the number of caring adults in schools means for the well-being of our students.

Each week, we poll our local school communities on issues of relevance in public education. Our sample sizes are small but it is an indication of what is important to the students, parents, and staff in Bruce and Grey counties. During the week of January 28, 2019, we asked our stakeholders the following question:

Do you feel the Ontario government should remove caps on class size limits?

Based on 141 submissions, 90 percent of the respondents indicated that the caps on class size limits should not be removed, seven percent indicated caps should be removed, and three percent were undecided.

In a Nanos survey commissioned by the Ontario Public School Boards' Association in November 2019 (Submission 2019-1531)¹, two in three Ontarians oppose (41%) or somewhat oppose (25%) having larger class sizes where there are more students per teacher in order to save money, while 11 percent support, and 19 percent somewhat support this. Four percent are unsure. Intensity of opposition is stronger among women (72% oppose or somewhat oppose) than men (59% oppose or somewhat oppose). In addition, a little more than two in three Ontarians oppose (43%) or somewhat oppose (24%) having less course selection for students in order to save money in the education budget, while six percent support, and 20 percent somewhat support this. Seven percent are unsure.

In the largest public education consultations in Ontario on class sizes, approximately 70 percent of the over 7,000 submissions did not support increase to class size.²

The movement from a board class size average of 22 to 28 students per class has had a negative impact on Bluewater District School Board students. To attain a board average, some programs have smaller class sizes, and some have larger ones. Programs designed for our most vulnerable students with special education needs or those who are at risk of not graduating in four or five years, were previously capped at 16 students. These programs will see an increase from 16 students to 23 students with an average cap increase to 28. That represents a 44 percent increase in the class sizes

for our most vulnerable students. This will negatively impact the quality of the academic support they receive, and ultimately, their overall mental health and well-being, which for many students is already compromised. For students in academic programs, we would see increases in class size from 29 to 35 students, which represents an increase of approximately 21 percent.

Bluewater District School Board has faced many years of declining enrolment and has made difficult decisions about staffing and reductions in program options accordingly. We are coming out of that period of decline. Our enrolment is currently increasing, and our local municipalities are experiencing some significant growth. The irony is that we are experiencing enrolment growth at a time when we should be able to add more programming options for our students. Larger class size maximums are being legislated, however, leaving us with the inability to replace qualifications in specialized STE(A)M program areas due to attrition. This creates an ongoing disadvantage for Bluewater District School Board students in terms of equity of access and opportunity.

In 2019-2020, Bluewater District School Board's average class size increased to approximately 24.8 due to a large attrition rate at the end of the last school year. Since we were not able to replace these very experienced and uniquely qualified retiring teachers, program options for the current school year were reduced. As we progress towards the cap of 28, we will see further reductions in program options, and equally important, we will have fewer caring adults in our secondary schools. We have significant concerns about the potential impact on student safety and well-being. The adults in our schools are the eyes, ears, and feet on the ground that keep our schools safe. We estimate that there will be approximately 50 fewer teachers in our secondary schools with a class size cap of 28. This represents a 20 percent decrease in the number of caring adults keeping our students safe and well supervised.

Bluewater District School Board believes spending on public education is an investment in the future, and has based our multi-year strategic vision, mission, and priorities on that belief. Maintaining low class size maximums and ensuring we can replace our retiring teachers will ensure that the quality of the public education we currently provide to our rural students can be maintained. Our students and local stakeholders in Bruce and Grey counties deserve as much.

As always, our commitment remains focused on providing a quality education for every student in a safe, accepting, and caring environment.

Sincerely,



Jan Johnstone
Chair



Jane Thomson
Vice-Chair

cc: The Honourable Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
The Honourable Bill Walker, MPP, Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound
The Honourable Lisa Thompson, MPP, Huron-Bruce
The Honourable Jim Wilson, MPP, Simcoe-Grey
The Honourable Marit Stiles, NDP Education Critic
Ontario Public School Boards' Association
Chairs of Ontario English Public School Boards

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¹ On behalf of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, Nanos conducted a representative online survey of 1,005 Ontario residents, 18 years of age or older, between November 8th and 12th, 2019. Participants were administered a survey online. The sample is geographically stratified to be representative to the province of Ontario. No margin of error applies to this research.

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.47/823.910.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-1531-OPSBA-Populated-report-w-tabs.pdf>

² <https://www.cp24.com/most-people-who-took-part-in-public-consultations-did-not-want-larger-class-sizes-1.4835473>