



News Release

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FINE-TUNING NEEDED FOR PLAN TO FIX ONTARIO'S SCHOOLS: AUDITOR GENERAL

(TORONTO) The province's six-year-old plan to systematically track the condition of its 5,000 school buildings to ensure their repair and maintenance needs were identified and prioritized was "an excellent initiative," but school boards didn't always spend the provincial funds as per the Ministry of Education's guidelines, Auditor General Jim McCarter says in his *2008 Annual Report*, released today.

"It was a good idea to inspect each and every school in the province during 2002 and 2003 and to enter each school's capital needs in a database," McCarter said. "But we found that the database wasn't being updated and the school boards didn't always follow the spending policies they were supposed to under this initiative."

The finding is contained in a value-for-money audit of the funding provided by the Ministry of Education to school boards for the maintenance and renewal of schools. In the 2007/08 fiscal year, the Ministry provided Ontario's 72 publicly funded boards with \$383 million for repairs and renovations in addition to another \$1.7 billion to operate and maintain their facilities.

The Report noted that:

- Under its Good Places to Learn (GPL) initiative, the Ministry provides some grants for urgent repairs deemed essential to school properties. However, at one of the three school boards audited, the Auditor found that \$2.5 million of the \$2.8 million allocated for such work was spent on "ineligible projects."
- Instead of spending funds earmarked for repairs and renovations on urgent projects, one board spent \$500,000 on ongoing operating costs and another spent millions on painting and asphalt projects.
- Closing schools that have become too costly to maintain is a difficult decision. Therefore, the Ministry and the school boards need to improve their process for deciding if and when to close schools. The process needs to be objective and proactive and take into account the long-term consequences of any decision.
- One board failed to follow its own policies in acquiring \$3.5 million in plumbing services from four suppliers. These services were not acquired competitively, and many invoices were deliberately split to keep individual payments low and thereby circumvent the requirement to get written quotes from more than one supplier. The board was also overbilled.

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