

SUDBURY BY-ELECTION FUROR RECEDES AS LEGISLATURE RESUMES AFTER MARCH BREAK

When the Legislature returned after its one-week March Break, the Opposition parties began to turn their attention away from the Sudbury by-election furor and to other issues of the day. Although the first question back from the break was asked by the Conservatives on the Sudbury by-election, the Tories did not ask any other question on this issue the rest of the week. On the other hand, the NDP did ask about the Sudbury by-election every day this past week but did spend most of their time asking questions on other issues. The only new development was that Premier Kathleen Wynne (Don Valley West) confirmed that she had an appointment scheduled with the Ontario Provincial Police for the month of April.

While there may have been a respite for the Liberals this past week, the by-election furor is an issue that can easily be re-ignited and dominate the Legislature at any moment.

LIBERALS ANNOUNCE “GRANTS FOR STUDENT NEEDS” AND CHANGES TO “ACCOMMODATION REVIEW COMMITTEE” FOR SCHOOL BOARDS

Education Minister Liz Sandals (Guelph) [announced](#) that her Ministry would maintain “Grants for Student Needs” overall funding for school boards for the 2015-16 school year at the same level as this year at \$22.5 Billion. Sandals said that she wants school boards to shift their focus to improving student programming and updating schools rather than maintaining underused facilities. She added that despite declining enrolment, the Ministry is maintaining stable funding. Sandals also [outlined](#) changes to the “Accommodation Review Committee” process that is intended to speed up the decision-making process for school closings. Sandals has frequently said that this is part of the government’s plan to have more money spent on programs rather than empty spaces.

The NDP quickly responded by saying that cuts to schools will mean fewer supports for students, more layoffs, and even more school closures across the province. The NDP’s newly-appointed Education critic, Lisa Gretzky (Windsor West) [said](#), “Parents will be appalled to learn that thirty-eight school boards will see less funding for special education next year, including over \$6 million in special education cuts in Toronto alone. Province-wide, there will be \$36 million less in funding for textbooks, classroom supplies, and educators’ salaries.”

Other education advocates, including OSSTF/FEESO, were not impressed with the government’s measures. In a [press release](#), OSSTF/FEESO said, “The government stated that the GSNs provide stable funding for school boards and include an increase in funding on a per-student basis. The reality, however, is that there is no additional funding for front-line services, and that some school boards across the province will actually see significant decreases in funding because of the various ways in which funds are allocated.”

In addition, OSSTF/FEESO President, Paul Elliott, was dismayed that the government's austerity measures imposed under Bill 115 on salary grid movements were still be kept in place. Elliott said, "Our members will now be moving into their fourth year of restricted grid movement. The cost to individual teachers and support staff members is now in the thousands of dollars, and continues to mount. This measure was never intended to be permanent, and it's disappointing in the extreme that the government has once again decided to unilaterally impose this unfair restraint on Ontario's front-line education workers."

PREMIER WYNNE CREATES COMMUNITY HUB FRAMEWORK ADVISORY GROUP

Prior to Education Minister Liz Sandals' announcement on changes to the "Accommodation Review Committee" process, Premier Kathleen Wynne [created](#) a Community Hub Framework Advisory Group. Wynne has asked the group to develop a framework for adapting existing public assets into community hubs that will offer coordinated services such as education, health care and social services. Wynne named Karen Pitre as her Special Advisor on Community Hubs and chair of the new group.

NDP CRITICS SHUFFLED

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath announced a mini-shuffle of her [party's critic's posts](#).

The most prominent was the elevation of rookie NDP MPP Lisa Gretzky (Windsor West) to the high-profile post of Education. Gretzky replaces long-time Education critic, Peter Tabuns (Toronto-Danforth), who was asked to concentrate on the Environmental and Climate Change post along with the Energy file.

Gretzky, a former vice-chair and two-term trustee at the Greater Essex District School Board, defeated Liberal Cabinet Minister Teresa Piruzza in the 2014 general election.

WYNNE TO PROCEED ON LIBEL SUIT AGAINST TORIES

Premier Kathleen Wynne [indicated](#) that she will continue with her \$2 million libel suit against Tory MPPs Tim Hudak (Niagara West – Glanbrook) and Lisa MacLeod (Nepean – Carleton). The libel suit was initiated as Wynne's response to allegations from Hudak and MacLeod regarding her role in the Mississauga and Oakville gas plant relocations. MacLeod [asked](#) the Premier to respect MPPs and the Premier's own anti-SLAPP legislation by dropping the libel suit. Wynne refused MacLeod's request.

NDP MPP WANTS FULL REVIEW OF LGBTQ CONVERSION THERAPY

A week after introducing a [bill](#) that would protect youth from therapy aimed at preventing them from growing up to be LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual or queer, NDP MPP Cheri DiNovo (Parkdale – High Park) asked the Liberals launch a full review of doctors who are using conversion therapy. DiNovo said that many influential doctors are still using conversion therapy on LGBTQ youth. In response, Health Minister Eric Hoskins (St. Paul's) said, "The member opposite does know that there is no billing code in the schedule of benefits for OHIP for conversion therapy

or anything like it. As well, I will be asking the relevant colleges, because there are a number that potentially could be involved in addressing this important situation, to explore amending the regulations to ban this practice, as it should be banned.”

NDP CALLS FOR RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF ANTI-RACISM SECRETARIAT

NNDP MPP Teresa Armstrong (London – Fanshawe) called for the re-establishment of an anti-racism secretariat. Armstrong [said](#), “Income inequality, unemployment and precarious employment continue to disproportionately affect racialized communities in the province.”

Ontario had an anti-racism secretariat under the Bob Rae NDP government but it was eliminated by the Mike Harris government. The Liberals passed legislation in 2006 to restore the anti-racism secretariat but have thus far failed to enact it.

In denying Armstrong’s request, Premier Wynne [said](#), “But I believe today what’s important is that we deal with these issues across government; in every single ministry, in every single policy, we make sure that we put that lens on that ensures equity and that we ask the questions of our policy to make sure that those policies are going to promote equity in the province.”

NDP INTRODUCES ANTI-FRACKING BILL

NDP MPP Peter Tabuns (Toronto-Danforth) introduced [Bill 82, the Oil, Gas and Salt Resources Amendment Act \(Anti-Fracking\)](#).

Although no licenses have been issued for fracking in Ontario, Tabuns [said](#) that rumours persist of interest in the oil and gas industry. Tabuns said that other jurisdictions such as New York, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec have anti-fracking bans. Tabuns concluded, “I call on the government to support and pass this bill which will be debated in April. The Premier has made it clear that climate change demands urgent action, she has a chance to avoid a significant new source of greenhouse gas emissions in Ontario and hopefully will take it.”