

Achieving a Breakthrough in the Stalled Ontario Ministry of Education Approval and Funding for
Phase 2 of the Deschâtelets Building conversion to house Au Coeur d'Ottawa school
A Request for Endorsement – April 8, 2025

After the February election campaign failed to produce an announcement of the long-delayed Ministry of Education funding for the Deschâtelets Building conversion project to house the permanent site of Au Coeur d'Ottawa School, Mark Dermer, an Oblats Ave. resident, decided to volunteer to identify the barriers at the Ministry and then work to overcome them. All stakeholders he has contacted thus far (see list of sources at end of document) have welcomed his offer to collaborate in the interest of getting this project re-started and completed.

Background

The conversion of the Deschâtelets Building has been stalled since the Phase 1 construction work ended in late 2022. While the Ministry of Education announced funding in fall 2020 to transform Deschâtelets to become the permanent site of Au Coeur d'Ottawa elementary school, the Phase 2 construction work – the final step - has been recurrently postponed by the Ministry.

Dec 2022 - When Phase 1 construction finished and the CECCE (school board) and Ottawa Community Housing signed a formal agreement for use of the top two floors of the building in December 2022, the use plan for Deschâtelets was complete and the CECCE pressed forward with its request for Phase 2 funding and approval.

Summer 2023 – The CECCE expected to imminently receive funds and approval but the Ministry was still repeatedly questioning the board about multiple items. The nature of these questions has never been disclosed by either the Ministry or the school board.

Dec 2023 – Once again, the CECCE expected funding imminently, so much so that they submitted a building permit application to the City of Ottawa. However, the funding and approval did not materialize.

Jan 2025 – The Ministry announced funding and approval for four other CECCE school construction projects, demonstrating that there is no targeted neglect of CECCE schools. However, the board explains that the Ministry has separate capital funding envelopes for new schools and renovation projects, and the Ministry has categorized ACO as a renovation project. This even though it is a brand new and first-ever permanent site for ACO.

Present situation

- *Late-breaking news from Thu, Apr 3*: The parents of the ACO students were informed that the Ministry and the CECCE have resumed talks on the funding and approval for the Phase 2 funding and approval. While this brings renewed optimism, the section above illustrates that there have been several false starts over that past 33 months. As such, please read through the rest of this document, which will be pertinent if talks stall yet again.

- The 150 families who have 200 students at ACO have reached the limit of their patience. They articulately expressed their frustration in a recent letter to the Minister of Education (see next page), which they are circulating in the OEE community for signatures. The key points:
 - 1) The significantly substandard state of the school's temporary location
 - 2) A substantial sunk cost in purchase and renovation that is useless without the Phase 2 work
 - 3) How the Ministry has approved and fully funded all other proposed CECCE capital projects
- Catherine McKenney's team (who are the same group that worked for Joel Harden) had little knowledge of this issue but are very supportive of all planned uses of Deschâtelets: permanent site of ACO, new OOE community centre and the 30 affordable housing units. They also now understand that insofar as the Ministry of Education funding for Phase 2 construction is the required next step, their office is the primary point of advocacy to break through the barrier.
- The CECCE has constraints on its advocacy for the project. With 60 schools, it cannot risk pressuring the Ministry for ACO funding in a way that damages their overall relationship. Furthermore, it cannot seek to collaborate with the MPP representing a school's catchment area to apply pressure for a specific school. However, no such constraints exist for the community that ACO serves.
- Our municipal government has become a great partner on the Deschâtelets project and will share/occupy that ACO does not always use or is surplus. However, the two city-supported uses (community centre and affordable housing) and the related construction (new gym building on the north end) cannot launch until ACO first occupies its space, so the city uses might best be considered a distinct Phase 3 of the project. And Phase 3 appears to have no capital investment from the Ministry. As a result, Shawn Menard's office understandably seems to see itself as an interested and supportive party for Phase 2, but not really in a position to be an advocate with the Ministry. But again, no such constraints apply to the community.

The request for endorsement

Even with the recommencement of talks between the CECCE and the Ministry, the Deschâtelets project would benefit from all possible community advocacy for the Ministry to release funding and approve Phase 2 construction. Catherine McKenney's office agrees with this approach and will be writing to Minister Calandra this week to request immediate action. The OOECA can assist by writing McKenney with the following suggested content (as discussed with McKenney's staff):

- 1) Mention only ACO, not the community centre or the affordable housing. This is not because the other two uses of Deschâtelets are unimportant, but because they are not of interest to the Minister/Ministry of Education. In fact, their inclusion might be detrimental.
- 2) The substantial investment to date.
- 3) A window of opportunity to release funding, call for tender, award contracts and complete work in time to allow students to start the 2026-27 school year in their permanent building.

While copying the city councillor might be worthwhile, the focus point for present advocacy should be the MPP's office until our either our MPP advises our community that we need to pursue other avenues, or the community reaches that conclusion itself.

To: Hon. Paul Calandra, Minister of Education
Didier Pomerleau and Didem Proulx, Ministry of Education
CC: Catherine McKenney, MPP for Ottawa Centre
Shawn Menard, City Councillor for Ottawa Centre
Yasir Naqvi, MP for Ottawa Centre

Dear Mr. Calandra,

Re: Au Coeur d'Ottawa French Catholic Elementary School

In 2021, the Ministry of Education announced it would fund a new building for “Au Coeur d'Ottawa” French Catholic Elementary School. That project has stalled. Our school has been in a sub-standard “temporary” location for eight years while we wait indefinitely. Our school council’s letters to the Minister of Education have gone twelve months without even the courtesy of an answer. We demand that you fulfill your promise and finalize the funding for our school.

Our school, with 199 students aged 4-12, has been in a “temporary” building at 88 Main St for eight years with no gymnasium, no library, no school-yard play structures, inadequately-functioning heating and air conditioning, and an insufficient number of washrooms. The classrooms are on the third floor with no elevator and thus our school cannot accommodate any students, teachers or parents with accessibility needs. One classroom is located in a rented space in a completely separate building, requiring the children to cross a busy street.

In 2021, the Ministry of Education and CECCE purchased a building at 200 Scholastic. The interior design plans were approved. Asbestos removal and building stabilization were completed. In July 2022, CECCE submitted an application to the Ministry of Education for additional funding to complete the interior work. Three years later, we are still waiting for approval and our letters have not been answered. In short, the current site is clearly inadequate, a permanent site has been identified, work is well underway, and yet the project is stalled due to lack of approval for funding for the final work.

Parents have lost patience. On January 27, 2025, the Minister of Education announced an investment of \$1.3 billion in the construction of new schools, including four CECCE schools. But not a cent for our school, Au Coeur d'Ottawa. This is not only unacceptable but incomprehensible.

Our school community is made up of parents who are entitled to French-language education under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The space constraints associated with this “temporary” building mean that many Francophone families do not have access to the school and must turn to other schools located further away, or simply abandon the Francophone school system. In the absence of action, or even explanation, the government will be held responsible and liable for the consequences of a failure to fulfill its duties.

Our letters to the Minister of Education have remained unanswered, including our recent letters of March 7, 2024, January 13, 2025 and March 23, 2025.

We demand your immediate attention for the sake of our children, for us their parents, and for the Ottawa Centre and larger Francophone community.

Thank you,

Sources

- Two in-person meetings with MPP Catherine McKenney's staff
- In-person meeting with former MPP Joel Harden
- Video meeting with Councillor Menard staff
- Two phone meetings with CECCE superintendent for ACO area
- Multiple communications with François Lavallée of ACO parents committee
- Mainstreeter issues from Apr 2021 to present
- Google searches for Au Coeur d'Ottawa (ACO) news items from 2017 to present
- Review of Au Coeur d'Ottawa webpage "Update: Construction project for the future permanent site" and all subpages and presentation links
- Review of Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-est (CECCE - school board) webpage "Capital projects" and all subpages