

# Brief

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## OECTA Submission to Commission on Broader Public Sector Reform

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The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) represents 45,000 women and men who have chosen teaching careers in the Catholic schools in Ontario. These teachers are found in the elementary panel from junior kindergarten to Grade eight, in the secondary panel from Grade nine through Grade twelve, and occasional teachers in both panels, in publicly funded schools.

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## **1. OVERVIEW**

- 1.01** This brief suggests areas where the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) supports public sector reform.
- 1.02** A number of observations and recommendations are made in the area of education. The type of education reform that has occurred in Ontario is described and three aspects of Ontario's system, which point to an education system that has become increasingly top-down, are examined. These characteristics are a growth of government assessment initiatives, an increase in school board administrators, and a growing number of Ministry of Education bureaucrats, who are too often far removed from the classroom.
- 1.03** Second, this brief looks at the issue of corporate tax cuts, and suggests that the money corporations save as a result of these cuts would be better spent on front-line government services.
- 1.04** OECTA makes the following recommendations for public sector reform:
- Link education funding more closely to impact the classroom;
  - Reduce government funding for assessment tools and materials by half;
  - Adopt a random sampling model of student assessment;
  - Introduce and enforce a real spending reduction on senior administrators;
  - Reduce Ministry of Education bureaucracy linked to assessment initiatives;
  - Consider implementing short-term rotating contracts for Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat staff;
  - Put a stop to planned corporate income tax cuts.
  - Classroom initiatives should be teacher directed

## **2. EDUCATION REFORM**

- 2.01** Since 2003, sustained and increased investments in Ontario's publicly funded education system have helped our province excel in the area of education. Student achievement has increased. Student retention and graduation rates have increased. Parents have more confidence in publicly funded schools, and teacher morale has dramatically improved. Ontario is

cited in numerous international studies for the great strides that have been made to close the gap between the highest- and lowest-achieving students. The steps taken to address equity issues in the classroom and to individualize programs to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population are also identified as key factors in Ontario's successful education reform. Likewise, smaller class sizes, the implementation of full-day Kindergarten, and improved relations between teachers and government are also recognized as essential contributors to Ontario's success. These tangible improvements must be considered in any review of Ontario's education system.

**2.02** The challenge remains to reduce spending without sacrificing the gains that have been realized to date or compromising the underlying conditions that have allowed progress to be made. Looking specifically at education, OECTA believes that a more critical lens should be applied to education dollars that are spent on initiatives not directly tied to the classroom. There is a broad consensus that expenditures in education are more cost-effective when they are more closely connected to the classroom. The further removed the spending is from the classroom (at the administrative level, for example) the less apparent the real benefits to student learning are.

### **2.03 Growth of Top-Down Driven Initiatives**

Levin, Glaze, and Fullan (2008) observed that Ontario's large-scale education reform has succeeded in integrating top-down and bottom-up forces in strong partnerships, while respecting teachers and professional knowledge. Levin (2007) added that Ontario has adopted a collaborative, rather than a top-down, approach to coherence. Levin pointed to the approach of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) to underscore this point, noting that Secretariat staff work cooperatively with school district leaders in order to ensure alignment of provincial and board strategies. Despite this characterization, Ontario's education reform has coincided with a growth of government initiatives in assessment and evaluation, and a proliferation of bureaucrats and administrators at the Ministry and school board level. These system features suggest Ontario has progressed towards a "top-heavy" system.

**2.04** A top-down approach to education reform has fiscal and pedagogical implications. There are economic ramifications because bureaucratic initiatives require significant government resources to administer. There are also pedagogical considerations. Research supports that top-down reform detracts from teachers' teaching autonomy, and their ability to rely on their professional judgement. Education theorists have argued that reform agendas are most successful when they are collaborative, research-based, and respectful of teachers' professional autonomy (Levin and Wiens, 2003; Fullan, Rolheiser and Edge, 2002). This type of change can be contrasted to reform that prescribes changes to schools, and imposes top-down demands on teachers. Research conducted through the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) established that students perform better when schools have greater autonomy over how students are assessed. Similarly, PISA concluded that when schools have responsibility to define their curricula and assessments, the result is system-wide improvement (OECD, 2010).

**2.05** Education theorist Ann Lieberman (2000) criticized top-down reform in the United States, observing that "experts" play an instrumental role in developing curriculum materials, though they may be out of touch with classroom and teacher realities. Regarding the American context, Lieberman and Miller (2005) emphasized that top-down accountability systems have put pressure on schools to focus on standardized assessment results, leading to decreased attention on student learning. Lieberman and Miller stressed that ideal education reform should enable teachers' practice, rather than prescribe it. Moreover, it must create incentives for teachers to increase their knowledge, skills, and abilities, and offers support for teachers who assume leadership roles in their schools. Lieberman and Wood (2002) expressed support for a "teachers teaching teachers" reform model, centred on teachers' professional knowledge. Lieberman and Grolnick (2005) indicated that networks composed of teachers, schools, administrators, parents, and communities are optimal vehicles for collaborative, bottom-up reform.

**Recommendation: Link funding for education, as closely as possible, to teacher directed initiatives that support teachers and students in the classroom.**

## **2.06 EQAO and the Increase in Assessment and Evaluation**

The Ministry of Education has placed increased focus on assessment and evaluation initiatives since 2003-04, as reflected by added assessment and evaluation initiatives in recent years. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) was established in 2004 to analyze Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test results, to determine areas of weakness, and to target improvement programs accordingly. The total expenditures of the LNS, from its establishment to 2011, were \$505 million, with all of its funding provided by the Ministry (Auditor General of Ontario, 2011). In 2008-09, the Ministry directed \$31.7 million towards the EQAO (Auditor General, 2009). Ministry funding for EQAO increased to \$33 million in 2010 (EQAO, 2010). EQAO funding constitutes a small part of the government's total expenditures on assessment.

**2.07** The current government has increased its focus on EQAO results. EQAO results have become the key factor in the development of government policies and programs. There has been a burgeoning of personnel in the Ministry and school boards whose positions can be characterized as a response to the province's demand for the generation and analysis of student achievement data. At the school level, principals and teachers are spending more of their time on tasks and initiatives related to testing. At a broader level, increased emphasis on the EQAO has contributed to a pervasive, assessment-driven culture across the school system, exacerbated by international pressure that focuses on test scores as a measure of improvement. Yet, the reality is that these tests have little value for students, teachers, or parents.

**2.08** Because of the increased focus on increasing student test scores, school boards are spending more of their Ministry-allocated funding to purchase assessment programs, resources, and tools. In addition to EQAO tests, school boards generate preliminary tests to gauge student

readiness for EQAO tests. The list of the various assessment tools currently being employed by schools is long: DRA, CASI, PM Benchmarks, oral reading records, Running Records, AlphaKids Assessment Tools, Reaching Readers, Writing Continuum, Dolsch Sight Words, Phonemic Assessment (Awareness), PRIME, JK Assessment Battery, to name a few.

**2.09** It is difficult to quantify the amount school boards actually spend in this area, because every school allocates money for these materials out of its school budget, drawing on Ministry funding that flows through various programs. The pressure to succeed on province-wide standardized tests leads some schools to access provincial monies allocated for purposes other than assessment, towards testing tools and materials. The result of spending precious school budget dollars on assessment materials is that students lose out in other areas: such as physical education equipment, music instruments, science equipment or school events.

**2.10** EQAO, the government's current assessment approach, which tests every student, is burdensome and expensive. Research shows that using large-scale, standards-based test results to compare and rank students and school boards does not improve learning in the classroom (Leithwood, 2001). The resources used to create, administer, and mark these standardized tests would be better deployed to support teachers and student learning in the classroom.

**2.11** Accurate achievement results can be obtained with a random sampling model. The current cost for EQAO testing is \$17 per student. In the 2009-10 school year, there were 134,463 students in Grade 3, 140,805 in Grade 6 and 163,035 in Grade 9. That year 438,303 EQAO tests were administered at a cost of \$7,451,151. A yearly random sample of 10 per cent of the student population in Grades 3, 6 and 9 would cost \$745,115, saving the government \$6,706,036 every year. Moving to random sampling is cost efficient, provides the information necessary for good systemic reviews and helps to dampen the current assessment driven culture.



**2.12** The OECD's education studies rely on a random sampling model to administer its internationally noted education research. Random sampling requires fewer government resources. It is less time consuming for teachers to administer, giving them more time to teach. When teachers are filling out required paperwork and administering tests, they can't teach.

**2.13** The Ministry's objective in using the standardized test data so heavily is to provide assistance in areas of the system that need it most. Yet school boards and schools already know as to where further attention is required. Teachers know better than anyone which of their students are struggling and where more support is needed. In a review of the LNS in 2009, Ontario's Auditor General found that in fewer than four per cent of cases did EQAO data vary from a student's report card marks by more than one grade level. This speaks to the ability of schools and boards to effectively assess students learning and provide accurate input as to what resources are needed and where. Yet, provincial requirements obligate teachers to test every student, leading to testing that is often unnecessary. Random sampling assessments would provide the Ministry with formal data that complements the informal knowledge that school and teachers already have, while reducing onerous administrative and time demands on teachers.

**Recommendation: Reduce current government funding directed to school boards for assessment tools and assessment materials, by half.**

**Recommendation: Adopt a random sampling model for EQAO, while maintaining existing student assessments provided by school boards for classroom teacher directed use.**

**2.14 Increase in School Board Administrators**

The increase in administrators at the school board level, as evidenced over the last number of years, reinforces that Ontario has moved towards a top-down approach to education administration. At the school board level, there has been an increase in the number of supervisory officers

and directors of education. In 2003-04, the ratio of administrators per thousand full-time students was 0.45, compared to a 0.66 administrator-student ratio in 2011-12, when looking at Ontario's Catholic school boards. There has also been an increase in the number of principals<sup>1</sup>. In 2003-04, the principal-student ratio was 2.98, versus a 3.44 ratio in 2011-12. It should be noted that the increase in administrative staff has occurred in the context of an approximate seven per cent decrease in full-time enrolment across the province. (Ministry of Education, Report of the Declining Enrolment Work Group, 2009) As such, expansion of administration has not reflected a need to cater to a larger student population.

**2.15** This issue is particularly pronounced in northern school boards that have a high number of administrators and very low student enrolment. According to 2010 data, the Kenora Catholic District School Board (CDSB) has eight senior administrators in place, to oversee a school board composed of 1,506 full-time students. There are nine senior administrators in the Northwest CDSB, and a total student population of 1,257. The Northeastern CDSB employs nine senior administrators, for a total student enrolment of 2,329. At the Superior North CDSB, there are nine senior administrators for only 662 full-time students. The total full-time enrolment across any one of these northern school boards is comparable to a typical secondary school in the Toronto CDSB. A handful of senior administrators should be sufficient to oversee the relatively small number of teachers and students managed by these smaller school boards.

**2.16** A top-heavy administration model is not limited to Northern Ontario. According to publicly available information from the Toronto CDSB, there are over 100 senior administrators in place (Toronto Catholic District School Board, 2010). This figure includes a director of education, associate directors, supervisory officers, assistant superintendent officers, managers, and coordinators. In addition, school board spending on senior

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<sup>1</sup> "Principal" refers to principals who hold administrative positions, and does not include principals who simultaneously fulfill teaching positions.

administrators is surpassing the Ministry's budgeted expenditures, in certain cases. In 2010, the Algonquin Lakeshore CDSB exceeded the Ministry's budgeted expenditures by \$342, 670. The board's actual spending on seven senior administrators totaled \$1,109,772. This money was used to pay a director of education, three superintendents of school effectiveness, two assistant superintendents of school effectiveness, and one superintendent of finance and business.

**2.17** The provincial government made a tepid attempt to rein in senior administrative spending in previous budgets. The 2010 Ontario Budget asked boards to reduce spending on senior administration by 10 per cent (Government of Ontario, 2010). In reality, these expenditures have continued to increase. Many school boards have maintained their spending on senior administrative salaries, by accessing funding from other budget lines, and accessing monies available to boards for student success initiatives. If government were to initiate and enforce a spending cut, there would be significant savings across the province. For example, a reduction of spending on senior administration by 25 per cent would yield \$150 million dollars in annual savings.

**2.18** The money that the Ministry currently uses to fund administration positions for the implementation of Ministry initiatives would be better spent in the classroom, to be used by teachers and for teachers. Linking education expenditures to the classroom makes funds go further, as confirmed by sound pedagogical research.

**Recommendation: Introduce and enforce a real spending reduction on senior administrators to save \$150 million.**

**2.19 Increase in Bureaucratic Positions**

There has been a significant increase in Ministry of Education bureaucrats, which is linked to an ever-growing number of provincial education initiatives. Many bureaucrats hold positions and job titles that did not exist in previous years. For example, the creation of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, which is now under the umbrella of the Student Achievement Division, created numerous new positions within the

Ministry, such as student achievement officers. Evaluation and assessment initiatives have also led to more coordinators, consultants and data analysts. The growing number of these positions is problematic, because it means that more money is being spent on bureaucracy, not in the classroom.

**2.20** Increasingly, Ministry bureaucrats have previous administrative experience at the school board level, requiring the Ministry to pay them salaries commensurate with, or higher than, what they were previously paid. Several current student achievement officers, education officers and team leads in the Student Achievement Division previously held positions as school principals, superintendents of education or directors of education. In the Ministry's Curriculum Branch, the majority of education officers appear to have held previous positions as high-level bureaucrats, principals, vice-principals, and consultants. In the 2011 Public Salary Disclosure released by the Ontario Ministry of Finance, almost 140 positions listed were for education officers and student achievement officers.

**2.21** The majority of these individuals do not have recent classroom teaching experience. This trend is problematic because it points to a detachment between on-the-ground classroom realities and expert, bureaucratic opinions. A lack of previous recent, relevant experience in front line teaching roles leads to detached, and less practical perspectives in the development of curriculum and assessment materials. Hiring people with more recent classroom experience would infuse a more relevant, first-hand approach to the development of curriculum and assessment materials. Moreover, it would save money that is currently spent on bureaucracy salaries. Ministry of Education staff with experience as administrators, consultants, coordinators, and principals are paid salaries that are higher than teachers.

**Recommendation: Reduce the size of Ministry of Education bureaucracy, and direct savings to front-line classroom initiatives.**

**Recommendation: Consider short-term (five-year) rotating contracts for Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat staff to ensure that Secretariat staff have recent teaching experience.**

### **3. CORPORATE TAX CUTS**

- 3.01** A 2011 study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives concluded that the beneficiaries of corporate tax cuts from 2000 to 2009 failed to create promised jobs for Canadians. Meanwhile, if these companies had paid the same tax rate as in 2000, federal and provincial governments would have collected an additional \$12 billion in revenue in 2009 (CCPA, 2011). Accordingly, OECTA supports a cancellation of government's previously stated plan to lower the general statutory CIT from 14 per cent to 10 per cent by 2013 (Government of Ontario, 2011c). This plan takes money away from the front line services that need it most, while putting money into Canada's largest corporations.
- 3.02** Provincially mandated Corporate Income Tax (CIT) cuts have saved corporations more than \$2.4 billion per year (Robinson, 2011; "Drummond's dire message," 2011). Meanwhile, corporate tax cuts have failed to deliver on their purported benefits to Canadians. Noted economist Hugh Mackenzie (2010) supported that corporate income taxes are both pointless in an economic sense and counterproductive fiscally. Given the skepticism surrounding their effectiveness, it is not the time to continue with the planned corporate tax cuts. Eliminating the government's planned corporate tax cuts would result in an additional \$800 million in government revenues (Benzie, 2011). This money would be much better spent protecting front-line government services. The reality is Ontario can no longer afford the corporate tax cuts from the last 10 years.

**Recommendation: OECTA recommends that the government implement no further corporate tax cuts. This will result in additional government revenues for the services that benefit from them the most.**

## **4. CONCLUSION**

- 4.01** Since 2003, ongoing investment in Ontario's publicly funded education system has resulted in system-wide improvement, as indicated by international recognition and greater public satisfaction with the system. It is problematic to view the education system as akin to a business environment. Certain gains in our education system are more intangible and cannot be quantified by outputs and results. For example, gains such as lower classroom sizes have had intrinsic benefits. Lower classroom sizes enable teachers to address the varied academic needs of students, as well as students' psychological, social, behavioural and mental health needs. Common sense and several studies (Biddle and Berliner, 2002) support the need for smaller classes especially in the primary grades. Lowered classroom sizes have resulted in better learning environments, opportunities for meaningful assessment and evaluation, and more time for professional dialogue and parent communication. Certainly, there is no credible evidence that suggests smaller classes do not benefit students. In the absence of such research it hardly makes sense to consider reversing an initiative that has been so closely tied to the various aspects of education reform that have seen Ontario become the envy of the world in recent years.
- 4.02** OECTA believes that we need to continue on the path we are on in Ontario, while simultaneously looking at areas where reform is prudent. When it comes to education, excellent outcomes result from maximizing education dollars that are tied closely to the classroom. Accordingly, government spending reductions should come from the bureaucracy and administration, not from the classroom. Reform efforts and assessment initiatives should be more closely linked to front-line teachers. With the plethora of administrators and bureaucrats at the Ministry and school board level, reform is becoming increasingly top-down. There is a need for government, school boards and education stakeholders to shift attitudes, so that education reform movements begin at the grassroots level. This approach is consistent with sound pedagogical research, respects teachers' knowledge and skills, and is a more fiscally prudent approach to education administration.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.01** Link funding for education, as closely as possible, to teacher directed initiatives that support teachers and students in the classroom.
- 5.02** Reduce current government funding directed to school boards for assessment tools and assessment materials, by half.
- 5.03** Adopt a random sampling model for EQAO, while maintaining existing student assessments provided by school boards for classroom teacher directed use.
- 5.04** Introduce and enforce a real spending reduction on senior administrators to save \$150 million.
- 5.06** Reduce the size of Ministry of Education bureaucracy, and direct savings to front-line classroom initiatives.
- 5.07** Consider short-term (five-year) rotating contracts for Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat staff to ensure that Secretariat staff have recent teaching experience.
- 5.08** OECTA recommends that the government implement no further corporate tax cuts. This will result in additional government revenues for the services that benefit from them the most.

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