

GRANTS FOR STUDENT NEEDS 2023–24

TO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

ONTARIO ENGLISH
**Catholic
Teachers**
ASSOCIATION

The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) represents the 45,000 passionate and qualified teachers in Ontario's publicly funded English Catholic schools, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

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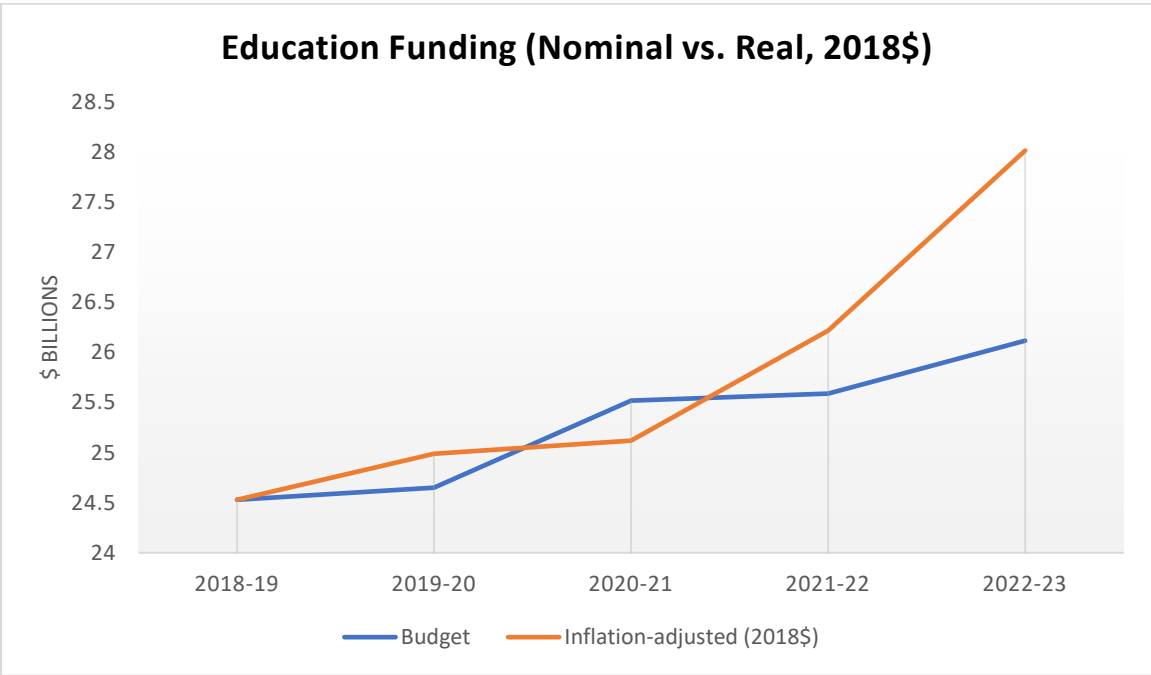
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	INTRODUCTION	1
2.	EDUCATION FOR ALL	3
	Consultation and Collaboration	3
	Learning Recovery	4
	Mental Health	6
	Class Size	9
	Online/Hybrid Learning	10
	De-streaming	13
	Special Education	15
	Safer Schools for All	17
	Infrastructure and Technology	18
	Education Quality and Accountability Office	19
	Full-day Kindergarten	21
	Indigenous Education	22
	Professional Development	24
	English Language Learners	25
	Adult and Continuing Education	26
	Holding School Boards to Account	27
	Publicly Funded Catholic Education	28
3.	CONCLUSION	29
4.	RECOMMENDATIONS	29
5.	WORKS CITED	32

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.01** The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to offer input, on behalf of 45,000 teachers working in Ontario's publicly funded Catholic schools, as the government develops the 2023-24 Grants for Student Needs (GSN).
- 1.02** More than two years of COVID-19 pandemic disruption has taken a significant toll on students, educators, families – everyone. From learning loss, to mental health and well-being crises, to socialization issues caused by school closures and isolation, students have suffered tremendously in ways that researchers are still attempting to discern (Sansone et al. 2021). Educators have also faced tremendous challenges. Although teachers and education workers have gone above and beyond to provide a positive learning experience for their students, numerous studies demonstrate that “alienation and burnout” are at all-time highs (Smith 2022; CTF 2020; OECTA 2020).
- 1.03** These developments are certainly not unique to Canada; around the world, countries have been working to develop education recovery plans (Nugroho et al. 2020). And while specific approaches vary, one common theme is threaded throughout: jurisdictions should take this opportunity to improve upon the foundations of publicly funded education, and to ensure that every student has the opportunity to recover and thrive. This is certainly true in Ontario, where education policy experts have stressed the need for a robust learning recovery program, one that goes beyond a “return to normal” and addresses longstanding policy gaps in education funding, which disproportionately impact students from equity-deserving communities (Tranjan, Oliveira, and Robinson 2022).
- 1.04** Given this – and with the fundamental role publicly funded education plays in society and the economy – one might expect that “learning recovery” and classroom resources and supports would be a centrepiece of the GSN development process in Ontario. Sadly, this is not the case. In fact, the opposite appears to be true.
- 1.05** The Education Funding Guide for the 2023-24 academic year presents three key priorities on which the Government of Ontario hopes to solicit recommendations from stakeholders: Efficiencies and Reducing Administrative Burden; Reducing Time to Completion for Capital Projects; and Joint Use of Schools. No emphasis, or even mention of classroom investments, mental health supports, or much-needed teacher training and professional development.

- 1.06 This is disappointing, but not surprising from a government that has shown no appetite for making the necessary classroom investments in our publicly funded education system throughout their time in office.
- 1.07 Too often, since the provincial election of 2018, the government has siphoned money out of the classroom, while shuffling in unrelated programs and tax credits to artificially inflate the education budget (DiMatteo 2021). The result is that core funding has not kept pace with inflation, producing a real-dollar cut.
- 1.08 Despite repeated claims by the government that the “Plan to Catch Up” represents the “highest investment in public education in Ontario’s history,” the numbers paint a different picture. According to the government’s own Budget Estimate documents, the \$27.08 billion allocation to publicly funded education represents a 3.4 per cent increase over the previous year. However, at that time, inflation stood at 11 per cent – meaning that, in reality, this was a 7.6 per cent real-dollar cut over the previous year (Ministry of Education 2022b). Adding to this, education funding was already in a deficit, as the 2022-23 figure was \$1 billion less than what was spent in the 2020-21 academic year. Wading through the endless spin and talking points, and focusing on the data, the Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario projects a \$6 billion funding shortfall in education over the next six years (FAO 2022).



- 1.09 As the chart above demonstrates, the current level of funding represents an almost \$2 billion inflationary shortfall, based on 2018-dollar value.

- 1.10** The consequences of the government's approach to publicly funded education are significant. While cuts and chronic underfunding negatively impact all students, they disproportionately affect students from vulnerable and equity-deserving populations, including those with special education needs; social, emotional, and mental health concerns; English as a second language learners; students from Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities; and students from families among lower socio-economic groups. The Ford government's ill-conceived policies – such as mandatory online learning – have widened these inequalities and exacerbated disparities between students from traditionally high-performing and traditionally low-performing groups (Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin et al. 2020).
- 1.11** Ontario's publicly funded education system is one of the best in the world, and teachers and education workers have done everything possible to maintain the highest quality of learning for all students. But the system will strain under the government's repeated funding cuts, attempts at destabilization, and inroads toward privatization.
- 1.12** As the provincial budget and education funding formula are developed for next year, it is imperative that the government prioritize publicly funded education and do what is necessary to provide students with the resources and support they need to recover and thrive.

2. EDUCATION FOR ALL

2.01 Consultation and Collaboration

The successful reform of Ontario's publicly funded education system since 2003 has been due in large part to the way evidence and experience have guided education policymaking, and the important investments that have been made in programs with well-established, long-term benefits. The co-operative professional relationship between policymakers and teachers in Ontario has been held up as a model for others to follow, providing further evidence that education systems work best when education policy is developed collaboratively (Schleicher 2018; OECD 2010).

- 2.02** As the frontline workers in the field of education, teachers possess firsthand knowledge and experience of how education policy works in the classroom, and which practices and methods are most conducive to student success. Genuine and meaningful consultations with teacher and education workers unions, and other education stakeholders, could help to guide decisions about education policy in a way that would minimize disruption for students and ensure positive outcomes over the long run.

- 2.03** Unfortunately, the government has too often been willing to dismiss the recommendations and expertise of educators, and has opted to rush through policy implementation without due consideration for the resources, supports, and time that educators need in order to effectively integrate curriculum changes. From COVID-19 health and safety protocols, to de-streaming, to math curriculum updates, over the past several years the government has missed the opportunity to collaborate meaningfully with education stakeholders.
- 2.04** Ontario's teachers are trained, certified professionals with expertise, experience, and professional judgement in writing and delivering curriculum, managing classrooms, and evaluating student progress. Teachers have a practical understanding of how schools operate and what is needed for students to learn and grow.
- 2.05** International research has shown that a collaborative, professional relationship between governments and teachers' and educators' organizations is a key ingredient in successful education systems. It is still not too late for the Ford government to change their approach, to avoid future mismanagement and to leverage the experience and expertise of qualified educators, to ensure Ontario schools have the resources students need to recover, and to thrive and grow (Schleicher 2020; Schleicher 2018). **Moving forward, it will be a far better use of everyone's time and resources for the government to engage in regular, open, and constructive dialogue with teachers and education workers, and to heed the advice of those on the frontlines of publicly funded education.**
- 2.06 Learning Recovery**
- After two years of pandemic disruption, educators, students, and families are hoping for a more "normal" academic year. And while everyone is excited to be back in schools, enjoying the many benefits of in-person learning, education systems around the world are confronting, assessing, and responding to student "learning loss" (Bennett 2022; Reed 2021). Some researchers and commentators have gone as far as to suggest that, if left unaddressed, learning gaps resulting from pandemic disruption could "derail a generation of children," with long-term social and economic costs (Malpass 2022; Blaskó, da Costa, and Schnepf 2022).
- 2.07** Extrapolating on data pertaining to summer learning loss for Ontario students, researchers have projected "learning losses of 3.5 and 6.5 months among typically-performing and lower performing students respectively, and achievement gaps that grow

up to 1.5 years among same grade peers” (Aurini and Davies 2021). As the same authors have pointed out elsewhere, the reality for Ontario students may be greater than modelling projections can indicate, as statistical modelling does not account for pandemic-related stress and trauma that children, youth, and parents may have experienced (Vaillancourt, Davies, and Aurini 2021).

- 2.08** The reality is that “learning loss” will be experienced differently, and to a varying extent, depending on student circumstances. According to research conducted by the – now-dissolved – Ontario COVID-19 Science Table, the effects of pandemic-related school disruptions have been unequal, disproportionately and negatively impacting “low-income families in which racialized and Indigenous groups, newcomers, and people with disabilities are overrepresented.” The science table further raises concerns that students’ learning loss, if not immediately addressed, may impact this generations’ future economic productivity and earning potential (Barrett et al. 2021).
- 2.09** Researchers from around the world agree: for a robust learning recovery, countries must implement “explicit education recovery strategies, and for these strategies to be funded in addition to regular schooling budgets.” The science table concludes that a successful learning recovery program must address “the long-term mental health, health, and education problems arising from COVID-19-related school closures” (Barrett et al. 2021).
- 2.10** To-date, the government has not gone nearly far enough to provide the investment necessary for a robust recovery. In fact, rather than invest in the necessary resources and supports, the government has funneled money out of the classroom, opting instead to provide parents with direct payments of roughly \$200 or \$250 per student, which the government claims are to be spent on tutoring services. This is an ineffective and irresponsible use of public funding, in several respects.
- 2.11** Education experts have been clear that the amount provided to parents will make no meaningful difference in students’ learning recovery. As Education Professor Kelly Gallagher-Mackay notes, with the funding allocation being enough to cover two or maybe three tutoring sessions, “there’s no possibility of really significantly helping students with this much money” (Eschner 2022).
- 2.12** This point is accurate; however, there is a more germane issue: namely, this money would be far more effective if invested into the classroom. Any effective approach to learning recovery must be comprehensive, multi-year, and involve inclusive supports

invested into the classroom. Teachers need opportunities to assess students, formally and informally, as guided by their professional judgement, to determine their learning needs.

2.13 To do so, the government must take responsibility for providing school boards with resources for supports to fill learning gaps. These programs will need to be tiered, differentiated, and ongoing – we cannot expect that one-size-fits-all solutions will work for all students, especially those with special education needs. It also must be understood that funding could be required for additional teachers to support student learning, as well as to reduce class sizes, which, when smaller, have been amply shown to boost learning and achievement, particularly for vulnerable and equity-deserving students (Schanzenbach 2014).

2.14 The government's approach falls well short of these requirements. As Gallagher-Mackay argues, "Two hundred dollars per child is not an investment. It's a giveaway." The government has an obligation to address learning loss and support a recovery focused on student success, in a comprehensive and effective manner. To do so, **the government must make the proper investments into the classroom, including: reduced class sizes, so students can get the focused, individual attention from teachers they need and the stable learning environment they deserve; more professional services and supports, to address learning loss and mental health needs; and immediate, substantial investments in school infrastructure and technology.**

2.15 Mental Health

The exacerbation of mental health and well-being issues for students and educators are among the most significant and troubling consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a recent study conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), between March and June 2021, involving 2,225 students in Grades 7 to 12 in Ontario, 59 per cent report that the pandemic has made them feel depressed about the future, and 39 per cent note their mental health has worsened. Distressingly, almost 18 per cent of students surveyed indicated that "they seriously contemplated suicide in the past year" (Boak, Elton-Marshall, and Hamilton 2022). These findings are indicative of a crisis-level situation with respect to student mental health and well-being.

2.16 The COVID-19 pandemic heightened issues of mental health and well-being, but it did not create them. There are longstanding shortcomings in Ontario's mental health system, particularly as it pertains to children and youth. More than 28,000 children and youth are waiting to access mental health services, more than double the estimated figure from

three years ago. Many of these children and youth are having to turn to emergency services through clinics and hospitals (MHASEF Research Team 2017). According to Ontario data from Children’s Mental Health Ontario (CMHO), “children and youth under 18 are now waiting as long as two-and-a-half years to receive mental health treatment,” and an estimated 200,000 children with serious mental health issues have no contact with mental health services at all (CMHO 2020).

- 2.17** What is more, the impacts of mental health challenges have not been experienced equally. Research shows that families who were already vulnerable prior to the pandemic – for example, those with lower household income and parental education rates – have been “disproportionately impacted by economic hardship as a result of the pandemic, such as job loss and food insecurity” (SickKids 2021). These consequences have been accompanied by higher rates of child abuse, neglect, physical inactivity, and instances of anxiety and depression (Carpenter 2020; Pringle 2020). **The government must acknowledge the relationship between mental health and equitable student outcomes. All mental health interventions should be culturally responsive and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of all students.**
- 2.18** Parents and teachers have also expressed concerns about the amount of time young people are spending with electronic devices rather than peers. Researchers from SickKids found that “increased time on screens had a wide-ranging impact on the mental health of children and youth” (Fahmy 2021; McGinn 2020; SickKids 2021). The Ford government has only made this problem worse by expanding online learning, and promoting school boards’ adoption of the failed hybrid model.
- 2.19** The Ford government has not done nearly enough to address the mental health crisis facing school-aged children in Ontario. Although the 2022-23 GSN documents indicate a \$38.4 million increase in the Mental Health and Well-being Grant over the previous year’s total, this figure is deceptive. In reality, \$25 million (or 65 per cent) of this increase is not new funding – the government has simply moved into the GSNs monies that had previously been allocated under Priorities and Partnership Funding (PPF), in an effort to artificially inflate the education budget. This is not a policy change; this is a change in accounting.
- 2.20** Even still, the government has allocated \$124.7 million to the Mental Health and Well-being Grant, well short of what is needed to recover from the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) Allocation

remains flat compared to the previous year, while the increases to the Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount (DSENA) Allocation, Special Incidence Portion (SIP), and Behaviour Expertise Amount (BEA) Allocation – 2.5, 3, and 0.3 per cent, respectively – is a fraction of what would be necessary in order to keep up with inflation (Ministry of Education 2022b).

- 2.21** The mental health needs of students must be a centerpiece of a learning recovery plan. Catholic teachers recommend that the government **immediately and dramatically enhance investments into mental health services in schools, and expand school-based resources, supports, and services. This should include funding to support ongoing mental health-related professional development opportunities for educators, as well as the hiring of additional mental health professionals, including social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, child and youth workers, and school mental health workers.**
- 2.22** As part of this, **the government must invest in proactive and comprehensive mental health assessment of students.** Previously, researchers have used data from the Canadian Health Measures Survey to determine a “baseline” of mental health fitness, which has been used to demonstrate gaps or declines in children’s mental fitness (Tremblay et al. 2010). In Canada, proactive mental health assessment in schools is not a standard practice; however, examples do exist, such as the Guidelines for Fitness Assessment in Manitoba Schools. Such assessments, in addition to providing baseline data, can be helpful in subsequently developing tools or determining the specific types of mental health resources and supports that students need. Such an approach could be especially beneficial for students in Ontario, given the mental health and well-being consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2.23** Providing supports in schools, where children and youth already spend much of their time, can help reduce stigma, connect students to their communities, and deliver more responsive, cost-effective service. **Annual funding for Student Mental Health Ontario must be increased in a manner that reflects sustainability and long-term needs.**
- 2.24** Of course, geographic and demographic needs will need to be considered to ensure that no regions or populations are disadvantaged. For the most efficient and effective services, **there should be co-ordination between the Ministry of Education and other ministries, further exploration of the community hub model, and regular**

consultation with the representatives of frontline teachers and education workers.

2.25 The government also has a duty to consider the mental health needs of teachers and education workers. According to research from the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF 2020), close to 70 per cent of teachers across the country are concerned for their own mental health and well-being, and 75 per cent say they are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their personal and professional expectations. The vast majority – including 99 per cent of OECTA members who completed the survey – do not feel they are being supported by the Ministry of Education as they cope with these struggles.

2.26 In addition to **targeting mental health resources specifically for teachers and education workers**, the government must **ensure that school administrators are honouring teachers' contractual rights to access sick leave for mental health issues, including investigating the reasons for, and redressing, the shortage of qualified occasional teachers.**

2.27 Class Size

The benefits of smaller class sizes are well established. For example, after a thorough review of the research, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach (2014) of the US National Education Policy Center concluded, "Class size is one of the most-studied education policies, and an extremely rigorous body of research demonstrates the importance of class size in positively influencing student achievement." By contrast, no study currently exists that documents advantages for student learning that result from increasing class sizes.

2.28 In the most comprehensive and well-known study, the Tennessee STAR project, assessment results consistently favoured those students who had been in small classes, with carryover effects lasting throughout their academic careers (Finn et al. 2001; Krueger and Whitmore 2000; Mosteller 1995). Reductions in class size have also been associated with improvements in students' psychological engagement with school, more positive reactions to teachers and peers, higher levels of interest and motivation, lower levels of boredom and anxiety, a greater sense of belonging, and more optimism and confidence (Dee and West 2011). There are also long-term socio-economic benefits associated with smaller class sizes, such as public savings in terms of lower health and welfare costs (Fredriksson, Öckert, and Oosterbeek 2011; Krueger 2003; Muennig and Woolf 2007).

2.29 While class size reductions are generally targeted toward primary students, these factors also point to the benefits of smaller classes for junior, intermediate, and secondary students, who are often dealing with a range of intellectual, social, and emotional challenges while struggling to develop “the skills of productive citizenry.” All students need the time and attention of a dedicated teacher, which can only be guaranteed if class sizes are manageable (Wasley 2002).

2.30 The Ford government has pointed to jurisdictions in Canada with higher class size averages than Ontario as counterevidence to the benefits of smaller class sizes. However, it is important to note that collective agreements in British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec offset higher class size averages by ensuring additional supports/educators based on class composition. The fact is, reductions in class size since 2003 have resulted in Ontario achieving the highest four- and five-year graduation rates in the province’s history, and Ontario’s system of publicly funded education routinely ranks among the best in Canada and the world.

2.31 All students deserve the opportunity to interact with their peers in a safe and enriching environment, and to receive the individual attention they need to realize their full potential. It is more important than ever that the government commit to lowering class size averages in Ontario’s publicly funded schools.

2.32 Online Learning

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government’s decision to implement mandatory online learning for Ontario high school students generated a significant amount of controversy. At the time, our Association and other education experts warned that introducing mandatory e-learning would raise a number of issues with respect to student learning, access, equity, and privacy, as well as how the platform would be administered (OECTA 2020; Parker 2020; Farhadi 2019).

2.33 Studies conducted throughout the pandemic confirmed concerns expressed by OECTA and experts, including how online learning was having a disproportionate negative impact on equity-deserving students “from low-income households,” and how the platform “is producing new geographies of inequality,” in which only a minority of students succeed (Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin, Wyatt, and Le 2020; OECTA 2020; Farhadi 2019; Jackson 2020).

2.34 Expanding online learning and privatizing aspects of Ontario’s publicly funded education system will lead students to lose out on vital interactions with teachers, education workers, and other students. Inequalities would increase, and learning gaps would widen,

especially among students with special education needs, Indigenous students, and those from vulnerable and equity-deserving communities (Maimaiti et al. 2021).

- 2.35** In discussing online learning, the government must also consider its current level of data integrity, on which programming decisions are premised. For instance, offerings are based upon the assumption that roughly 15 per cent of students take online courses. However, these data remain unverified and are potentially misleading. This is lazy policymaking in the extreme. By arbitrarily applying a 15 per cent usage assumption across the province, the government does not take regional variations into account; thus, funding is equalized rather than targeted to high-use regions – this overcompensates for school boards in some areas, while underserving others.
- 2.36** This approach represents an extreme example of lazy policymaking – and raises a number of questions that remain unanswered. For instance, what happens to school funding, and by extension teacher staffing, when schools fall under or go over that arbitrarily assigned 15 per cent benchmark, and as a result have fewer or more students opting out? If schools fall below the benchmark, is projected funding clawed-back? These are questions that our Association has posed to the government; as yet, we have not received a reply.
- 2.37** On the topic of uneven experiences, the pandemic also highlighted ongoing and significant issues with delivery infrastructure. Reliable broadband access remains uneven across the province, with northern and rural areas facing significant gaps in service. This has been compounded by several internet outages, even in urban areas (McKay 2021).
- 2.38** While the government has made numerous announcements regarding their intent to improve internet access in northern and remote regions – and while it is true that some additional funding has been provided – many families in these areas still struggle with reliable internet access and stability (CBC 2022). This is particularly acute for students who live on Indigenous reservations, where news stories have described students being forced to use fax machines to submit work, in the absence of reliable broadband access (Buell 2021).
- 2.39** As well, many families in Ontario cannot *afford* high speed internet, or the technology required to access online courses (Butler 2021; CBC 2019). Pursuing online learning without providing corresponding additional funding to ensure equitable access will have a negative impact on the student learning experience. In the government’s seemingly

relentless pursuit of expanding online learning, too often they have failed to take into account the social, cultural, economic, and geographic factors that impact a student's ability to engage with, and achieve in an online learning environment.

- 2.40** No student should be forced to take courses online. Nevertheless, the government must **provide predictable and ongoing funding to ensure that every student who needs it has access to their own electronic device, and must ensure that all families have equitable access to broadband internet. In addition, any educator required to deliver instruction remotely must be issued the technology and/or devices required for the task by their school board.**
- 2.41** As well, students and teachers must be provided with appropriate resources and supports to facilitate achievement. This includes **providing teachers who demonstrate interest with teacher-led, teacher- directed professional development opportunities related to online learning.**
- 2.42** Amidst discussion of online learning, we must bear in mind a clear fact: research has established in-person instruction as the ideal and most equitable model of learning for students (Cornelius-White 2007). In-person learning provides the best environment to realize student success, promoting greater well-being, academic achievement, and fostering a life-long love of learning. Among its many benefits, in-person learning enables teachers and education workers to provide the individual attention and holistic social, emotional, and academic supports to help students realize their full potential (CMHO 2022).
- 2.45** The Minister of Education has admitted this publicly on numerous occasions (OHRC 2020; TVO 2020). Recently, when the government introduced Bill 28, using legislation to impose a contract on Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) education workers, the Minister of Education grounded the bill's rationale almost entirely on the paramount need of students to be in school – in fact, the bill's name was the *Keeping Students in Class Act* (Legislative Assembly of Ontario 2022).
- 2.46** Given this, the government must **cease the expansion of online learning, as well as the extension of service delivery to third party entities beyond the publicly funded education system. Any courses that are delivered in an online format must be delivered by certified teachers, within the publicly funded education system, and must not be hosted or delivered by any third-party and/or private**

organization. The government must also **commit to in-person learning by providing the necessary investments into classroom resources and supports in order to allow students to thrive, academically and socially.**

2.47 De-streaming

Catholic teachers have always supported efforts to eliminate racism, discrimination, and all systemic barriers in our schools, and we will continue to advocate for action, offering our perspectives on how to implement de-streaming successfully (OECTA 2021).

2.48 Unfortunately, the government has simply not provided the resources, supports, or training necessary to promote program success.

2.49 By pursuing de-streaming without providing additional supports for students, smaller class sizes so that teachers can provide greater individual attention and differentiated instruction, revamped curricula, implementation training for educators, or meaningful collaboration with educators, the government's current approach limits success (Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education 2021).

2.50 According to recent survey research by the advocacy group People for Education, only 30 per cent of principals in Ontario schools indicate that the government has provided sufficient support to successfully implement de-streaming policy (People for Education 2022). Several factors have contributed to the inadequacy of the government's approach.

2.51 First, the government has not committed stable, long-term funding dedicated to the sustainability of de-streaming efforts. As part of the 2022-23 GSN allocations, the government provided funding for "temporary additional staffing supports" (Ministry of Education 2022b). However, this funding is time-limited, and spread across a range of categories, including "learning recovery, the implementation of the first year of a fully de-streamed Grade 9, the delivery of remote learning, supports for special education, and maintaining enhanced cleaning standards."

2.52 An additional issue that threatens the success of de-streaming pertains to teacher training. The Association, and others, have repeatedly highlighted the centrality of teacher-led professional development opportunities, resources, release time, and other supports to ensure that educators can provide the best possible learning environment for all students (Follwell and Andrey 2021; Ontario Teachers' Federation 2021; Pichette, Deller, and Colyar 2020).

- 2.53** Despite this, the government’s rollout of the de-streamed Grade 9 math curriculum provided teachers only three months to prepare to deliver this entirely new curriculum – and to do so during a global pandemic, with frequent changes to delivery platform and learning environment. The result, observers note, is that teachers were attempting to complete professional development training while simultaneously rolling out the new curriculum (People for Education 2022). As one principal described, “There’s no runway to properly execute this” (Alphonso 2022).
- 2.54** In addition to stable funding and teacher training, the Association has noted the importance of considering a range of associated factors that, if not addressed, could undermine de-streaming efforts, such as class size and composition, where research indicates that smaller class sizes better allow teachers to provide individual attention and differentiated instruction for all students (Follwell and Andrey 2021; Fogliato 2017).
- 2.55** The government has not taken heed of this advice, the result of which has been uneven circumstances, often divided along socio-economic lines. For instance, principals in high-income neighbourhoods were much more likely (63 per cent) than those from schools in low-income neighbourhoods (38 per cent) to report the ability to offer reduced class sizes for de-streamed courses (People for Education 2022). As a result, the policy is exacerbating one of the very principles it seeks to address.
- 2.56** Throughout the discussion of policy implementation, the government has still not grasped sufficiently that de-streaming alone will not eradicate some of the other causes of disadvantage, such as poverty and racial discrimination in the wider community.
- 2.57** Time and again, the Association has made clear that de-streaming should be part of a broader discourse on equity and inclusion, including wide-ranging educational reforms (Jakubowski et al. 2016; OECD 2010). This should involve a variety of supports, funded properly by the government, for students who are experiencing learning gaps in de-streamed classes, as well as other measures to address inequities, such as through the Learning Opportunities Grant – which received less than a 0.1 per cent increase in 2022-23, compared to the previous year (Ministry of Education 2022b).
- 2.58** Ultimately, the success of any de-streaming policy will depend in no small measure on the government’s willingness to engage in immediate, meaningful, and consistent consultation with education stakeholders. Any endeavours to write curriculum, support documents, or policy should be done in collaboration with teachers, who are the frontline

workers tasked with delivering curriculum, and teacher unions. At the same time, there must be a focused effort on expanding current societal attitudes toward ideal educational outcomes, as well as greater student and parental understanding of the full range of post-secondary pathways.

- 2.59 The Ministry of Education must provide a robust suite of supports and community engagement to promote success. Mental health and wellness must be a centrepiece of this approach. This will require the hiring of additional resource teachers, educational assistants, special education supports, social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, and culturally responsive counsellors.**
- 2.60 The government must also provide funding for professional development, support resources, release time, and other supports needed to transition to full implementation.**
- 2.61 The government must engage education partners in sustained, meaningful consultation and collaboration in developing de-streaming policy and rewriting curriculum documents. De-streamed courses must be delivered in-person, not online.**
- 2.62 The government should also commit to working collaboratively with education affiliates to collect appropriate data in order to assess program implementation on an ongoing basis.**
- 2.63 Special Education**
Special education funding remains a glaring weakness in Ontario's publicly funded education system, as it continues to insufficiently address student need, opting instead for a one-size-fits all formula approach.
- 2.64** Currently, the funding formula assigns a total of 1.73 support staff per 1,000 elementary school children and 2.21 per 1,000 secondary school students, dedicated to speech services, psychological services, social services, child and youth workers, and attendance counselling (Tanjin 2022). This is a woefully inadequate ratio, which produces significant shortages in supports. As education economist Ricardo Tranjan describes, "In 2020, there was one speech specialist for every 2,370 students, roughly 0.2 specialists per school.

There were even fewer professionals providing psychological services: there was just one for every 2,580 students” (Tranjan, Oliviera, and Robinson 2022).

- 2.65** There is also a geographic component to these issues. Only 72 per cent of rural elementary schools report having a full-time special education teacher, and the average ratio of students receiving special education support to special education teachers is 38:1 in elementary schools and 77:1 in secondary schools (People for Education 2019).
- 2.66** Across the province, because school boards are reluctant to go through the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) process, students often go far too long without their learning needs being acknowledged. Given the frequent disruptions to in-person learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the backlog of students waiting to begin the IPRC process has increased. Students do not get the proper interventions while they are awaiting identification, and it is more difficult to build new skills or change attitudes when identification finally happens (OECTA 2020). As such, additional resources will be required to ensure all students are able to begin the IPRC process in a timely manner.
- 2.67** It is clear that these issues will not resolve themselves. **The government must act aggressively, and deploy mental health and well-being teams in every school in Ontario.**
- 2.68** If the Ford government is to address this issue, it will need to improve upon past performance. For example, the government previously drastically reduced a planned, long-needed increase to the Special Incidence Portion, which provides specialized staff and materials to support high needs students. They also cut the Local Priorities Fund, only replacing it with the Supports for Students Fund after a lengthy struggle by OECTA and other education unions at the bargaining table. More recently, the government’s fall economic statement made no mention whatsoever about additional funding to support students with special education needs.
- 2.69** The government has also put families of children with autism through an incredible ordeal, first announcing a widely condemned move from a needs-based support system to a fixed amount, then walking back this decision but delaying implementation of the new program, leaving more than 27,000 children on the waitlist for services (MacMillan 2021; Waberi 2020; Sharkey 2019). In March of last year, the Ford government promised that by the end of 2021, there would be fewer than 8,000 children on the

waitlist for needs-based autism programs. As of June, the list stands at more than 51,000 children, and counting (Aelick 2022).

2.70 It is imperative that the government **enhance support for students with special education needs, to successfully reintegrate them with their peers and mitigate any learning loss that has occurred.**

2.71 Safer Schools for All

As educators continue to go above and beyond to help students recover from the previous years of pandemic-related disruption, we cannot leave the significant challenges that existed before COVID-19 unaddressed. Of particular concern is the problem of violence against teachers and education workers.

2.72 In our 2017 survey of classroom teachers (OECTA), 85 per cent of respondents said the incidence of violence against teachers is increasing, while 80 per cent said incidents are becoming more severe. More recently, a report surveying 3,854 education workers, led by researchers from the University of Ottawa, reported “shockingly high” rates of workplace violence, with 70 per cent of those surveyed indicating they have been subject to some form of physical force (Bruckert et al. 2021). The report found a “disturbing normalization of workplace violence... that violence ‘is part of the job’” (Bruckert et al. 2021).

2.73 This has repercussions for everyone in the school community. More than three-quarters of OECTA survey respondents said violence in schools makes teaching more difficult, and more than a quarter have had to take time away from work due to the physical or mental toll of a violent incident (OECTA 2017).

2.74 Despite greater attention being paid to this problem over the past few years, and negotiated obligations requiring school administrators to report incidents of violence, we are still a long way from implementing the solutions outlined in our Safer Schools for All platform (OECTA 2017a).

2.75 If unaddressed, the situation will only become more acute. The relationship between isolation, school closures, and mental health challenges among students has been well established (St. George et al. 2021; SickKids 2021). And during school closures, some students may not have had regular access to the mental health supports they require. As such, it is imperative that the government provide resources and supports for more child

and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and other professional services to help students deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs.

2.76 These investments will help students manage their behaviours and realize academic success in the short and long term, while enabling teachers, education workers, and the rest of the school community to focus on making learning happen in a safe and secure environment. **To ensure comprehensive and inclusive supports the government should be encouraging and facilitating collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services on a proactive, multi-faceted response that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of school violence.**

2.77 Infrastructure and Technology

The need for urgent and comprehensive upgrades to Ontario's publicly funded schools predates COVID-19. In 2021, news reports revealed that the repair backlog for schools exceeded \$16.8 billion (King, Rieti, and Swyers 2021). According to a report by economist Hugh Mackenzie, Ontario is now past the point where the physical condition of schools has deteriorated to such an extent that hundreds of schools need to be replaced entirely (Mackenzie 2017).

2.78 While the issue of school infrastructure is not a new problem, unfortunately the current government has done little to rectify the situation. In May 2022, the Minister of Education announced \$500 million toward building and refurbishing schools, as part of the government's 10-year, \$13 billion commitment made in 2019 (Ontario Newsroom 2022). However, it is worth noting that this is \$3 billion less than what the previous government had committed to spend over the same period (Benzie 2017). Complicating matters further, in July 2020 it was revealed that the government had quietly cut an additional \$1 billion in school repair funding – now promising only \$12 billion over the decade-long period (*PressProgress* 2020).

2.79 Data also show a persistent lack of funding in technology, poor or uneven internet connectivity in schools, and insufficient access to technology-related professional development for teachers (People for Education 2019). A 2018 report by the Ontario Auditor General found that students' access to classroom technology varied widely across the province, as did the age of equipment and software.

2.80 Since the 1970s, the physical construction of Ontario schools has been driven by economic and demographic considerations, rather than public health concerns (McQuigge

2020). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that school facilities are not well-positioned to respond to public health emergencies, with small, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate, dated, and substandard ventilation systems, where such systems exist. The government has partially recognized this situation, using a federal-provincial cost sharing program to earmark \$600 million for ventilation improvements, and promising standalone air-purifying (HEPA) units for classrooms without mechanical ventilation systems (Chidley-Hill 2021).

- 2.81** Unfortunately, as has been the case since the beginning of the pandemic, the government was not proactive and did not act quickly enough or use the time in which physical facilities were closed to ensure the necessary ventilation upgrades. As a result, in many school boards, major ventilation upgrades were not ready for the start of the 2021-22 school year and, to date, remain outstanding (Mojtehdzadeh, Warren 2021).
- 2.82** While HEPA units have provided a stopgap, they cannot be relied upon as a long-term solution. **The government must act proactively and make the necessary investments to ensure that all schools have ventilation systems that meet the health and safety standards set by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers.** To ensure that this process is transparent, the government must also institute a provincial standard for air quality measurements in schools, with publicly available metrics to indicate whether standards are being met.
- 2.83** Out-of-date and poorly maintained facilities, and technology that has not kept pace with students' educational needs, have an immediate and detrimental impact on the learning environment. Research has clearly established the relationship between school facility conditions, student academic achievement, and teacher effectiveness (Earthman 2002). Quite simply, no one should be forced to work or learn in buildings with leaking roofs, poor ventilation, mold, and other dangers. **The government must provide immediate, stable, and sufficient annual funding for infrastructure and repairs, new technology, as well as services and supports for all students, including those with special education and mental health needs.**
- 2.84 Education Quality and Accountability Office**
The recent release of Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized test results precipitated a media frenzy, with numerous articles fanning flames of concern with incendiary headlines, such as "Majority of Ontario's Grade 6 students failed

provincial standardized math test” (D’Mello and Callan 2022). Catholic teachers remain steadfast in our belief that EQAO standardized testing is not an accurate picture of student learning, and in many respects causes more harm than good.

- 2.85** The most recent iteration of EQAO testing had a number of specific and problematic issues. For instance, the new online testing format, using a multi-stage computer adaptive test, was hampered by numerous technical difficulties (Canadian Press 2022). At the same time, upending the testing platform throws into question data reporting, as results are being compared against previous, distinct platforms. In addition, following a two-year hiatus, standardized testing resumed while still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, no doubt adding stress for students in an already-stressful situation (Groleau 2022).
- 2.86** These specific issues join with longstanding and broad concerns, which call into question the efficacy of standardized testing more generally. The negative consequences of standardized testing on students’ health, well-being, learning, and performance are well-known (Heissel et al. 2018; Kempf 2016; Segool et al. 2013).
- 2.87** Looking specifically at Ontario, recent research from international education expert Andy Hargreaves (2020) found that any supposed benefits of EQAO for monitoring progress and stimulating higher expectations for achievement “have been outweighed by the harmful consequences for broad excellence, equity, and well-being.” He also found that teachers – the professionals who work directly with students in the classroom – were concerned about the effects of the testing not only on students’ health, but also on learning and innovation.
- 2.88** To make matters worse, province-wide standardized testing does not give an accurate reflection of student ability, because it only captures a moment in time and fails to account for the range of skills and factors that affect achievement. While some argue that standardized testing is necessary to provide essential information to improve student achievement and ensure the education system is accountable to taxpayers, the reality is that teachers already use professional judgment to conduct assessments for, as, and of learning. We use the results of these assessments to modify our instruction and provide individual attention, as well as to complete provincial report cards (OTF 2017).
- 2.89** Even before COVID-19, the tide was already turning against EQAO testing. The previous government appointed a set of advisors to undertake a comprehensive study of Ontario’s

assessment regime. The advisors made a slew of recommendations, including phasing out the EQAO test in Grade 3 (Campbell et al. 2018). This report should have been the starting point for a wide-ranging discussion about how to move forward.

2.90 Unfortunately, the Ford government discarded this advice, in favour of an ideology that views standardized testing as inherently useful. Where once the Chair of the EQAO was a part-time position, the government created a full-time job and appointed a defeated Progressive Conservative election candidate to the role. This is on top of the costly bureaucracy at the Ministry of Education that exists to deal with EQAO initiatives. The government has also expanded the mandate of the agency to conduct hastily devised, poorly considered assessments for pre-service teachers, despite the fact that the EQAO itself found that “the fundamental goal of these tests – to improve student learning – is often not met” (EQAO 2019; Alphonso 2019).

2.91 Teachers are assessing students for, as, and of learning every day, and communicating these results to school boards and parents. Standardized testing is not a good use of education resources. Given how far EQAO has strayed from its original mandate, Charles Pascal, a former Deputy Minister of Education and Chair of EQAO, recently argued that the government should suspend EQAO testing (CBC 2020). **If the government still believes some sort of province-wide testing is necessary, they should at least move toward a random sampling model, as is used by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and others.** This would produce statistically valid results at a fraction of the current costs, while reducing the level of student anxiety and allowing most teachers and students to remain focused on genuine learning activities and more meaningful classroom assessments.

2.92 Full-day Kindergarten

Parents, teachers, early childhood educators (ECEs), administrators, and researchers agree that Ontario’s full-day Kindergarten (FDK) program is preparing children socially and academically, leading to better outcomes in later years (Alphonso 2017; Janmohamed 2014). Longitudinal research provides more evidence of self-regulatory and academic gains, with benefits being apparent in all academic areas at the end of Kindergarten and remaining significantly greater to the end of the primary division (Pelletier and Corter 2019).

2.93 However, there are still some issues that are keeping the program from being fully effective for all students. For example, although the previous government took some

action to address the problem, more still needs to be done to reduce the number of large and/or split Kindergarten and Grade 1 classes.

2.94 It is also imperative that we continue to respect and support the functioning of the teacher/ECE teams. When the FDK program was developed, the teacher/ECE teams were recommended based on pilot tests in Ontario and elsewhere, in which teams were found to add to the professional preparation and skillset of each team member (Pascal 2009). ECEs bring specialized knowledge about early childhood development, which proves valuable for fostering emotional regulation and social skills. Meanwhile, certified teachers bring high levels of skills and training related to teaching methods, planning, and assessment. We are able to structure the play-based curriculum in a way that optimizes learning, and to individualize instruction when necessary. We understand the whole child and are best equipped to prepare students and integrate them into the next stages of their learning.

2.95 Research has shown that Ontario's FDK staff teams are united around the mission to support children and families (Pelletier 2014). Moreover, the current dynamic enables the teacher and ECE "to capitalize on children's individual needs and inquiries. They have the time to know their students very well and to identify problems and intervene early before a child becomes too frustrated and discouraged to try" (McCuaig 2019). Rather than disrupting this effective dynamic, the government should provide sufficient resources to ensure that a certified teacher and an ECE are present in all FDK classrooms at all times during the instructional day.

2.96 With the proper support, the investment in FDK will continue to pay dividends long into the future for students, families, the economy, and society. **As we move toward a post-pandemic system of publicly funded education, the government must continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise.**

2.97 Indigenous Education

The tragic discovery of unmarked graves at residential school sites across Canada highlights the immediate need for the government to provide resources, supports, and curriculum updates to properly acknowledge the devastation that this country's residential school system has inflicted on Indigenous communities.

- 2.98** The 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission drew attention to a number of issues pertaining to Indigenous youth and education. While much of the focus has been on students attending on-reserve schools, it is important to note that in Ontario the majority of Indigenous students attend a provincially funded school. In fact, there are Indigenous students in almost every community: 92 per cent of elementary schools and 96 per cent of secondary schools have at least some Indigenous students (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013).
- 2.99** By now, most Ontarians recognize the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. In a 2019 survey, 81 per cent of elementary schools and 95 per cent of secondary schools reported having offered at least one Indigenous learning opportunity, a substantial increase from 2014 (People for Education 2019). However, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators still need support and resources to ensure they are properly reflecting Indigenous histories and knowledge in the classroom.
- 2.100** There are also significant resource gaps in schools with high proportions of Indigenous students compared to other schools in the province, including lower than average access to guidance teachers, teacher-librarians, and music and physical education programs (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013). **These resource gaps must be overcome if we are going to address the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.**
- 2.101** In addition to investments in resources and supports, **teachers and education workers will require ongoing professional development to facilitate curriculum delivery, as well as to promote familiarity and comfort in providing instruction on important, but potentially sensitive topics.** As the advocacy group People for Education has explained, “Indigenous ways of learning are part of that diversity and cannot be integrated if teacher professional development is inconsistent and there is limited time for collaborative planning” (People for Education 2016).
- 2.102** The previous government was making significant steps in this regard, increasing funding and collecting data on a voluntary basis in order to provide appropriate programs and supports. The new government should not turn its back on these efforts, especially as the need will only become more urgent, given that Indigenous children are the fastest-growing child population segment in Canada (UNICEF Canada 2018). Integrating Indigenous students into their school communities and enabling them to realize their full potential will reduce marginalization and pay significant social and economic dividends over the long term (Sharpe and Arsenault 2010).

2.103 In the years prior to the current government taking office, the Indigenous Education Grant had increased substantially, in response to a nationwide call for a renewed effort toward reconciliation. But this government has shown time and again that this is not an area of priority. After having been cut in the revised Grants for Student Needs for 2018-19, the grant has received only a modest increase over the past four years (Ministry of Education 2019, 2020a, 2021b 2022b).

2.104 And while the government provided \$120.5 million for the Indigenous Education Grant in the 2022-23 GSN, this increase still lags where the grant *would* be, had the government not made drastic initial cuts. What is more, this amount remains far below the investment necessary to redress current gaps within the Indigenous student population. Indigenous education is also an area that has been affected by the government's failure to recommit to the Local Priorities Fund. Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is one of the most urgent and fundamental issues for Ontarians. Rather than looking for areas to trim and save costs, the government should be actively supporting progress.

2.105 Professional Development

Teachers are dedicated lifelong learners, who continually upgrade our knowledge and skills, often on our own time and at our own expense, to ensure that we keep abreast of what is current and effective in our classrooms. For instance, thousands of teachers have taken advantage of opportunities over the past few years to upgrade and refine our skills in math and technology (OCT 2017).

2.106 Unfortunately, the government has too often chosen to implement sweeping changes without providing teachers much-needed opportunities for professional learning. The revised elementary math curriculum provides a case-in-point. When the revised curriculum was announced, the Association and others called on the government to provide the appropriate time, resources, and supports necessary for teachers to understand and master the material (OTF 2020).

2.107 Ideally, this would have involved structured, teacher-led professional development, including ongoing opportunities to meet with peers to collaborate, share classroom experiences and challenges, and refine methods over a period of at least two years (Wong 2020). Instead, the government insisted on implementing the curriculum in the middle of a pandemic, providing teachers with little-to-no guidance or professional learning supports.

2.108 Recent announcements regarding de-streaming have followed a similar pattern. The Association has offered to provide its expertise to the government to ensure that de-streaming efforts are accompanied by appropriate teacher-led professional development opportunities, resources, and other supports to ensure we are providing the best possible learning environment for all students. But once again, these efforts have been rebuffed, with the government instead choosing to implement half-baked plans that are oversimplified, underfunded, and rushed.

2.109 Empirical and anecdotal research show that students thrive in environments where teaching strategies can be adapted to meet individual students' needs (Morgan 2014). It is therefore necessary that teachers be provided with teacher-led professional development opportunities on topics such as differentiated instruction, applying an equity lens to curriculum delivery, and more.

2.110 As the government ponders any additional future changes to curriculum, it is **imperative that resources be provided for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development – the most efficient and effective form of professional learning**. This will ensure that teachers' knowledge remains relevant and up to date, based on the current, job-embedded experiences of our colleagues, and designed to address the needs of our students (CEA 2015; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995).

2.111 English Language Learners

Currently, funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) programs is based on census data and immigration statistics. While these figures provide an estimate, they do not accurately reflect English Language Learners' needs based on actual proficiency. This problem was noted 15 years ago by the Education Equality Task Force, which also condemned the inadequacy of the duration of supports, a sentiment echoed by the Auditor General of Ontario (2017).

2.112 The current funding formula also "fails to recognize the additional costs associated with higher densities of ESL needs in areas with high levels of immigration," while a lack of oversight and transparency mechanisms means some school boards might not be spending the funds on programming for students who need support (Mackenzie 2017). For instance, English Language Learners often require additional supports to acclimate to a new school and culture, especially those who have recently arrived in Canada. These resources help English Language Learners connect to their schools and communities, which in turn contributes to their academic success.

2.113 Many English Language Learners require additional supports or extra assistance in order to better understand class instructions, and were particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports from Ontario and elsewhere indicate that English Language Learners are not receiving the supports they require, and are suffering from additional learning loss as a result of pandemic disruption (Kim 2020; Alphonso 2020). **Smaller class sizes and investing more in English language supports, including properly trained teachers, will ensure students are able to interact with their peers, achieve academic success, and ultimately contribute in our society.**

2.114 Adult and Continuing Education

Adult and continuing education programs are funded at roughly two-thirds the level of regular day school credit programs, which has previously been calculated to result in annual underfunding of \$112 million (Mackenzie 2015). Since coming into office, the Ford government has repeatedly cut the adult and continuing education budgets. This reduction was particularly drastic in the 2022-23 school year, which saw a real-dollar cut of 23 per cent (\$17.7 million) from the previous year (Ministry of Education 2022b).

2.115 At the same time, funding allocations from Special Purpose Grants are directed only toward students in the regular day school program, even though in many cases adult and continuing education programs are being delivered to new immigrants or students who have been marginalized from the regular day school credit program. As a result, adult or continuing education students who have significant needs are often dealing with large class sizes, different classes being delivered in the same room, and a lack of early intervention processes, while teachers are often employed from contract to contract, with substandard salaries, working conditions, and rights.

2.116 Research demonstrates that, despite the many benefits of adult and continuing education learners re-engaging with publicly funded education, there are impacts on learners' mental health, especially for those transitioning back into a formal learning environment after a potentially lengthy absence (Waller et al. 2018). The government must realize that its consistent cuts to adult and continuing education programs have a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of these learners.

2.117 The government should recognize that adult and continuing education is invaluable to the socio-economic well-being and social mobility of communities, especially as we emerge from the pandemic. **Funding is required so that school boards can provide the**

necessary supports to improve language skill assessment. At the same time, adult learners require additional and specific mental health supports to improve chances for successful completion of their respective programs.

2.118 Across Canada, one in five working age adults lack basic literacy and numeracy skills (Drewes and Meredith 2015). Research has shown that raising literacy skill levels would yield an annual rate of return of 251 per cent, with savings of \$542 million across the country on social assistance alone (Murray and Shillington 2011). Furthermore, by improving basic language proficiency, fostering notions of citizenship and social engagement, and encouraging healthier lifestyles and relationships, we can reduce the need for later interventions in these areas and enhance the well-being of our democracy and society. Proper funding for adult and continuing education programs will undoubtedly provide value for money in the short and long term.

2.119 Holding School Boards to Account

Catholic teachers have long expressed our concerns about inconsistencies and lack of accountability in school board spending. For example, our Association has for many years been raising the issue of how school boards are using Special Purpose Grants, such as the Learning Opportunities Grant or funds for English as a Second Language programs. With an overall education budget that does not match student needs, and legal pressure to balance their books, school boards are compelled to use these grants to fill gaps in funding for core programs and expenses.

2.120 It is imperative that new funds for mental health services, special education programs, professional services and supports, and other initiatives are spent as intended. Rather than scaling back reporting requirements in a misguided effort to reduce red tape, the government should be strengthening the process by which funds are distributed and allocated. In many cases, there is still no clear process to determine how allocations are made until after funding has been distributed.

2.121 To hold school boards to account, there should be an annual process of consultation with teacher representatives at each school board regarding locally determined expenditures, as well as prompt reporting with real-time transfers of data where possible.

2.122 Publicly Funded Catholic Education

Publicly funded Catholic schools have made significant contributions to the overall excellence of Ontario's world-renowned education system. In addition to teaching literacy, math, science, and other skills, we are developing students' character and commitment to the common good, encouraging them to be discerning believers, creative and holistic thinkers, self-directed learners, caring family members, and responsible citizens. There are almost 575,000 students attending publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario, including many non-Catholic students whose parents have chosen the system's high standards and well-rounded methods for their children.

2.123 There remains a common misconception that merging Ontario's school systems could save a significant amount of money, but history and scholarship suggests the opposite is true. Dr. John Wiens, former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, put the matter succinctly: "If it's about money, I think there is actually no evidence to show at all that anybody has saved money by [consolidating boards]" (CBC 2016). In Alberta, a study of the restructuring of the school system in the late 1990s found that the implementation costs associated with the mergers exceeded any resulting savings (Pysyk 2000). Ontario's experience with school board amalgamation in the late 1990s led to hundreds of millions of dollars in costs for transition and restructuring. Even conservative organizations like the Fraser Institute have found that amalgamating large organizations almost always results in high transition costs and limited long-term savings (Miljan and Spicer 2015).

2.124 At the same time, there are opportunities to make more efficient use of education resources, by using provincially funded buildings in more collaborative ways and incentivizing inter-ministerial and municipal co-operation. One potential avenue is shared facilities, specifically for co-terminus boards. The previous government noted that "co-locating the schools of coterminous boards in the same facility was an idea with fairly broad support" (Ministry of Education 2014). Naturally, this would have to be done while protecting each school system's unique framework and structures, but there are significant opportunities to make efficient use of resources while ensuring that more communities have access to important public services.

2.125 There are several successful examples of such arrangements in Ontario. The Humberwood Centre houses Holy Child Catholic School, Humberwood Downs public school, a branch of the Toronto Public Library, the Humberwood Community Centre, as well as the 280-space Macaulay Child Development Centre. In Brantford, St. Basil's Catholic Elementary School and Walter Gretzky Elementary School each have a wing in

the 90,000-square-foot shared facility. These sorts of shared facilities can be helpful in maximizing cost efficiency, specifically in rural areas where enrolment declines have raised the specter of school closures.

2.126 In addition to co-location, Ontarians can also benefit from shared services agreements. A feasibility study of 11 Ontario school boards revealed that shared services in areas such as energy and transportation could produce ongoing annual savings of \$3 to 8 million per year, which would represent a 13 to 28 per cent savings on these boards' annual total expenditures (Deloitte 2012). Ultimately, exploring options for shared services agreements and co-locating schools is a far more effective approach than board amalgamation, not only in meeting the needs of students and communities, but also in making efficient use of school space.

3. CONCLUSION

3.01 Ontario's publicly funded education system is world class, thanks to its teachers, education workers, students, parents, and supporting communities – a fact that the challenges of COVID-19, and the dedication of these groups, have made abundantly clear. It is past time for the Ford government to recognize this as well, and work to strengthen our publicly funded school system with the necessary investments to benefit all Ontarians now and in the future.

3.02 The development of the education funding formula for the 2023-24 school year presents the government with an opportunity to do the right thing – to make the investments in the programs, resources, and supports that Ontario's students need in order to recover and thrive, next year and beyond. Ontario's publicly funded education system cannot do more with less. All students deserve a learning environment where they can succeed.

3.03 Ontario's publicly funded schools need real government action and investment. And they need it now.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.01 That the government engage in regular, open, and constructive dialogue with teachers and education workers, and to heed the advice of those on the frontlines of publicly funded education.

4.02 That the government make the proper investments into the classroom, including: reduced class sizes, so students can get the focused, individual attention from teachers they need and the stable learning environment they deserve; more professional services and supports, to address learning loss and

mental health needs; and immediate, substantial investments in school infrastructure and technology.

- 4.03 That the government must acknowledge the relationship between mental health and equitable student outcomes. All mental health interventions should be culturally responsive and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of all students.
- 4.04 That the government immediately and dramatically enhance investments into mental health services in schools, and expand school-based resources, supports, and services. This should include funding to support ongoing mental health-related professional development opportunities for educators, as well as the hiring of additional mental health professionals, including social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, child and youth workers, and school mental health workers.
- 4.05 That the government must invest in proactive and comprehensive mental health assessment of students.
- 4.06 That the government provide annual funding for Student Mental Health Ontario must be increased in a manner that reflects sustainability and long-term needs.
- 4.07 That the government co-ordinate between the Ministry of Education and other ministries to further explore the community hub model, and commit to regular consultation with the representatives of frontline teachers and education workers.
- 4.08 That the government target mental health resources specifically for teachers and education workers.
- 4.09 That the government ensure that school administrators are honouring teachers' contractual rights to access sick leave for mental health issues, including investigating the reasons for, and redressing, the shortage of qualified occasional teachers.
- 4.10 That the government commit to lowering class size averages in Ontario's publicly funded schools, as all students deserve the opportunity to interact with their peers in a safe and enriching environment, and to receive the individual attention they need to realize their full potential.
- 4.11 That the government provide predictable and ongoing funding to ensure that every student who needs it has access to their own electronic device, and ensure that all families have equitable access to broadband internet
- 4.12 That the government ensure that any educator required to deliver instruction remotely is issued the technology and/or devices required for the task by their school board.
- 4.13 That the government provide teachers who demonstrate interest with teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development opportunities related to online learning.
- 4.14 That the government cease the expansion of online learning, as well as the extension of service delivery to third party entities beyond the publicly funded education system.

- 4.15 That the government ensure that any courses delivered in an online format be delivered by certified teachers, within the publicly funded education system, and must not be hosted or delivered by any third-party and/or private organization.
- 4.16 That the government commit to in-person learning by providing the necessary investments into classroom resources and supports in order to allow students to thrive, academically and socially.
- 4.17 That the government provide a robust suite of supports and community engagement to promote success. Mental health and wellness must be a centrepiece of any approach to de-streaming, which will require the hiring of additional resource teachers, educational assistants, special education supports, social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, and culturally responsive counsellors.
- 4.18 That the government provide funding for professional development, support resources, release time, and other supports needed to transition to full implementation.
- 4.19 That the government engage education partners in sustained, meaningful consultation and collaboration in developing de-streaming policy and rewriting curriculum documents. De-streamed courses must be delivered in-person, not online.
- 4.20 That the government commit to working collaboratively with education affiliates to collect appropriate data in order to assess program implementation on an ongoing basis.
- 4.21 That the government act aggressively, and deploy mental health and well-being teams in every school in Ontario.
- 4.22 That the government enhance support for students with special education needs, to successfully reintegrate them with their peers and mitigate any learning loss that has occurred.
- 4.23 That the government encourage and facilitate collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services on a proactive, multi-faceted response that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of school violence.
- 4.24 That the government act proactively and make the necessary investments to ensure that all schools have ventilation systems that meet the health and safety standards set by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers.
- 4.25 That the government provide immediate, stable, and sufficient annual funding for infrastructure and repairs, new technology, as well as services and supports for all students, including those with special education and mental health needs.
- 4.26 That the government end EQAO standardized testing. If the government still believes some sort of province-wide testing is necessary, they should at least move toward a random sampling model, as is used by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and others.

- 4.27 That the government continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise.**
- 4.28 That the government commit the resources necessary to address the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.**
- 4.29 That the government provide teachers and education workers with ongoing professional development to facilitate curriculum delivery, as well as to promote familiarity and comfort in providing instruction on important, but potentially sensitive topics.**
- 4.30 That the government commit resources for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development – the most efficient and effective form of professional learning.**
- 4.31 That the government commit to reducing class sizes for, and investing more in, English language supports, including properly trained teachers, will ensure students are able to interact with their peers, achieve academic success, and ultimately contribute in our society.**
- 4.32 That the government provide funding so that school boards can offer the necessary supports to improve language skill assessment. At the same time, adult learners require additional and specific mental health supports to improve chances for successful completion of their respective programs.**
- 4.33 That the government hold school boards to account through an annual process of consultation with teacher representatives at each school board regarding locally determined expenditures, as well as prompt reporting with real-time transfers of data where possible.**

5. WORKS CITED

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