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PRE–BUDGET

SUBMISSION

TO THE STANDING

COMMITTEE ON

FINANCE AND

ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

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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1. INTRODUCTION

The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input on behalf of 45,000 Catholic teachers, as the government develops the 2023 provincial budget.

- 1.01** For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the lives and livelihoods of Ontarians and people around the world, there is a glimmer of optimism. While we must remain vigilant and continue to protect ourselves and our communities, there is a feeling that – individually and collectively – we can recapture some of the connection and joy that has been absent these past several years.
- 1.02** Around Ontario, people are longing for a return to normalcy – a chance to go back to the way things were. As we consider the way forward, our message to the Ford government is simple: do not go back to *your* "normal."
- 1.03** Far too often, since coming to office in 2018, the government's agenda has been guided by ideology rather than evidence. Time and again, policy decisions have been made with little thought, foresight, or genuine consultation with stakeholders and experts. In most cases, the only discernable motivation for the government's actions is to cut spending, destabilize public services, and open space for privatization, where only the wealthiest individuals benefit.
- 1.04** This approach – with its emphasis on fiscal austerity, haphazard decision-making, and false or misleading statements to the public – has been nowhere more apparent than in education. At each year's provincial budget release, the government has claimed it is making unprecedented investments in publicly funded education. The truth is, when factoring for inflation and including funding for a child care tax credit unrelated to the classroom, core per-pupil funding for elementary and secondary education has been cut every year. Funding for programs and supports have been cancelled, and the waitlist to access certain programs and resources is now measured in years. In short, the government has siphoned money out of the classroom at the expense of students.
- 1.05** All the while, the government has treated public sector workers with profound disrespect – legislating wage cuts, imposing contracts, and denying *Charter*-protected rights. Even as Ontarians face record-high prices, the government continues to defend its passage of Bill 124, and the wage cuts it legislated. For

Ontario's education workers, who are predominantly women – many of whom make less than \$40,000 a year – the Ford government showed no qualms imposing a contract through Bill 28 and stripping away their rights – backing down only when confronted by labour solidarity and Ontarians' vocal opposition.

- 1.06** For a government that came to power promising to be “for the people,” the Ford government has proven to be anything but.
- 1.07** It is time for the Ford government to establish a new normal. If the government is serious about addressing pandemic-related learning loss, as well as the mental health and well-being needs of students and educators, then it must go beyond its check-box approach to policy and properly invest in a real plan that provides the necessary in-class resources and supports to ensure every student gets the learning environment they need to recover and thrive.
- 1.08** It is simply not possible to continue to reduce spending in education, health care, social services, and other critical areas without negatively affecting the long-term well-being of individuals and families. There is also considerable evidence to show that these investments pay dividends in the short and long term for Ontario's broader society and economy.
- 1.09** Now is not the time for the government to fall back on its preoccupation with hiding spending cuts and privatization efforts couched in the disingenuous language of “modernization.” The moment demands forward-thinking leadership. It demands proper, comprehensive investment. The development of the 2023 provincial budget provides the government an opportunity to set a new tone, and to establish a new normal. The government must look ahead to a post-pandemic era, and do far more to reinvest in the health and prosperity of our province and our people, now and in the future.

2. RESPECT FOR PUBLIC SERVICES AND WORKERS

- 2.01** It is common for Premier Doug Ford and various government ministers to appear at press conferences, standing behind a placard that reads “Working for Workers.” There is a certain irony in this imagery, in that, almost inevitably, the announcement made at the press conference is designed to weaken workers' rights, undermine public services, and diminish the collective power of unions.

- 2.02** The disconnect between the government’s rhetoric of being “for the people” while pursuing an anti-worker agenda was established early in the Ford government’s tenure. Before Bill 124 It is worth remembering that one of the government’s first actions after taking office in 2018 was to recall the legislature to force 3,000 striking York University contract faculty and graduate teaching assistants back to work (CTV Jeffords 2018); followed by cancelling the planned minimum wage increase (*PressProgress* 2018); followed by the revocation of protections under the previous government’s *Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act* (D’Mello 2018); followed by pre-emptive back-to-work legislation against power workers (Janus 2018); and the list goes on and on.
- 2.03** Unfortunately, the public backlash generated as a result of these early attacks has not deterred the government from pursuing its anti-worker agenda.
- 2.04 Bill 124**
In November 2019, the government introduced Bill 124, the ironically-named *Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act*. Draped in misleading language around a supposed fiscal emergency, the act imposed a one per cent cap on salary increases, for three years, for a range of public sector workers, including in education, health care, and long-term care – sectors with higher proportions of women and people from equity-deserving groups.
- 2.05** Introduced during the last round of central bargaining, this was a blatant attempt by the government to tie the hands of both the employer and employee representatives at the bargaining table, to interfere with workers’ rights to join and advance our own interests, and to interrupt the free flow of ideas and proposals.
- 2.06** At the same time, the legislation perpetuated the fallacy that public sector wages are out of control. In reality, according to federal government data, in Ontario private sector wage increases have outpaced those in the public sector in all but one year since 2013 (ESDC 2023). Over the same period, public sector wage increases have been below the annual rate of inflation each year (Statistics Canada 2023). All the while, Ontario remains the second-lowest per capita spender on government programs of any province (FAO 2022), and is spending \$1,623 less per person than the Canadian provincial average (Robinson 2022). These are not distinctions of which we should be proud.

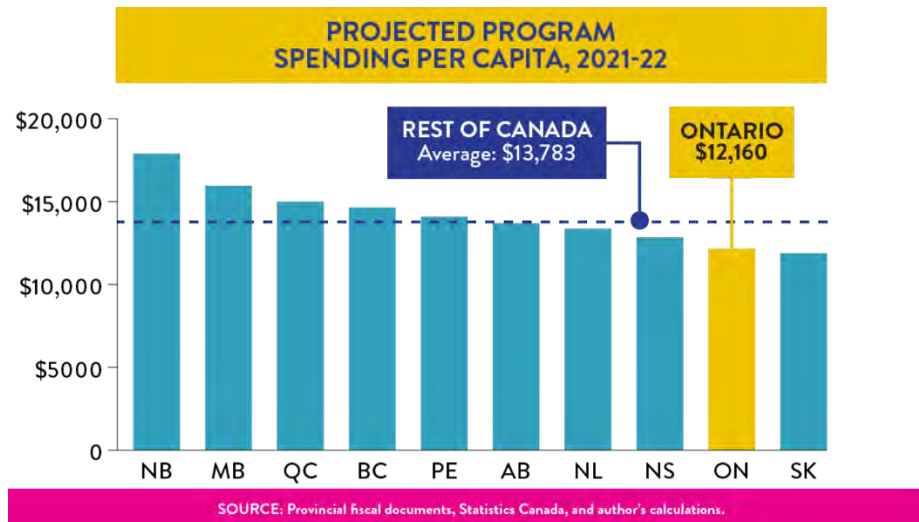


Figure 1 - Graph reprinted from Randy Robinson, "Why Ontario needs to raise more revenue."

2.07 In response, our Association joined with three teacher affiliates to challenge the constitutionality of Bill 124, with six other organizations following suit. And on November 29, 2022, Ontario Superior Court Justice Markus Koehnen quashed the legislation, declaring it unconstitutional. In a written decision on *OECTA et al. v. His Majesty the King*, Justice Koehnen ruled that Bill 124 "substantially interfered" with a free and fair collective bargaining process, and thus violated Section 2(d) of the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the right to freedom of association. This was a landmark victory in labour relations history, and a major win for the rights and freedoms of all Ontarians.

2.08 In the aftermath of the court's ruling, it has been disturbing to learn of the lengths to which this government has gone to pursue its anti-worker agenda. Recent news reports, unearthed via Freedom of Information requests, reveal that for almost a year the government possessed internal documents, which confirm that Bill 124 is widening the wage disparity between public and private sectors, at a time of record-high prices – directly contributing to a staffing shortage in the nursing profession and exacerbating Ontario's health care crisis while in the midst of a global pandemic (Callan and D'Mello 2023). Despite having this evidence, the Ford government refused to repeal Bill 124. As such, Catholic teachers were disappointed – but not surprised – to learn that the government will continue to spend untold sums of public money to appeal the court's ruling (Canadian Press 2022).

2.09 Bill 28

Many Ontarians hoped that the public outrage generated by the government's shameful pursuit of Bill 124 would cause Premier Ford to rethink his ideologically-driven attack against the labour community. Sadly, the opposite has proven true.

- 2.10** In November 2022, in the midst of negotiations between the government and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) education workers, represented by the Ontario School Boards Council of Unions (OSBCU), the government launched an unprecedented assault on workers' rights.
- 2.11** Bill 28, the *Keeping Students in Class Act*, was passed ostensibly as pre-emptive back-to-work legislation, in response to the announcement that CUPE education workers would begin legal strike action, having reached impasse in negotiations for the renewal of their collective agreement – and having followed the legally-proscribed process (CityNews 2022).
- 2.12** Any pre-emptive back-to-work legislation is dubious enough, but what made Bill 28 unique was its pre-emptive use of Section 33 of the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the so-called “notwithstanding clause,” which gives provincial legislatures or Parliament the ability to override certain portions of the *Charter* for a five-year period.
- 2.13** In the case of CUPE education workers, the passage of Bill 28 prohibited the union from engaging in job action and imposed a woefully substandard contract upon workers, predominantly women, who are already the lowest paid in Ontario's publicly funded education system (Sarson 2022). What is more, the invocation of the notwithstanding clause denied CUPE education workers the legal right to challenge the law's constitutionality in court.
- 2.14** Perhaps most egregious of all, not only did Bill 28 immunize the Ford government from *Charter* review; it *criminalized* the exercising of a fundamental *Charter* freedom – the right to strike – by including a section that prohibited strike action for the duration of the collective agreement, subject to a fine of up to \$500,000 (Government of Ontario 2022).
- 2.15** In response to the bill's passage, Catholic teachers joined with our education affiliates, the broader labour movement, including public and private sector workers,

and Ontario communities in an unwavering demonstration of solidarity and support. Ultimately, this show of unity across the province was critical in forcing the Ford government to rescind its draconian Bill 28 and use of the notwithstanding clause, and return to the bargaining table (Rushowy 2022).

- 2.16** It is disheartening that it took a mass protest and the potential for a province-wide shutdown for the government to be forced into seeing the error of its ways. Ideally, a government would be looking to recruit and retain the best possible talent to staff Ontario's public sector, while fostering an environment in which public sector workers feel respected and supported. Instead, the Ford government is deliberately interfering with public sector workers' fundamental rights and cutting vital public services.
- 2.17** It is well past time for a course correction. **The Ford government must finally demonstrate respect for the frontline public service workers who play a vital role in Ontario's society and economy, starting by withdrawing the appeal of Bill 124. The government must also uphold the constitutionally-protected rights of Ontario workers, and the unions that represent them.**

3. GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

3.01 Accountability and Transparency

Typically, a government's priorities are made available through the publication of mandate letters. These letters lay out the directives a premier has for each of their ministers – with such letters being routinely released by governments across Canada (Hepburn 2022).

- 3.02** However, the Ford government has dispensed with this historical precedent of accountability and transparency. The government has refused to release its mandate letters; failed to comply with an order of the Information and Privacy Commissioner to release the letters; and is now awaiting the Supreme Court to rule on the matter (Casey 2022). In the interim, the government is refusing to disclose the number of taxpayer-funded hours its lawyers have spent fighting the release of these letters (Brockbank 2022).

- 3.03** In response to this ongoing saga, and in defense of his government's refusal to release its mandate letters, the Premier has said, "Everyone knows where we stand"

(Brockbank 2022a). This statement is slightly confusing for a party that did not publish an election platform and ignored media inquiries. In the absence of traditional mechanisms of transparency, the Ford government's priorities have been laid bare by what it chooses to invest in – and what it chooses to ignore.

3.04 Highway 413

At every opportunity, the government has crafted policy seemingly designed to financially benefit wealthy individuals – specifically PC Party donors – at the expense of the general public, environmental sustainability, and society more broadly. One need only consider examples from the past 12 months to illustrate the point.

3.05 Premier Ford made building Highway 413 – a transit corridor stretching between Halton, Peel, and York regions – a centrepiece of his 2022 re-election campaign. The proposal was widely panned by experts. According to the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, the highway will destroy 2,000 acres of farmland, intersect 85 waterways, and pave over almost 400 acres of protected Greenbelt land. It would also disrupt 220 wetlands and the habitats of 10 at-risk species (Toronto Star 2022).

3.06 In ploughing ahead with plans to build the highway, internal government documents, as confirmed by the Auditor General of Ontario, reveal that the government has ignored its own experts' advice and warnings about the significant environmental dangers posed by building the highway. The government also refused to provide a rationale as to why other proposed highways, which would have created less environmental disruption, were scrapped in favour of focusing on Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass (Callan and D'Mello 2022).

3.07 An investigative report by the *Toronto Star* and *National Observer* has raised alarming questions, specifically around the fact that "eight of Ontario's most powerful land developers own thousands of acres of prime real estate near the proposed route of the controversial Highway 413," and that "four of the developers are connected to Premier Ford's PC government through party officials and former [Conservative] politicians now acting as registered lobbyists" and donors to the PC Party (Buist, Javed, and McIntosh 2021).

3.08 The Greenbelt

A similar dynamic is evident around the issue of the Greenbelt. Despite promises by the Premier, captured on video, to "never touch the Greenbelt," in November 2022

the government reversed its position, announcing plans to remove 7,400 acres from the Greenbelt for the construction of at least 50,000 new homes (Globe and Mail 2022).

3.09 While housing availability and affordability remain important issues to address, this situation has become fraught given the peculiar timeline of events. In the months immediately preceding the government's decision to open portions of the Greenbelt to construction, several developers paid tens of millions of dollars for protected lands that, at the time, were considered "worthless," as they could not be developed. The *Globe and Mail* has since revealed that at least four developers who bought these protected lands were major donors to Premier Ford's re-election campaign (Moore and Mahoney 2022). The Ontario Integrity Commissioner is now investigating allegations that these developers were given advanced notice (Fox 2023).

3.10 Privatization

This tendency of the Ford government to pursue policy initiatives that benefit wealthy donors goes hand-in-hand with their ideologically-driven efforts to privatize public services.

3.11 In education, the Ford government has taken every opportunity to destabilize publicly funded education, and push Ontario's world-class system toward privatization. Over the past two years, the government has cut almost \$3 billion in education funding (Thompson 2022); made plans to commercialize and expand mandatory online learning (*PressProgress* 2021); significantly underfunded learning recovery at a time when students are in need of a real and robust plan (Draaisma 2022); and attempted to impose a substandard contract on education workers, while negating their ability to exercise *Charter*-protected rights (Hauen 2022).

3.12 As will be outlined in the subsequent section, this profound disrespect is not just an abdication of leadership, it is a calculated and purposeful assault on publicly funded education. And the situation will only grow worse, as the Financial Accountability Office projects that the Ford government plans to underfund education by \$6 billion over the next five years (FAO 2022a).

3.13 Health care has also been a target of the government's privatization efforts. Over the past several years, the Ford government has come under heavy criticism for significantly underfunding health care – exacerbating an already-strained system

during the COVID-19 pandemic (Benzie 2022). This has led several observers to speculate that the structural underfunding is deliberate, and that the government is following the path laid by other conservative governments hoping to privatize public services (Giles, Raza, and Brar 2019; Arthur 2021; *PressProgress* 2021a).

- 3.14** Recent government announcements have done nothing to alleviate these fears. In January, the government announced plans to privatize 50 per cent of surgical procedures, in an effort to reduce the surgical backlog (DeClerq 2023).
- 3.15** Almost immediately, Ontario's five major health care unions issued a statement calling on the Ford government to halt its plan, characterizing it as "a risky venture that will cost Ontarians dearly and damage access to public care." The unions go on to note that the Ford government's actions will "further starve [Ontario's] public health care system of funding and divert frontline staff to enrich private shareholders and diminish access to publicly-delivered health care" (CUPE 2023).
- 3.16** In arriving at its plan, the government has disregarded the advice of health care experts. Speaking to a variety of news outlets after the government announcement, Dr. Nancy Whitmore – Registrar and CEO of the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons – explained, "Many months ago, we were consulted and shared our opinion that stand-alone surgical centres need to be connected to the hospital system to ensure continuity of care and patient safety... We also shared that [the Ford government's proposed plan] wasn't the solution to the health care crisis and would further tax our health human resources shortages and further increase wait times for more urgent hospital-based care" (Crawley 2023).
- 3.17** The shamefulness of this approach is magnified when one considers the crisis affecting children's hospitals across the province. The situation has become so dire, that the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario was forced to call in the Red Cross for emergency assistance to deal with staffing shortages (Ferguson 2022). It is almost incomprehensible, in light of the worsening situation impacting the health and well-being of Ontario children, that a government would divert funding from public health care and redirect it toward private options.
- 3.18** In pursuing privatized health care, the government is also ignoring the will of the people. A recent public poll developed by Environics Research found that 78 per cent of Ontarians believe the Ford government should use public money to increase

funding to public hospitals and clinics. In addition, 59 per cent of Ontarians oppose more involvement by private for-profit health care providers, as a solution to the current problems facing Ontario's health care system (OFL 2023).

3.19 Taken together, despite promising to listen to experts, the Ford government has routinely cherry-picked, spun, or flatly ignored the expertise of relevant stakeholders – choosing instead to pursue an ideological agenda of cuts and privatization, which drive up costs for Ontarians and benefit the wealthy few instead of the many. The government must **immediately cease any efforts toward privatization and commit to properly funding public services in Ontario, while respecting workers and the expertise of frontline staff.**

3.20 Government Expenditures vs. Revenue

Since coming to office, the Ford government has been trying to justify its austerity plans by claiming Ontario's finances are in crisis: this has formed the basis of the government's overall agenda and was a key – if unsuccessful – rationale for passing Bill 124.

3.21 Unfortunately, the statement is simply not true. On one hand, the Financial Accountability Office is projecting that the government can expect modest budget surpluses this year and through 2027-28. More to the point, evidence suggests that the province's finances were never in "crisis," in the manner characterized by the government.

3.22 In the written decision on *OECTA et al. v. His Majesty the King*, which quashed Bill 124, Justice Koehnen rejected the government's claim by questioning "why it was necessary to infringe on constitutional rights to impose wage constraint at the same time as [the government] was providing tax cuts or license plate sticker refunds that were more than 10 times larger than the savings obtained from wage restraint measures" (Ontario Superior Court of Justice 2022).

3.23 At the same time, a review of the government's budget documents, supplementary estimates, and the Fall Economic Statement reveal that the government has forgone billions of dollars in potential revenue each year. Randy Robinson, Ontario Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), has calculated that for the fiscal year of 2022-23 the Ford government has reduced its own potential revenue by \$7.5 billion, through a variety of tax cuts, tax credits, and fee cuts (Robinson 2022).

3.24 In addition, Ontario ranked second-last of all provinces for “fiscal effort,” which is defined as the effort a government puts into raising “own-source revenue” – and is calculated as a percentage of each province’s total provincial Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Looking at Ontario’s 2021-22 fiscal year, the Ford government’s “own-source” revenue amounted to 15.2 per cent of GDP. The average for all other provinces was 17.5 per cent. Thus, Ontario’s “own-source” revenue is 2.3 per cent lower than the Canadian provincial average (Robinson 2022).

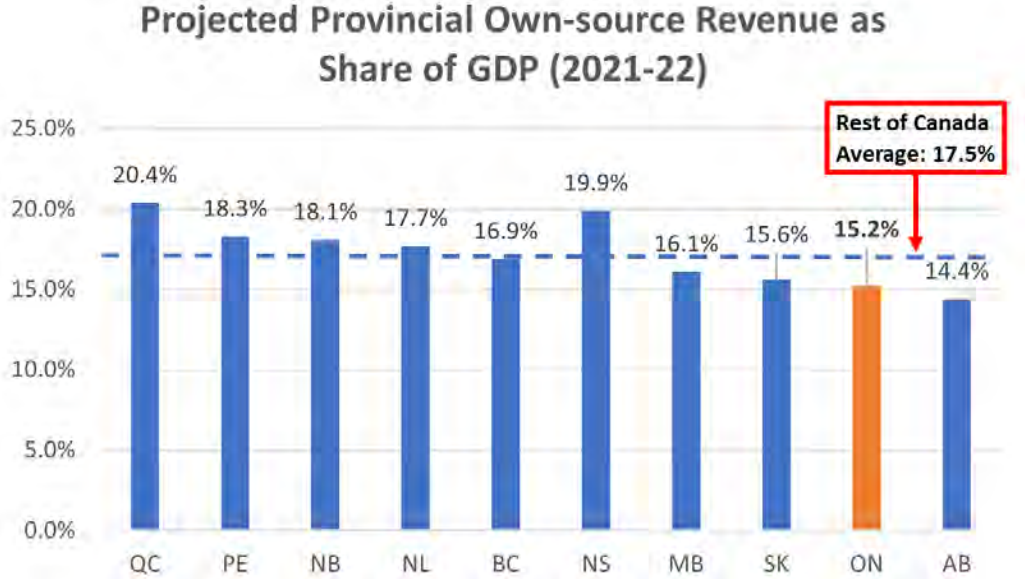


Figure 2 - Data source: Randy Robinson, "Why Ontario needs to raise more revenue."

3.25 This gap has a significant impact on provincial coffers. If Ontario raised revenue at the average rate of Canadian provinces, revenue would have been \$22.6 billion higher than what was collected. This could have represented a 13 per cent boost to provincial revenue for 2021-22, and could have been directed to vital public services. The government’s choice not to raise this revenue has shortchanged Ontarians, and highlights the extent to which Ontario does not have a spending problem, it has a revenue problem of the government’s own making.

3.26 Catholic teachers **urge the government to reverse their tax cuts and credits that disproportionately benefit wealthier Ontarians, and instead commit to improving “fiscal effort” to a rate higher than the Canadian provincial average, with the additional revenue going to properly fund public services in Ontario.**

4. QUALITY PUBLICLY FUNDED EDUCATION FOR ALL

- 4.01** The COVID-19 pandemic cast much of society and culture into a state of disruption over the past several years – and publicly funded education in Ontario was no exception.
- 4.02** 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).
- 4.03** 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 2021).
- 4.04** 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 2022). 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).

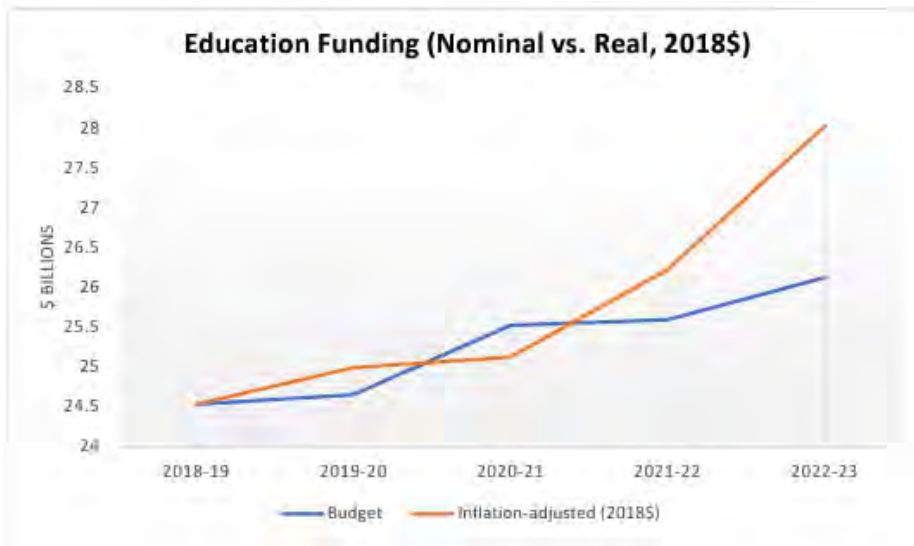
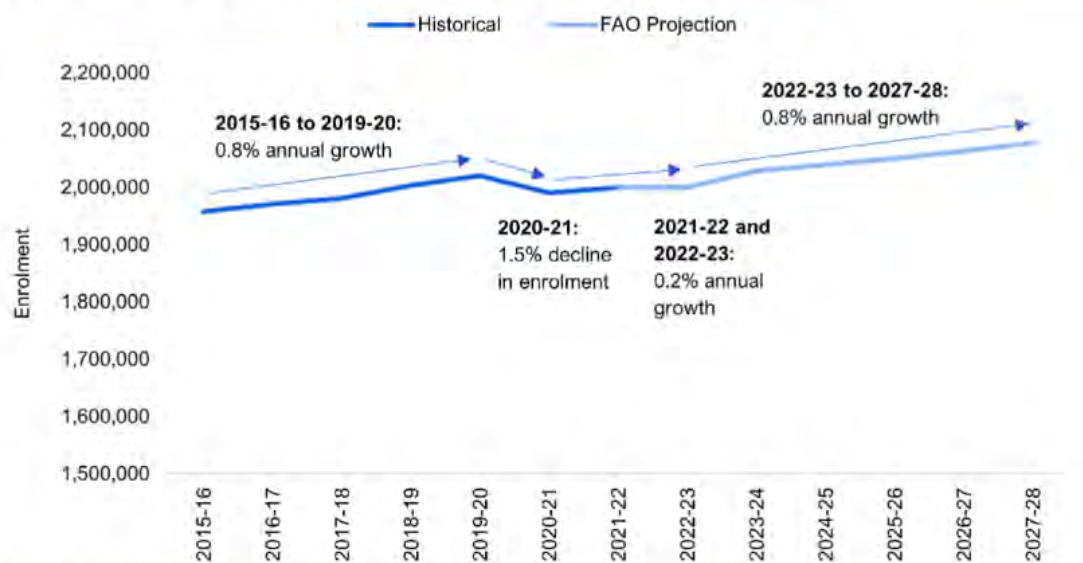


Figure 3 - Data source: FAO, Ministry of Education: Spending Plan Review (2022)

4.05 We must also contend with shifts in enrolment projections, and the impact this will have on the needs of Ontario's publicly funded education system. According to the Financial Accountability Office, enrolment for students in Kindergarten to Grade 12 is projected to increase at an average annual rate of 0.8 per cent between the 2022-23 and 2027-28 school years. With enrolment having declined by 1.5 per cent in 2020-21 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FAO projections would see a return to pre-pandemic enrolment growth rates (FAO 2022).

Figure 2: Historical and projected enrolment, 2015-16 to 2027-28 school years



Source: Statistics Canada, Ministry of Finance and FAO analysis of information provided by the Province.

Figure 4 - Graph reprinted from FAO, Ministry of Education Spending Plan Review (2022)

- 4.06** In a similar fashion, economists have predicted significant population growth across Canada, with some estimates indicating the highest rate of Canadian population growth in 50 years (Perrault, Economic Club of Canada 2023). Taken together, the projected rise in overall population growth and student enrolment in Ontario, coupled with inflation, will require substantial and stable investment in publicly funded education in the long term.
- 4.07** By contrast, the consequences of the government's approach to publicly funded education to-date have been 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).
- 4.08** 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.
- 4.09 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).
- 4.10** 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.

- 4.11** 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 destreaming, to math curriculum updates, over the past several years the government has missed the opportunity to collaborate meaningfully with education stakeholders.
- 4.12** 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.
- 4.13** 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.**

4.14 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).

- 4.15** In the United States, results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is administered through the US Department of Education, has produced alarming results. According to NAEP data, nine-year-olds have “lost the equivalent of two decades of progress in math and reading.” Students in Grades 4 and 8 are also experiencing dramatic declines in math performance – particularly in Grade 8, where student results declined in 49 of 50 US states (Mervosh 2022).
- 4.16** Looking specifically at Canada and 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).
- 4.17** 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).
- 4.18** 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).

- 4.19** 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.
- 4.20** 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).
- 4.21** 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.
- 4.22** 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).
- 4.23** 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.

4.24 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.

4.25 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).

4.26 What is more, the impact 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.

- 4.27** 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 learning model.
- 4.28** 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.
- 4.29** Even still, the government has allocated \$124.7 million to the Mental Health and Well-being Grant, falling 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 2022).
- 4.30** 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.**

- 4.31** 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.
- 4.32** 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.**
- 4.33** 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.**
- 4.34** 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.
- 4.35** 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.

4.36 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.

4.37 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).

4.38 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).

4.39 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.

4.40 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.

4.41 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 unaddressed the significant challenges that existed before COVID-19, and that persist in many schools today. Of particular concern is the problem of violence in schools, including workplace violence and harassment directed against teachers and other education workers.

4.42 In recent months, news stories from across Ontario have highlighted the increasing frequency and severity of incidents of violence in schools (Griffin 2022; Alhmidi 2023; McKee 2023). As just one example, in October 2022, the Thames Valley District School Board reported 900 incidents of school-based violence (Rivers 2022). A study from University of Ottawa researchers published in April 2022 found that, of 4,000 Ontario education workers surveyed, 89 per cent of respondents had "experienced a threat, attempt, or act of physical violence from one or more sources (students, parents, colleagues, administrators)" (Briggs 2022).

4.43 This issue is not new. It is a growing problem and a reflection of larger societal issues. Six years ago, in our 2017 survey of classroom teachers, 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).

- 4.44** The pervasive nature of workplace violence 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).
- 4.45** The issue of violence in schools is complex and challenging. There is no simple answer. Addressing this matter requires a multifaceted, comprehensive, and co-ordinated response. Despite greater attention being paid to this problem, thanks in part to the work of education unions to negotiate contractual obligations requiring school administrators to report incidents of violence, we are still a long way from implementing the solutions outlined in our Association’s Safer Schools for All platform (OECTA 2017a).
- 4.46** The relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and mental health challenges among students has been well established (St. George et al. 2021; SickKids 2021). And during school closures, some vulnerable students and staff 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 frontline, school-based child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and other professional services to help students and education workers deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs, in some cases attributable to pandemic-related causes.**
- 4.47** It is also necessary for the government to **provide educators and school staff with comprehensive anti-violence training. To proactively support students or staff who are in crisis, a whole-school approach must be developed and must include follow-up actions to prevent recurrence. This would better enable all staff in the school building to recognize a potential situation, and respond and address it accordingly.**
- 4.48** Schools must be safe places to work and learn. There is a clear need to realize and accept that the safety requirements in schools are unique to other workplaces. Currently, legislation governing health and safety in a work setting takes a one-size-fits-all approach. It is past time that the government recognize that the nature of schools – which simultaneously serve as workplace and place of learning, and represent some of the largest and most frequent spaces of congregation in Ontario –

require health and safety policies and procedures that meet their specific context. **The government should amend the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, by creating a new section dedicated specifically to education workplaces, so that the legislation reflects the specific context of the school setting. Any update to legislation must be done in genuine collaboration with education stakeholders, including – but not limited to – education sector affiliates, experts on student mental health and school violence, the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety, and representatives from local joint health and safety committees.**

4.49 These investments will help students manage their behaviours and realize academic success in the short and long term, while also enabling teachers, education workers, and the rest of the school community to focus on student learning and success, in a safe and secure environment. **To ensure sustained, comprehensive and inclusive supports the government should encourage and facilitate collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services on the development of a proactive, multifaceted response that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of school violence.**

4.50 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).

4.51 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).

- 4.52** 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).
- 4.53** In discussing online learning, the government must also consider its current level of data integrity, on which programming decisions are made. 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.
- 4.54** 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.
- 4.55** 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).
- 4.56** 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).

- 4.57** As well, many families in Ontario cannot *afford* high speed internet, or the technology required to access online courses (Butler 2020; 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.
- 4.58** 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.**
- 4.59** As well, students and teachers must be provided with appropriate resources and supports to succeed. This includes **providing teachers who demonstrate interest with teacher-led, teacher- directed professional development opportunities related to online learning.**
- 4.60** 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).
- 4.61** 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).

4.62 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.**

4.63 Destreaming

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 destreaming successfully (OECTA 2021).

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

4.65 By pursuing destreaming 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).

4.66 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 destreaming policy (People for Education 2022). Several factors have contributed to the inadequacy of the government's approach.

4.67 First, the government has not committed stable, long-term funding dedicated to the sustainability of destreaming efforts. As part of the 2022-23 GSN allocations, the government provided funding for "temporary additional staffing supports" (Ministry of Education 2022). 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 destreamed Grade 9, the delivery of remote learning, supports for special education, and maintaining enhanced cleaning standards.”

- 4.68** An additional issue that threatens the success of destreaming 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).
- 4.69** Despite this, the government’s rollout of the destreamed 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).
- 4.70** 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 destreaming 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).
- 4.71** 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 destreamed courses (People for Education 2022). As a result, the policy is exacerbating one of the very principles it seeks to address.
- 4.72** Throughout the discussion of policy implementation, the government has still not grasped sufficiently that destreaming alone will not eradicate some of the other causes of disadvantage, such as poverty and racial discrimination in the wider community.

- 4.73** Time and again, the Association has made clear that destreaming 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 destreamed 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 2022).
- 4.74** Ultimately, the success of any destreaming 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.
- 4.75** **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.**
- 4.76** **The government must also provide funding for professional development, support resources, release time, and other supports needed to transition to full implementation.**
- 4.77** **The government must engage education partners in sustained, meaningful consultation and collaboration in developing destreaming policy and rewriting curriculum documents. De-streamed courses must be delivered in-person, not online.**
- 4.78** **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.**

4.79 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.

4.80 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 (Tranjan 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 2022).

4.81 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).

4.82 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.

4.83 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.**

4.84 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 with 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.

4.85 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 2021, the Ford government promised that by the end of the year there would be fewer than 8,000 children on the waitlist for needs-based autism programs. As of June 2022, the list stands at more than 51,000 children, and counting (Aelick 2022).

4.86 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.**

4.87 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).

4.88 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 (Thompson 2020).

- 4.89** 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.
- 4.90** 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).
- 4.91** 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 (Mojtehedzadeh, Warren 2021).
- 4.92** 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 (ASHRAE).** 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.
- 4.93** 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.**

4.94 Education Quality and Accountability Office

The release of Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized test results in October 2022 sparked 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.

4.95 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 2022a). 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).

4.96 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).

4.97 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.

- 4.98** 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).
- 4.99** There is also significant concern with the test's inequity, especially as it relates to equity-deserving populations. In a comprehensive study of the Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing preparation and administration, Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad, a professor in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University, found in his doctoral thesis that EQAO test questions marginalize racialized students and students from lower socio-economic groups. Eizadirad concludes that EQAO test construction is "culturally and racially biased as it promotes a Eurocentric curriculum and way of life privileging white students and those from higher socio-economic status" (Eizadirad 2018).
- 4.100** 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.
- 4.101** 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).

4.102 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.

4.103 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).

4.104 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.

4.105 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.

4.106 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.

4.107 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.**

4.108 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.

4.109 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).

4.110 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.

- 4.111** 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.**
- 4.112** 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).
- 4.113** 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).
- 4.114** 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 2022).
- 4.115** 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 learning and achievement. 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.

4.116 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).

4.117 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 in 2020, 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).

4.118 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.

4.119 Recent announcements regarding destreaming have followed a similar pattern. The Association has offered to provide its expertise to the government to ensure that destreaming 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.

4.120 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.

4.121 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).

4.122 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 more recently by the Auditor General of Ontario (2017).

4.123 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.

4.124 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 to society.**

4.125 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 2022).

4.126 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.

4.127 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 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.

4.128 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.

4.129 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.

4.130 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.

4.131 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).

4.132 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.

4.133 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.

4.134 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.

5. A FAIR AND JUST SOCIETY

5.01 Early Childhood Education and Care

Research confirms the importance of the early years in a child’s life in the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Cleveland 2021). And it has long been known that affordable, accessible, high quality early childhood education and care increases equity in outcomes at school and creates a strong foundation for lifelong learning (McCuaig, Bertrand, and Shanker 2012).

- 5.02** It also improves labour force participation, particularly among women, which helps to boost household incomes and reduce poverty. According to one analysis, every public dollar spent expanding enrolment in early childhood education and care yields close to six dollars in economic benefits (Alexander et al. 2017).
- 5.03** Since coming to office, our Association has advocated for accessible and affordable child care in Ontario – too often, the government has met these requests with a callous disregard, bordering on hostility toward publicly funded early childhood education and care – cutting millions of dollars in child care funding, loosening child care regulations, and refusing to provide pandemic pay to child care workers (Ferns 2022).
- 5.04** Optimism arose after the federal government seized the initiative and developed the Canada-Wide Early Learning & Child Care (CWELCC) plan, a national framework to work toward a goal of \$10-a-day child care by 2026.
- 5.05** One by one, provinces reached agreement with the federal government and saw child care fees reduced almost immediately. The Ford government proved the outlier, and for months Ontario held the dubious distinction of being the only province in Canada that had refused to sign-on to the federal child care plan.
- 5.06** When a deal with Ontario was finally reached in March 2022, news began to emerge regarding the nature of the Ontario government’s holdout. An investigative exposé by the *Toronto Star* revealed that the Ford government had quietly made concessions to for-profit daycares, stripping a series of checks and balances from Ontario’s funding rules, dropping a restriction on “undue profits,” and refusing to implement a wage grid that would have standardized and increased pay for early childhood educators (Mendleson and Kennedy 2022).
- 5.07** The Ford government’s shenanigans and political posturing to appease for-profit centres and delay in signing a deal to coincide with the provincial election threatened to compromise the agreement. Although a deal was ultimately reached, observers fear that the removal of cost controls will ultimately subsidize the previous inadequate model, rather than revolutionize the system for the betterment of all Ontario families, and create as many issues as the program is attempting to address (Jones 2022).

- 5.08** Some of these issues are already coming to the fore. Due to low wages and consistent disrespect shown by the Ford government toward early childhood educators, there remains a staffing shortage in the sector, with the government's own documents highlighting a potential shortfall of almost 10,000 workers (Liu 2023).
- 5.09** At the same time, a report by the FAO estimates that the province will be more than 220,000 child care spaces short of meeting demand by 2026. As child care policy expert Gordon Cleveland explained to *The Canadian Press*, "There is not apparently any system of [government] capital funding anticipated to support this new space creation, beyond very modest start-up grants" (Jones 2022).
- 5.10** It is also necessary to consider the *type* of child care spaces being created. Licensed child care spaces in Ontario still only account for 25 per cent of children in Ontario (*Toronto Star* 2022a). By directing federal child care funding to for-profit centres, 30 per cent of child care funding will go toward profit-making ventures.
- 5.11** Internationally, studies have shown the risks of allowing financial markets to overwhelm the child care sector. In England, large corporations are purchasing child care centres, without investing in better services. The study found that a number of these programs are left heavily indebted by the impetus for profit-maximization, and risked closing (Simon et al 2022).
- 5.12** At a more fundamental level, and closer to home, Ontario policy experts fear that even at \$10-a-day, some families may strain to afford child care (Cleveland and Krashinsky 2022). The authors stress the need for the government to implement complementary policies, such as targeted grants, to ensure that low-income families are not disadvantaged.
- 5.13** To ensure that the new child care system properly serves Ontario families, **Catholic teachers call on the Ford government to be held to account and transparent in how it spends the federal funds provided. Our Association also calls on the Ford government to cease providing funding to for-profit child care centres, and instead commit to creating a sufficient number of publicly funded, licensed child care spaces, while also providing a living wage to early childhood educators.**

5.14 Employment Equity

Income inequality is one of the defining issues of our times. As an increasing number of Ontarians find themselves in precarious work and we fail to evolve our social safety net accordingly, our economy and society are at risk.

- 5.15 While nobody would have wished for or anticipated the suffering caused by COVID-19, the social and economic policies that have left Ontarians vulnerable were not arrived at by accident. As the Ontario Federation of Labour (2021) has noted, the deregulation of health and safety standards, the rollback of workers' rights and protections, the erosion of progressive taxation, the retrenchment of welfare state programs, the privatization and underfunding of public services, and the disregard for equity-deserving groups – much of which the Ford government has participated in – have all led us to this point.
- 5.16 Women, racialized workers, Indigenous peoples, and other equity-deserving groups, continue to confront disproportionate disadvantages in society and the economy. In 2021, employees who identify as women, aged 25 to 54, earned 11.1 per cent less per hour, on average, than their male counterparts. In other words, women in this age group earned \$0.89 for every dollar earned by men – a gap that was wider for racialized women, women who are newcomers to Canada, women with disabilities, Indigenous women, and trans women (Drolet 2022; Ontario Pay Equity Office 2022).
- 5.17 At the same time, the unemployment rate gap between racialized and non-racialized workers has widened, with racialized workers more likely to be employed in the information, recreation, entertainment, and retail sectors that account for 80 per cent of the pandemic-related job losses in Canada (Alook, Block, and Galabuzi 2021).
- 5.18 These negative impacts, especially those affecting the most vulnerable in our society, have further highlighted the challenges this province faces with regards to child poverty. Despite a pre-pandemic reduction in child poverty in the previous ten years, more than a half a million children in Ontario still live in poverty (Oliveira, Robinson, and Tranjan 2021) and racialized children experience a higher poverty rate than non-racialized children (Statistics Canada 2022).
- 5.19 Ontario is a wealthy and prosperous province. That so many children still live in poverty is an embarrassment, as the government has the tools and knowledge to reduce it. To do this, **the Ford government must be laser-focused on creating**

decent jobs with higher wages, improving employment standards, ensuring better and more affordable access to education and training, and bolstering the province's social safety net. As the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives concludes in its recent report on poverty in Ontario, "There should be no poverty in the midst of plenty." (Robinson, Tranjan and Oliveira 2021).

5.20 A Robust Social Safety Net

The continued inadequacy of Ontario's social safety net, a situation further exposed by COVID-19, demands far more than the meagre increases offered to-date by the Ford government. Ontarians desperately need a prompt and thorough re-examination of the province's social policy framework and the role of programs and services in promoting health and prosperity.

5.21 As part of this re-assessment, **the Ford government must immediately revisit and revise its Poverty Reduction Strategy, which aims to transform how critical social assistance is delivered through Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).**

5.22 In May 2022, following intense and sustained public pressure by advocacy groups, the Ford government promised a five per cent increase to ODSP rates, which work out to roughly \$60 per month to those earning the maximum benefits.

5.23 The Ford government proceeded to expend great energy lauding itself for the largest increase in history. What the government failed to mention is that it had slashed ODSP rates after taking office, and then froze those rates at the 2018 level for five years (Amin 2021).

5.24 More than this, a closer examination of the increase, and how it interacts with policy distribution, reveals that there is far less to this announcement than meets the eye. Given the policy design, individuals who live in subsidized housing, are pregnant, have specific dietary needs, or who access OW prior to ODSP would fail to meet the program requirements to be eligible for the additional five per cent (Hatala, Manson, and Calabro 2022).

5.25 To a certain extent, all of this misses the central point. The 2018 rate for OW provided \$733 a month for a single person and the ODSP provided single recipients with up to \$1,169 a month. A five per cent increase, following a five-year freeze,

does almost nothing to assist those who require these programs, and who face the same inflationary pressures and rising cost of living as all Ontarians. This is especially concerning given that the average length of time a recipient relies on OW has doubled from 1.5 to three years over the past decade (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2018).

- 5.26** According to a McMaster University study, Ontarians receiving OW and ODSP, struggled to pay for basic necessities, including shelter and food, at a higher rate than those receiving the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit, which paid \$2,000 a month, substantially more than either Ontario program (Chandler 2021).
- 5.27** At the same time, the Ford government's approach to OW and ODSP, which overemphasizes employment rates as a basis for determining eligibility, ignores this reality and the concerns of disabled and other Ontarians who are unable to work (Amin 2021). "In Canada, poverty and disability are largely synonymous: poverty can lead to disability and disability can lead to poverty," says the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (Council of Canadians with Disabilities 2021). Increasing OW and ODSP rates must be done in conjunction with investing in the critical supports that will result in a real poverty reduction.
- 5.28** OW and the ODSP must provide a living income that does not leave Ontarians below the poverty line, and it must provide Ontarians that are unable to work with dignity and respect. The Ford government must immediately recognize that **social assistance rates are below what they should be, and do not provide sufficient income for basic necessities. The government must double the rates for OW and ODSP.** OW and ODSP recipients, their families, and their children should not have to endure crushing poverty in a province as wealthy as Ontario because of the barriers to employment that they face.
- 5.29** To fully address poverty in Ontario, **improvements to OW and the ODSP must be accompanied by other measures that expand the social safety net, improve employment standards, and create better, high paying jobs.**
- 5.30** **The government should also revisit its premature cancellation of the Basic Income pilot.** When cancelled, the pilot was working, providing those in the program with much-needed stability and the quality-of-life improvements many recipients cited as necessary to take the next steps toward improving their skills to

find better employment. The Ford government's decision to end the program in the middle of the three-year pilot in 2018 was cruel to those it had so greatly benefited (Ferguson and Monsebraaten 2018). It also denied policymakers crucial evidence about the long-term success of such initiatives.

5.31 The Ford government must also update Ontario's *Employment Standards Act*, to make it easier to unionize, as a sure way to improve wages and working conditions; stop the practice of classifying employees as "independent contractors;" establish an equal pay for equal work provision; and institute a transparent employment pay law as part of a strategy to reduce the pay gaps suffered by women, racialized, and other equity-deserving groups, as well as Indigenous peoples. Additionally, the Ford government must legislate 10 permanent, employer-provided, paid sick leave days for all Ontario workers.

5.32 Real Climate Action

In discussing poverty and Ontarians' livelihoods, the potential economic consequences of climate change cannot be ignored. A strong, progressive climate change action plan, focusing on leveraging green technology to de-carbonize Ontario will require significant investment, and change to the province's economic and labour systems. But, if implemented with a forward vision, a green Ontario, with a green economy, has added benefits beyond environmental concerns. A green economy has the potential to create tens of thousands of high paying, green jobs, to promote electrification over fossil fuels, retrofit existing buildings, and to build public transit.

5.33 The Ford government failed in its attempt to oppose the federal government's carbon pricing plan. Despite this, the government now stands to collect \$2.2 billion in carbon pricing revenue over the next eight years (Crawley 2023). This provides the government with an opportunity to invest in long-term sustainability and climate action. **The government should use part of this revenue to invest in new or emerging, low-emission technologies and clean economy initiatives, such as renewable energy programs like wind and solar.**

5.34 **The Ford government must also develop and properly invest in a climate change action plan that prioritizes transitioning to a low-carbon economy, while creating good jobs, with the necessary job training supports for**

workers in transition and a pathway for the equity-deserving communities that need decent work most.

6. CONCLUSION

6.01 Governing is about making choices. Lofty rhetoric and promises of support are meaningless without the necessary investment to make a positive difference. Too often, this government has prioritized compliments over competence. The result of the Ford government's consistent attack on public services and public sector workers has weakened the systems that all Ontarians rely upon. We cannot continue to do more with less.

6.02 The 2023 budget is an opportunity for this government to build a better, fairer, and more prosperous Ontario. To show leadership and abandon its failed track record of reckless cuts to public services. To invest in publicly funded education, child care, and the broader public sector. And to repair and strengthen the province's social safety net.

6.03 A government for the people should keep every individual in mind, and focus on moving our province forward, not backward. Ontario's publicly funded schools and broader public services need real government action and investment. And they need it now.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.01 The Ford government must finally demonstrate respect for the frontline public service workers who play a vital role in Ontario's society and economy, starting by withdrawing the appeal of Bill 124. The government must also uphold the constitutionally-protected rights of Ontario workers, and the unions that represent them.

7.02 The government must immediately cease any efforts toward privatization and commit to properly funding public services in Ontario, while respecting workers and the expertise of frontline staff.

7.03 Catholic teachers urge the government to reverse their tax cuts and credits that disproportionately benefit wealthier Ontarians, and instead commit to improving

“fiscal effort” to a rate higher than the Canadian provincial average, with the additional revenue going to properly fund public services in Ontario.

- 7.04** 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.
- 7.05** 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.
- 7.06** 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.
- 7.07** 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.
- 7.08** The government must invest in proactive and comprehensive mental health assessment of students.
- 7.09** Annual funding for Student Mental Health Ontario must be increased in a manner that reflects sustainability and long-term needs.
- 7.10** 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.

- 7.11** 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.
- 7.12** 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.
- 7.13** It is imperative that the government provide resources and supports for more frontline, school-based child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and other professional services to help students and education workers deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs, in some cases attributable to pandemic-related causes.
- 7.14** It is also necessary for the government to provide educators and school staff with comprehensive anti-violence training. To proactively support students or staff who are in crisis, a whole-school approach must be developed and must include follow-up actions to prevent recurrence. This would better enable all staff in the school building to recognize a potential situation, and respond and address it accordingly.
- 7.15** The government should amend the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, by creating a new section dedicated specifically to education workplaces, so that the legislation reflects the specific context of the school setting. Any update to legislation must be done in genuine collaboration with education stakeholders, including – but not limited to – education sector affiliates, experts on student mental health and school violence, the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety, and representatives from local joint health and safety committees.
- 7.16** To ensure sustained, comprehensive and inclusive supports the government should encourage and facilitate collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services on the

development of a proactive, multifaceted response that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of school violence.

- 7.17** 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.
- 7.18** Provide teachers who demonstrate interest with teacher-led, teacher- directed professional development opportunities related to online learning.
- 7.19** 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.
- 7.20** 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.
- 7.21** 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.
- 7.22** The government must also provide funding for professional development, support resources, release time, and other supports needed to transition to full implementation.
- 7.23** The government must engage education partners in sustained, meaningful consultation and collaboration in developing destreaming policy and rewriting curriculum documents. De-streamed courses must be delivered in-person, not online.

- 7.24** 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.
- 7.25** The government must act aggressively, and deploy mental health and well-being teams in every school in Ontario.
- 7.26** 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.
- 7.27** 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 (ASHRAE).
- 7.28** 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.
- 7.29** 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.
- 7.30** 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.
- 7.31** 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.
- 7.32** 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.

- 7.33** 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 to society.
- 7.34** 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.
- 7.35** Catholic teachers call on the Ford government to be held to account and transparent in how it spends the federal funds provided. Our Association also calls on the Ford government to cease providing funding to for-profit child care centres, and instead commit to creating a sufficient number of publicly funded, licensed child care spaces, while also providing a living wage to early childhood educators.
- 7.36** The Ford government must be laser-focused on creating decent jobs with higher wages, improving employment standards, ensuring better and more affordable access to education and training, and bolstering the province's social safety net.
- 7.37** The Ford government must immediately revisit and revise its Poverty Reduction Strategy, which aims to transform how critical social assistance is delivered through Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).
- 7.38** The Ford government must immediately recognize that social assistance rates are below what they should be, and do not provide sufficient income for basic necessities. The government must double the rates for OW and ODSP.
- 7.39** To fully address poverty in Ontario, improvements to OW and the ODSP must be accompanied by other measures that expand the social safety net, improve employment standards, and create better, high paying jobs.

- 7.40** The government should also revisit its premature cancellation of the Basic Income pilot.
- 7.41** The Ford government must also update Ontario's *Employment Standards Act*, to make it easier to unionize, as a sure way to improve wages and working conditions; stop the practice of classifying employees as "independent contractors;" establish an equal pay for equal work provision; and institute a transparent employment pay law as part of a strategy to reduce the pay gaps suffered by women, racialized, and other equity-deserving groups, as well as Indigenous peoples. Additionally, the Ford government must legislate 10 permanent, employer-provided, paid sick leave days for all Ontario workers.
- 7.42** The government should use part of this revenue to invest in new or emerging, low-emission technologies and clean economy initiatives, such as renewable energy programs like wind and solar.
- 7.43** The Ford government must also develop and properly invest in a climate change action plan that prioritizes transitioning to a low-carbon economy, while creating good jobs, with the necessary job training supports for workers in transition and a pathway for the equity-deserving communities that need decent work most.

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