

2024–25

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

- 1.01** 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 2024 provincial budget.
- 1.02** When the Ford Conservative government came to power in 2018, two broad factors contributed to the party's electoral success. The first was widespread dissatisfaction with the Liberal government of the day – which, despite a number of legislative and policy successes, had accumulated significant “political baggage” after 15 years in office (Norquay 2018).
- 1.03** The second factor centred on Doug Ford and the campaign promises he made to Ontario voters. This had less to do with articulating substantive policy ideas – in fact, the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party refused to publish a costed platform (CBC News 2018), and Conservative candidates were instructed to avoid all-candidates debates and to resist media availability where they might be scrutinized by reporters (Powers 2018).
- 1.04** Instead, Ford's Conservative party espoused an ethos, summed up by Doug Ford in his June 7, 2018 election victory address: “We have taken back Ontario. We have delivered a government that is **for the people**. A government that will **respect your hard-earned tax dollars**... But the work has just begun. Our team will get to work immediately. We will deliver on our plan for the people. **We will bring accountability, transparency, and integrity** [to government]” [**emphasis added**] (Maclean's 2018).
- 1.05** It is difficult to square any of these promises with the government's record over the past six years.
- 1.06** As we are now aware, there have been clandestine efforts to enrich billionaire friends and party donors, often at the expense of the broader public (Ferguson 2019; OFL 2023). Millions of tax dollars have been wasted appealing court decisions, in the attempt to trample citizens' Charter-protected rights (Casey 2023). Public funds are being dedicated to upgrade private companies' infrastructure,

meanwhile health care and education face crumbling buildings and multi-billion-dollar repair backlogs (Southern 2024; Kafeel 2023). And at the time of writing, the government is under investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) for allegedly engaging in the largest scandal in Ontario political history (Canadian Press 2023). Seemingly each week, new information emerges that paints the Ford Conservative government in an increasingly negative light.

- 1.07** Time and again, public policy decisions are 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.
- 1.08** This approach – with its emphasis on fiscal austerity, haphazard decision-making, and false or misleading statements to the public – has been widely apparent in education. At each year’s provincial budget release, and at every announcement, the government has claimed it is making unprecedented investments in publicly funded education.
- 1.09** The truth is, when factoring for inflation, excluding funding for tax credits and boutique initiatives credit unrelated to the classroom, core per-pupil funding for elementary and secondary education has been cut every year since the Ford government took office.

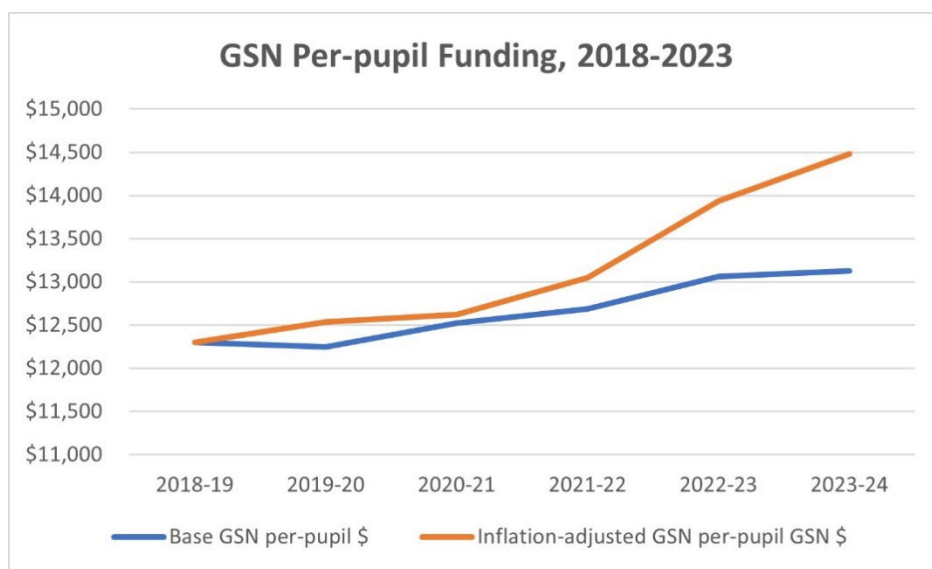


Figure 1- GSN per-pupil funding, 2018-23. Source: Ontario Government, Ministry of Education, annual GSN funding documents.

- 1.10** As the graph above depicts, in the 2023-24 school year, each student in Ontario publicly funded schools is set to receive \$1,357 *less* than they would have if the government had maintained per-pupil funding at 2018 rates. Multiplied across the entire publicly funded education system, this represents a \$2.7 billion inflationary cut to per-pupil base funding.
- 1.11** In addition, funding for programs and supports have been cancelled and the waitlist to access certain programs and resources is now measured in years. Put simply, the government has siphoned money out of the classroom at the expense of students (Rushowy 2023; DiMatteo 2021).
- 1.12** This contrast – between the government’s rhetoric and the reality of funding cuts – is evident across Ontario’s public services, from education to health care to social services, and beyond. It is simply not possible to continue cutting funding from critical areas without negatively affecting the long-term well-being of individuals and families. And there is considerable evidence to show that these investments pay dividends in the short and long term, for society and the economy (Abiad, Furceri, and Topalova 2016).
- 1.13** It is well past time that the Ford Conservative government live up to the promises it made to the people of Ontario. Ontarians deserve and demand forward-thinking leadership. We deserve and demand proper, comprehensive investment in public services. In short, we deserve and demand a provincial government that serves not just *some* of the people, but *all* people – one that invests in the health and prosperity of its citizens, now and into the future.

2. RE-EVALUATING GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

- 2.01** A government’s priorities are revealed not through slogans or speeches, but through the choices a government makes – the programs that get funded, the process for making decisions, and the people who are intended to benefit. Sadly, in every instance, the Ford Conservative government’s choices reveal glaringly misguided priorities.

2.02 During their time in office, the Ford Conservative government has created a pattern of policymaking that ignores stakeholders and experts, and is seemingly designed to financially benefit wealthy individuals – specifically PC Party donors – at the expense of the general public, environmental sustainability, and society more broadly.

2.03 Accountability and Transparency

Mandate Letters

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).

2.04 However, the Ford government took every effort to dispense with this historical precedent of accountability and transparency. For five years, the government refused to release its original mandate letters, taking the case to the Supreme Court of Canada after failing to comply with an order of the Information and Privacy Commissioner to release the letters (Casey 2022).

2.05 In total, between 2018 and 2021, Ontario Crown lawyers logged 1,672 taxpayer-funded hours in an effort to keep the government’s intentions hidden from the public (Brockbank 2023). It was only through intrepid reporting, and the bravery of individual(s) within the government, that the mandate letters were ultimately leaked and saw the light of day (D’Mello and Callan 2023). And at the time of writing, we remain unaware of the updated mandate letters upon the government’s re-election.

2.06 This approach of avoiding transparency and accountability in order to conceal intentions has, unfortunately, become a hallmark of the Ford Conservative government.

2.07 *The Greenbelt Scandal*

It is almost quaint to think back to the 2018 provincial election campaign and recall a PC Party press release – still accessible online – which includes a quote from then-candidate Ford, stating, “We won’t touch the Greenbelt. Very simple. That’s it,

the people have spoken. I'm going to listen to them, they don't want me to touch the Greenbelt, we won't touch the Greenbelt. Simple as that" (Ontario PC Party, 2018).

- 2.08** It would be interesting to discover what Candidate Ford thinks of Premier Ford – given that, in November 2022, the government reversed its campaign promise, announcing plans to remove 7,400 acres from the Greenbelt, purportedly for the construction of at least 50,000 new homes (Globe and Mail 2022).
- 2.09** As it turned out, this announcement was only an overture. In the 12 months that followed, the sheer scope and brazen nature of the Ford Greenbelt scandal would become evident. It is worth recounting the scandal's timeline in some detail.
- 2.10** Following the decision to remove protections from certain Greenbelt lands, it was revealed that several developers with close ties to Doug Ford had purchased sections of Greenbelt-protected lands – originally thought to be worthless – just ahead of the government's announcement, and now stood to gain \$8.2 billion as a result (Jones and Brockbank 2022).
- 2.11** At the request of opposition parties in the Ontario Legislature, two separate investigations led by Ontario's Integrity Commissioner and Auditor General, respectively, were undertaken. The investigations concluded that Ford government political staffer, Ryan Amato – Chief of Staff to Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark – had strongly encouraged civil servants to remove protections from particular sections of the Greenbelt (at the request of wealthy developers who had met with Amato at various functions). When some of the requested lands did not meet the criteria to be removed from protection, Amato had those criteria dropped (Jones 2023).
- 2.12** Following this, in September 2023, news came to light that Premier Ford's Minister of Public and Business Service Delivery, Kaleed Rasheed, had "mistakenly" given incorrect dates to the Integrity Commissioner, when being interviewed about a trip to Las Vegas. Receipts revealed that the trip actually coincided with that of a wealthy Ontario developer. And while in Las Vegas, the two men *happened* to be at the same massage parlour at the same time. Subsequently, that developer

purchased a section of Greenbelt land, which coincidentally then saw its protections removed (CBC News 2023).

- 2.13** As public pressure mounted, and in a desperate attempt to stem the damage, the Ford government announced a complete reversal of its policy, and introduced legislation to return all Greenbelt lands that had been removed from protection. In the wake of the Greenbelt scandal, Ryan Amato resigned from government, Minister Clark resigned his cabinet post, Minister Rasheed resigned from the PC Party caucus, and the case is now under investigation by the RCMP (Canadian Press 2023).
- 2.14** This saga perfectly illustrates the Ford government's misguided priorities and shameful approach to policymaking: a scheme hatched during clandestine meetings, designed to further enrich billionaire friends and party donors; a willingness to interfere with a neutral policy process, changing the rules to engineer a desired outcome; an attempt to deceive the public about their actions and true intentions; and finally – amidst public outrage – a full policy walk-back and a meagre promise to do better next time.
- 2.15** *Highway 413*
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).
- 2.16** 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).

- 2.17** 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).
- 2.18** *ServiceOntario*
In January 2024, news broke that the government was closing at least 11 ServiceOntario locations, to be replaced with kiosks inside some Staples Canada and Walmart Canada stores (Southern 2024a). This, in itself, was not particularly newsworthy, as some ServiceOntario kiosks already exist in Canadian Tire stores across southern Ontario (McGrath 2024).
- 2.19** However, what raised alarm bells about this announcement was the process that led to the decision and the implications for workers. The decision to allow Staples to open ServiceOntario kiosks was done through a sole-sourced contract – meaning that the deal was not subject to tender through an open bidding process whereby companies could submit proposals for the contract (Southern 2023). This raises important questions about the government’s refusal to publish a Request for Proposals – questions that, as yet, the government has refused to answer.
- 2.20** In addition, the government has confirmed that it will provide American-owned Staples and Walmart with untold sums of Ontario taxpayer money in order to retrofit facilities in preparation for hosting ServiceOntario kiosks. It has also been reported that the government will pay 18 months of rent for a privately owned ServiceOntario location in downtown Toronto, a move that has been characterized as “highly unusual” (Southern and Bond 2024).
- 2.21** The government’s willingness to provide public funds to private and foreign-owned companies is especially disgraceful given their refusal to adequately address crumbling public service infrastructure – including the more-than-\$17 billion school repair backlog, and with news that hospitals are being forced to take high-interest bank loans to continue operating (Payne 2024).

2.22 Perhaps even more egregious is the impact this will have on workers. As part of the decision to close ServiceOntario centres, the government will require workers who have been laid off to re-apply for their old positions, now located in Staples and Walmart facilities. This will have two consequences. First, since kiosks will require fewer staff, an untold number of former ServiceOntario employees will simply lose their jobs. For those who are rehired, these individuals will now become employees of Staples or Walmart – which means, despite doing the exact same job, they will likely be forced to accept lower wages and may lose access to important benefits for which they were previously eligible (McGrath 2024).

2.23 **Respect for Workers and Public Services**

The preceding example of privatizing ServiceOntario serves as a reminder of this government’s blatant disrespect for workers. 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.

2.24 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. 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.

2.25 Unfortunately, the public backlash generated as a result of these early attacks did not deter the government from pursuing its anti-worker agenda.

2.26 *Legislative Attacks on Workers*

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 within the labour force.

2.27 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.

2.28 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 fallen below the annual rate of inflation each year (ESDC 2023).

2.29 The Association was proud to join 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.

2.30 It has been disheartening, but not surprising, to learn of the lengths to which this government has gone to pursue its anti-worker agenda. News reports, unearthed via Freedom of Information requests, reveal that for almost a year the government possessed internal documents, which confirm that Bill 124 widened 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).

- 2.31** Add to this the fiasco surrounding the government's introduction of Bill 28, the *Keeping Students in Class Act* – legislation that imposed a woefully substandard contract upon Canadian Union of Public Employee (CUPE) education workers, predominantly women, who are already the lowest paid in Ontario's publicly funded education system, and inappropriately invoked the Notwithstanding Clause, which immunized the Ford government from Charter review and criminalized the exercising of a fundamental Charter freedom – the right to strike (Sarson 2022; Government of Ontario 2022). So overwhelming was the backlash to Bill 28 from the labour community and the general public, that the government was once again forced to climb down from its position and rescind this draconian legislation (Rushowy 2022).
- 2.32** The Ford Conservative government has not shown itself willing to learn from past mistakes. 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. The government must also drop their appeal of Bill 124, and uphold the constitutionally-protected rights of Ontario workers, and the unions that represent them.**
- 2.33 Program (Under)spending**
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.
- 2.34** However, the statement is simply not true. The Financial Accountability Office (FAO) is projecting double digit surpluses over the next five years. In fact, for 2025 the FAO is projecting a \$10.6 billion surplus – this is compared to the \$4.4 billion that Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy outlined in the 2023 budget (FAO 2023). The FAO documents make clear that the government has the financial capacity to increase program spending.
- 2.35** Despite this, Ontario remains "dead last" in per-resident program spending, and is spending \$3,863 less per person than the Canadian provincial average (Robinson 2023). These are not distinctions of which we should be proud.

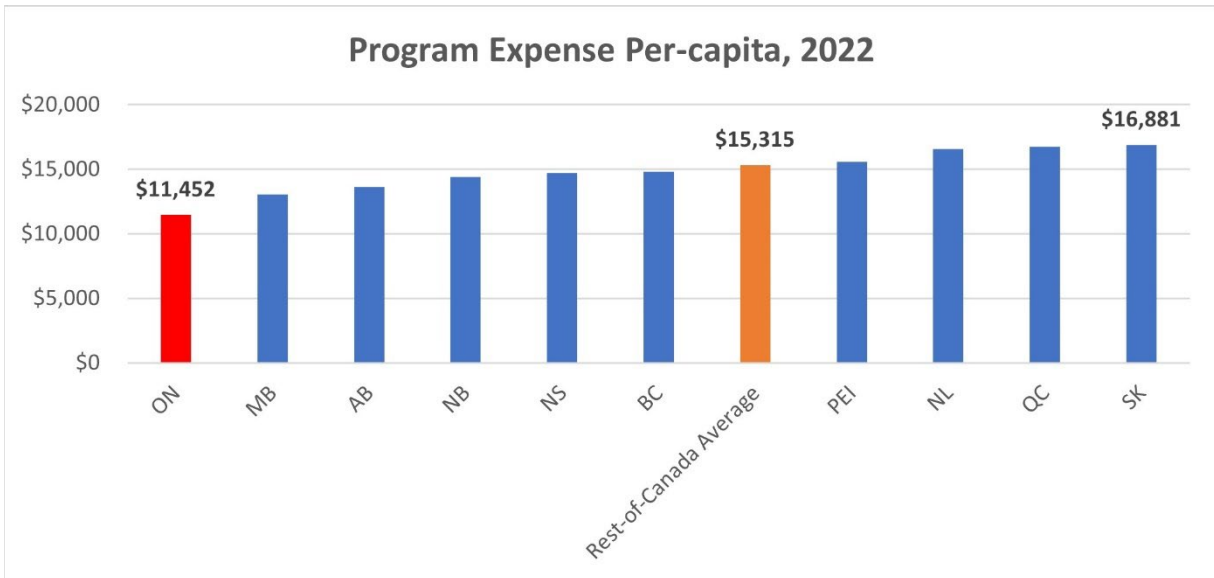


Figure 2- Program expense per-capita, 2022. Source: Randy Robinson (Statistics Canada).

- 2.36** Even more concerning, given the Ford government’s chronic underfunding of public services, is that spending documents reveal that the government is sitting on more than \$22 billion in “excess funds,” and has provided “no transparency on how that money will be used over the next four years” (D’Mello and Callan 2023a). This figure represents \$10.8 billion more than what was outlined in the FAO’s winter economic and budget outlook (FAO 2023). That the government would be squirreling away billions of dollars at a time when public service spending is at the lowest level in the country is unconscionable.
- 2.37** In addition, the Ford Conservative government remains resolute in its refusal to access revenue streams, and has chosen to forgo billions of dollars each year in potential revenue. 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). That year, the Ford government’s “own-source” revenue amounted to 14.4 per cent of GDP. The average for all other provinces was 18.5 per cent. Thus, Ontario’s “own-source” revenue is 4.1 per cent lower than the Canadian provincial average (Robinson 2023).

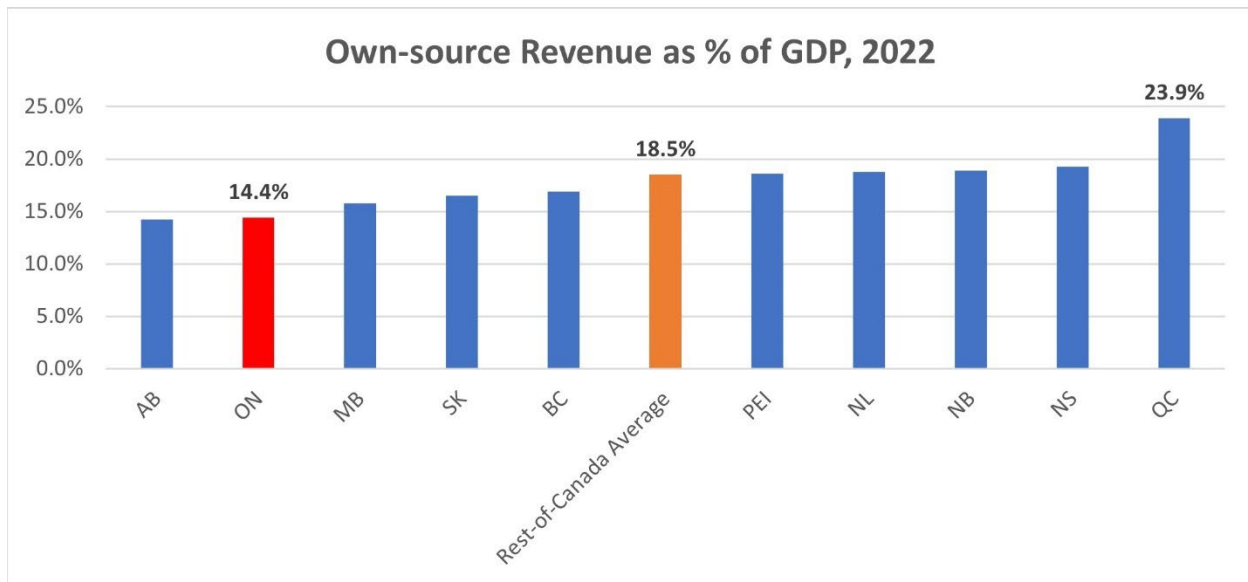


Figure 3- Own-source revenue as percentage of GDP, 2022. Source: Randy Robinson (Statistics Canada).

2.38 This situation is only getting worse, as the gap in fiscal effort between Ontario and other Canadian provinces increased by 1.8 per cent compared to last year. In reality, if Ontario was to raise revenue at the average “fiscal effort” of Canadian provinces, it would result in an additional \$43 billion in provincial coffers – almost \$10 billion more than the entire education budget in Ontario.

2.39 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. Overall, according to budget documents, tax cuts and tax credits have drained a minimum of \$7.7 billion from the provincial treasury over the past five years (Robinson 2024).

2.40 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 matching the Canadian provincial average, with the additional revenue going to properly fund public services in Ontario.**

2.41 Privatization

Taken in isolation, the Ford Conservative government’s funding cuts, refusal to invest, and blatant disrespect of workers could be regarded as a callous, but

uncoordinated attack. Indeed, commentators point to the sheer number of policy reversals as evidence of government incompetence (Toronto Star 2023). While this is true to a point, one must not lose sight of a cohering element that underpins much of the government's policymaking motivation: the desire to privatize public services.

2.42 This ideologically-driven approach is evident in the government's actions toward a number public services.

2.43 *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 three years, the government has cut billions of dollars in education funding (Thompson 2023); made plans to commercialize and expand mandatory online learning (PressProgress 2021); significantly underfunded in-class resources and supports at a time when students are in desperate 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).

2.44 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 a \$1.1 billion shortfall in education funding over the next three years (FAO 2023a).

2.45 *Health Care*

Health care has also been a target of the government's privatization efforts. Over the past several years, the Ford Conservative 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).

- 2.46** We are seeing the real-world consequences of the government’s chronic underfunding. In 2017, before the Ford government was elected, there was an average of 1,087 patients in “unconventional spaces” – the official term for what is colloquially referred to as “hallway health care.” Despite coming to power on a promise to “end hallway health care,” the number of patients in “unconventional spaces” has grown to 1,326 – a 22 per cent increase (Ontario Health 2023). As well, in 2019-20, the first full year of the Ford government’s tenure, there were zero emergency department closures. Between July 2022 and June 2023, there were 203 temporary emergency department closures (Auditor General 2023).
- 2.47** According to the Auditor General, a key factor in the worsening health care crisis has been the Ford government’s refusal to properly invest in hospital staffing. And despite repeated warnings from hospitals, who have highlighted staffing shortages, the Ford Conservative government has refused to develop “a long-term strategy or [act] upon this information to take specific actions related to hospitals with significant staffing shortages” (Auditor General 2023).
- 2.48** In the wake of the Auditor General’s report, several unions that represent health care workers characterized the Ford government’s approach as a “failure” (Unifor 2023; CUPE 2023). However, it is worth remembering that a policy’s failure depends on its intentions. And it has become increasingly clear that the government has seemingly *intended* to create chaos in the health care sector, to open space for privatization and profit maximization.
- 2.49** Having manufactured a crisis in health care, the Ford government turned to the private sector to offer solutions. Recently, Minister of Health and Long-term Care, Sylvia Jones, reiterated the government’s intention to expand the number and range of surgeries offered at for-profit clinics (CBC News 2024).
- 2.50** Framed as a response to the growing surgical backlog, the government continues to ignore evidence that for-profit medical services do not improve the quality of service-provision – in fact, data shows that jurisdictions with greater reliance on for-profit clinics experience longer average surgical wait times than jurisdictions where these procedures are performed in the public sector (CBC News 2024).

Expanding private clinics also threatens to create a two-tiered health care system, as staff and funding migrates from the public to private sector.

2.51 In pursuing privatized health care, the government is also ignoring the will of the people. A 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 2023a).

2.52 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 drives 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. QUALITY PUBLICLY FUNDED EDUCATION FOR ALL

3.01 Publicly funded education in Ontario finds itself at a crossroads. The current provincial government inherited a world-class system almost six years ago – made possible by the teachers, education workers, and staff in Ontario schools who strive every day to best meet the diverse needs of the students they serve.

3.02 However, since taking office, the government has systematically underfunded the education system, siphoning money out of the classroom, while shuffling in unrelated programs and tax credits to artificially inflate the education budget (Rushowy 2023; DiMatteo 2021). The result is that core funding has not kept pace with inflation, producing a real-dollar cut.

3.03 At the release of last year’s Grants for Student Needs (GSNs) – which forms the basis of the education budget – the government lauded a \$698 million, or 2.7 per cent “historic” increase in funding. What the government failed to mention is that, to arrive at this increase, they quietly altered the calculation, decreasing the base

investment from the previous year by removing \$303 million in one-time COVID-19 learning recovery funding. This allowed them to artificially inflate – in fact, to almost double – their claimed increase for 2023-24 (Ministry of Education 2023; Ministry of Education 2022). When the numbers are calculated in a more fulsome and accurate way, the 2023-24 GSN investment amounts to a 1.4 per cent increase – or roughly one-third of what would be needed to match projected inflation (Statistics Canada 2023).

3.04 Even if one disregards the government’s mathematical sleight-of-hand, the funding figures are still far less than meets the eye. The government’s insistence on advertising GSN increases in nominal terms masks the continued erosion of the value of these funds, which has decreased significantly since 2018 as inflation rose to near-40-year high (Armstrong 2023).

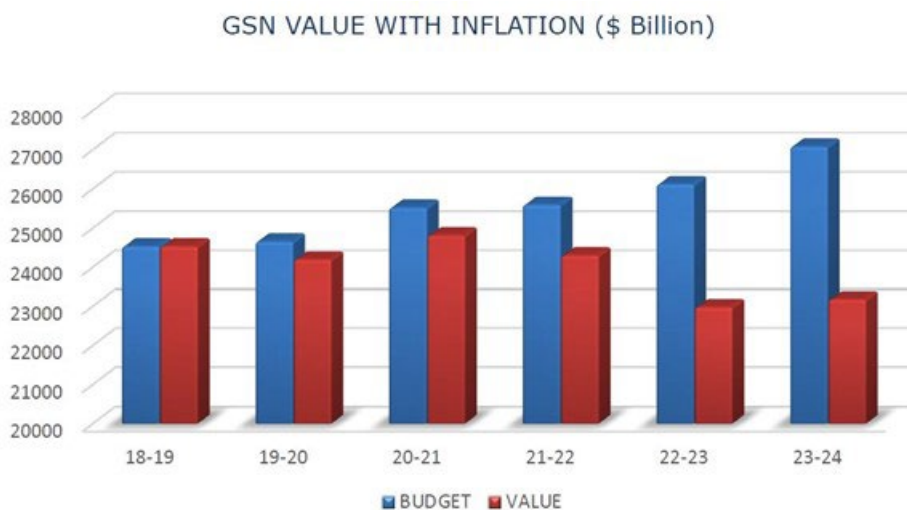


Figure 4- GSN value, with inflation, 2018-19 to 2023-24. Source: Government of Ontario, Ministry of Education GSN documents.

3.05 As the chart above describes, the inflation-adjusted, real-dollar increase in GSN investment for 2023-24 is 0.87 per cent, a far cry from the government’s claims. In fact, the funding gap for this current school year stands at almost \$4 billion.

3.06 It takes considerable effort to unpack the government’s ‘spin.’ And doing so threatens to miss a broader point: the government’s accounting tricks have real costs for students, teachers, education workers, and families. The reality – on the ground, in classrooms across Ontario – is that teachers and education workers are

being asked to do more with less, and students are being left without access to the vital resources and supports that they need and deserve.

- 3.07** While cuts and chronic underfunding negatively impact all students, they continue to 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 – from mandatory online learning to rushed curriculum overhauls – have widened these inequalities and exacerbated disparities between students from traditionally high performing and traditionally low-performing groups (Teotonio 2023; Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin et al. 2020).
- 3.08** The government has a choice: it can continue to systematically underfund education and erode the quality of Ontario's world-class publicly funded education system; or, they can choose a different path. The government can finally admit and act upon the truism that properly investing in education is an investment in the future – that every student deserves to be supported and to learn in a safe and modern school.
- 3.09** As part of this investment, the government must finally embrace a broader understanding of what constitutes and contributes to student success. For instance, investment in initiatives such as breakfast programs recognize the interconnection between students' basic human needs and academic learning – “Maslow before Bloom,” as the saying goes (Godin, Patte, and Leatherdale 2018). Rather than going “back-to-basics,” it is past time that the Ford Conservative government go *beyond* the basics.
- 3.10** As the provincial budget is developed for next year, it is imperative that the government prioritize publicly funded education and do what is necessary to provide students with the resources and supports they need in order to thrive and succeed.

3.11 Meaningful 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).

3.12 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 worker 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.

3.13 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 de-streaming to math curriculum updates to the implementation of diagnostic tools that violate collective agreements, over the past several years the government has missed the opportunity to collaborate meaningfully with education stakeholders.

3.14 Ontario's teachers are trained, certified professionals with expertise, experience, and professional skills 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.

3.15 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.**

3.16 Mental Health

The crisis of children’s mental health has reached unprecedented levels in recent years. Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health issues among school-aged children. According to a 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 made them feel depressed about the future, and 39 per cent note their mental health 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).

3.17 The full and long-term impacts of the pandemic on student mental health remain to be seen; but, it is clear that students are struggling – including those who initially demonstrated no visible affects. School Mental Health Ontario reports that, as of 2023, one-in three Ontario parents have had a child miss school as a result of anxiety. In 2019, according to data from Statistics Canada, 73 per cent of children aged 12 to 17 described their mental health as “very good” or “excellent.” A follow-up study in 2022 found that this number had decreased by 12 per cent (Statistics Canada 2020).

3.18 In addition, research from Toronto Public Health, published in 2023, determined a 29 per cent increase in emergency room visits related to self-harm among children and youth – with young women being disproportionately represented (Toronto Public Health 2023).

3.19 In light of this overwhelming evidence, one would imagine that a concerted and comprehensive effort would be made by the government to address and redress the crisis of children’s mental health. What one finds instead, is a system strained to the breaking-point, with a severe lack of resources and supports available to students in need.

- 3.20** A 2023 report from People for Education illustrates the distressing nature of the current situation. According to the study, only nine per cent of schools have regularly scheduled access to a mental health/addiction specialist or nurse, and 46 per cent report no access at all. With respect to psychologists, 28 per cent of Ontario schools report having no access to this critical resource, either in-person or virtually – a figure that has almost doubled since 2011. Overall, 95 per cent of schools in Ontario report needing “some” or “more” support for students’ mental health and well-being (People for Education 2023).
- 3.21** Examining the situation from the student-level, one finds that although all students are experiencing mental health issues, they are not always experiencing these issues equally or in the same ways. Research shows that families who were already vulnerable prior to the pandemic – for example, those from equity-deserving groups or 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, and especially those from equity-deserving groups.**
- 3.22** Parents and teachers have also expressed concerns about the amount of time young people are spending with electronic devices rather than peers. Researchers from SickKids found that “increased time on screens had a wide-ranging impact on the mental health of children and youth” (Fahmy 2021; McGinn 2020; SickKids 2021). The Ford government has only made this problem worse by expanding online learning, and promoting school boards’ adoption of the failed hybrid model.
- 3.23** Given the evidence presented above, it is clear that the government has not done nearly enough to address the mental health crisis facing school-aged children in Ontario. The 2023-24 GSNs allocated \$130.4 million to the Mental Health and

Wellbeing Grant. This represents a 4.6 per cent increase over last year, well short of what is needed to properly address this critical issue.

- 3.24** Further, the Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) Allocation, Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount (DSENA) Allocation, and Behaviour Expertise Amount (BEA) Allocation all increased at rates below inflation. In the case of the Special Incidence Portion (SIP), the 2023-24 GSN documents indicate an increase of 12 per cent (Ministry of Education 2023). Although this would appear a significant increase, it is important to note that this funding is based on historical averages and not on system need – thus, especially in smaller school boards, there could be significant funding shortages in situations where there has been an increase of students requiring this funding line. In addition, part of the increase is attributable to a calculation change designed to “relieve school boards of administrative work” related to claims submission.
- 3.25** It remains as critical as ever, that **the government make real, and substantial investments into student mental health resources and supports. 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.**
- 3.26** Following from the pandemic, there is still a need for the government to **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.

- 3.27** 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 ongoing mental health and well-being consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.28** Following from this, **the government must act aggressively, and deploy mental health and well-being teams in every school in Ontario.**
- 3.29** 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.**
- 3.30** Of course, geographic and demographic needs will need to be considered to ensure that no regions, communities, 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.**
- 3.31** 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.
- 3.32** 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.

3.33 Special Education

At present, 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.

3.34 As part of last year's GSN release, the government highlighted a 4.7 per cent increase over the previous year's funding. However, this increase is smoke and mirrors – largely the product of shuffling monies around, changing the calculation, and basing funding on projections.

3.35 More to the point, the increase is still a "drop in the bucket" of what is needed. Currently, the funding formula assigns a total of 1.73 support staff per 1,000 elementary school students and 2.21 per 1,000 secondary school students, dedicated to support students who need special education programs, services, and/or equipment (Ministry of Education 2023).

3.36 This is a woefully inadequate ratio, which produces significant shortages in supports. As 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 [including special education assessments]: there was just one for every 2,580 students" (Tranjan 2022).

3.37 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).

3.38 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.

- 3.39** If the Ford government is to address this issue comprehensively, it will need to improve upon past performance. And if the government is sincere about reforming SIP and SEA allocations to better respond to student need, there are several factors to keep in mind.
- 3.40** A move to needs-based funding for SIP and SEA allocations would potentially result in something similar to the Intensive Support Amount (ISA) grants, which previously required that students be assessed by teachers and applications be made to access additional monies, which would then be freed up for school boards.
- 3.41** Although the ISA grants provided needs-based funding, the process involved several shortfalls that would need to be addressed and corrected. For instance, this model would need to consider who does the assessments. Previously, ISA grants required teachers to write and submit grant applications. This takes considerable time, and many teachers were strongly encouraged by their administrators to complete grant applications at the expense of being able to interact with, and best support, the students they serve.
- 3.42** If the government moves toward a needs-based model, funding should be made available for external staff – who are qualified special education teachers – to conduct assessments. Any alteration to special education funding should not create additional duties for classroom teachers or take away from their ability to support students in their care.
- 3.43** A transition to needs-based funding should also not replace base funding for special education. Instead, additional funding should be provided in a “base-plus” model. Without this, the government risks widening equity gaps between schools and communities.

- 3.44** On the issue of special education, it would be remiss not to mention the government’s shambolic handling of the autism file. The government has 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 – at the time leaving more than 27,000 children on the waitlist for services (MacMillan 2021; Waberi 2020; Sharkey 2019). In March 2021, the government promised there would be fewer than 8,000 children on the waitlist for needs-based autism programs by the end of that year. Fast-forward to October 2023, the list now stands at more than 60,000 children, with an average of 7,000 more added each year (Yazdani 2023).
- 3.45** 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.**
- 3.46 Class Size**
The benefits of smaller class sizes are well established. A decade ago, 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.
- 3.47** 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).
- 3.48** Reductions in class size have 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).

- 3.49** 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).
- 3.50** The same principles apply to online classes, which are currently staffed at a student-teacher ratio of 30:1. In a study of online learning for students from Kindergarten to Grade 12, researchers from the University of Hong Kong determined that for online classes that require collaboration, 15 students was the preferable average (Zhang, Liu, and Lin 2018). The researchers also concluded, in a separate study, that student success was maximized when the number of students in an online course did not exceed the in-person class size averages (Noonoo 2020).
- 3.51** 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.
- 3.52** **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.**

3.53 Safe and Modern Schools

“Almost nine-in-ten teachers (89 per cent) indicate that they have experienced or witnessed violence or harassment in their schools” (OECTA 2017). The preceding quotation comes from an OECTA survey report released in 2017. In the seven years following this publication, incidents of violence and harassment in schools have only grown more frequent and severe – and to-date, the government has done nothing of substance to address this critical issue.

3.54 Seemingly each week, news stories are published that describe the shocking details of violence and harassment experienced by teachers and education workers – which range from verbal threats to physical assault (Mehrabi 2023; Ceolin 2023).

3.55 This anecdotal evidence is supported by data. A 2023 study by the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) found that “two-thirds of members say the severity of violent incidents has increased and 72 per cent say the number of incidents has increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic” (ETFO 2023). Similarly, a study from University of Ottawa researchers published in 2021 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)” (Bruckert, Santor, and Mario 2021).

3.56 School boards have reported similar findings. For instance, in October 2022, the Thames Valley District School Board reported 900 incidents of school-based violence (Rivers 2022). And over the course of the 2022-23 school year, more than 4,000 incidents of violence were reported at schools within the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (Brown 2023).

3.57 It would be a mistake to characterize this as an “education-specific” issue – our schools reflect broader social trends, and evidence points to a rise in threats and acts of violence across Canada in recent years (Statistics Canada 2023a). However, it is incumbent upon the government to address the issue of school violence and to do whatever is necessary to ensure a safe learning environment for students, teachers, education workers, and staff. This requires honest assessment and proactive investment.

- 3.58** The issue of violence in schools is complex and challenging. There is no simple answer. Addressing this matter requires a multifaceted, comprehensive, and coordinated response. Despite greater media attention being paid to this problem, and although education unions have worked hard 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).
- 3.59** While the lasting consequences the COVID-19 pandemic had on student mental health remains to be determined, evidence of its immediate impacts has been well established (St. George et al. 2021; SickKids 2021). And during school closures, some vulnerable students and staff did not have regular access to the mental health supports they require.
- 3.60** But this is only *part* of the comprehensive action plan required. An act of violence is often a cry for help. It has, as its basis, a multitude of intertwining factors – everything from inadequate access to mental health resources, to large class sizes, to a lack of special education supports, to the defunding of before- and after-school programming, and more, plays a role. However, there is a consistent theme to each of these, which has contributed to the rise in violence and harassment: chronic underfunding of publicly funded education (Eizadirad 2023; Rushowy 2023; Teotonio 2023).
- 3.61** 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.**
- 3.62** It is also necessary for the government to **provide educators and school staff with comprehensive trauma-informed 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.**

3.63 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.**

3.64 Addressing Equity in Education

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 best promote equity in education, including combatting anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, and supporting and protecting the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and staff. With respect to anti-Black racism, some of these ideas are expanded upon in Association publications, such as our *Submission to the Ontario Human Rights Commission on Anti-Black Racism in Education* (2023).

3.65 We recognize and acknowledge the many, varied, and systemic ways that discrimination and racism manifest and is reproduced in all our social institutions, including publicly funded education. And we understand the consequences such harms have on students, teachers, education workers, and families in the short and long terms.

3.66 Unfortunately, too often, the government has opted for a performative approach to this critical issue, rather than taking concrete steps, with proper investments and resources, to redress inequities faced by a variety of equity-deserving communities.

3.67 For instance, while the government has acknowledged the ongoing consequences of anti-Black racism – including conduct by officials in several school boards (Teotonio 2023a) – the government’s actions and implementation of anti-Black racism initiatives leave much to be desired.

- 3.68** The situation around destreaming offers a case-in-point. 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).
- 3.69** According to survey research by 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.
- 3.70** First, the government has not committed stable, long-term funding dedicated to the sustainability of destreaming efforts. In the 2023-24 GSN documents, the government once again provided inadequate funding, spread across a range of categories, including the Learning Opportunities Grant, literacy and math funding, student success, tutoring allocations, and early math intervention.
- 3.71** While, on paper, the Learning Opportunity Grant (LOG) received a 9.3 per cent increase in the 2022-23 GSNs, a closer inspection reveals that the majority of this increase is a result of a shell game – moving funds for Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) programs, previously contained in Priorities and Partnership Funding, into the LOG, as well as incorporating a \$5 million Summer Learning Program into the LOG that was already accounted for elsewhere.
- 3.72** 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).
- 3.73** 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. The result, observers note, was 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).

- 3.74** Throughout the discussion of policy implementation, the government has still not grasped sufficiently that destreaming alone will not eradicate the causes of disadvantage and inequity. 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 including lowering class sizes and addressing class composition (Follwell and Andrey 2021; Fogliato 2017; Jakubowski et al. 2016; OECD 2010).
- 3.75** For instance, it is evident that **additional investment is necessary to allow school boards to hire additional resource teachers, educational assistants, special education supports, social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, school nurses, and culturally responsive counsellors, to assist families and students from Black, racialized, and Indigenous communities, as well as 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and those living in low-income communities or from other equity-deserving groups.**
- 3.76** There is also a clear need for **investment in mandatory ongoing training and professional development for all administrators, school board trustees, teachers, education workers, and teacher candidates, on a range of equity-related topics, including microaggressions.**
- 3.77** In addition, **the government must adopt a more dedicated and substantive approach to disaggregated, demographic-based data collection. Any effort by school boards to collect equity-related data must involve a standardized approach, consider cultural relevance and responsiveness and trauma-informed principles, include all employees and their positions, respect privacy, and achieve the highest standards of data collection integrity – results must also be made available in an accessible form.**

3.78 The government must also commit to working collaboratively with education affiliates on any policy and program implementation, including curriculum writing.

3.79 Infrastructure and Technology

The need for urgent and comprehensive upgrades to Ontario's publicly funded schools has now been evident for many years. In 2016, the school repair backlog was estimated to be \$15 billion (Rushowy 2019). Today, the repair backlog is estimated to exceed \$17 billion (Thompson 2023). Even by late 2017, experts felt that the physical condition of schools has deteriorated to such an extent that hundreds of schools need to be replaced entirely (Mackenzie 2017).

3.80 While the issue of school infrastructure is not a new problem, unfortunately the current government has done little to rectify the situation. In 2022, the Minister of Education announced \$14 billion over 10 years dedicated to building and repairing schools (Ontario Newsroom 2022). However, it is worth noting that this was \$2 billion less than what the previous government had committed to spend over the same period (Benzie 2017). Add to this, that the government quietly cut an additional \$1 billion in school repair funding (PressProgress 2020), and it becomes clear this government has not demonstrated a sincere commitment to ensuring safe and modern schools for students.

3.81 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.

3.82 The pandemic also highlighted the significant issue of poor air quality within school facilities. **It is critical for the government to make the necessary investments to ensure that all schools have ventilation systems that meet the health and safety standards set by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers.** To ensure that this process is transparent, the government must also institute a provincial standard for air quality

measurements in schools, with publicly available metrics to indicate whether standards are being met.

- 3.83** Out-of-date and poorly maintained facilities, and technology that has not kept pace with students' educational needs, have an immediate and detrimental impact on the learning environment. Research has clearly established the relationship between school facility conditions, student academic achievement, and teacher effectiveness (Earthman 2002). Quite simply, no one should be forced to work or learn in buildings with leaking roofs, poor ventilation, mold, and other dangers. **The government must provide immediate, stable, and sufficient annual funding for infrastructure and repairs, new technology, as well as services and supports for all students, including those with special education and mental health needs.**
- 3.84** Although the government has stated a commitment to school building projects, these must remain public enterprises. **It is not appropriate nor beneficial for the government to entertain private-public partnerships (PPP) as a method to promote school construction.** This form of creeping privatization has no place in the development of public infrastructure, such as schools.
- 3.85** 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.
- 3.86** To that end, and in an effort to promote skilled trades, the government announced that starting in 2024, secondary students will be required to earn a technology education credit in order to graduate (Rushowy 2023a). While the Association supports technology education and the skilled trades, it was extremely troubling to hear the minister, in response to a reporter's question, muse that the private sector could prove a useful source from which to draw instructors to deliver these courses (DeClerq 2023). To be clear, **qualified technology teachers are the only appropriate individuals to deliver these courses. If the government is looking to expand course offerings in these areas, it must hire additional**

qualified teachers to meet that demand and address the growing issue of teacher recruitment and retention.

3.87 Learning in a Digital Age

Online and Hybrid 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 2020a; Parker 2020; Farhadi 2019). Studies throughout the pandemic confirmed these concerns (Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin, Wyatt, and Le 2020; OECTA 2020; Farhadi 2019; Jackson 2020).

3.88 It remains true that 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).

3.89 In discussing online learning, the government must also consider its current level of data integrity, on which programming and funding decisions are premised. For instance, offerings are based upon the assumption that 22.5 per cent of students take online courses. However, these data remain unverified and are potentially misleading. By arbitrarily applying a 22.5 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.

3.90 More problematic is that this percentage assumption was raised from 15 per cent, last year. The result is that the number of secondary classroom teachers decreased from 39.95 per 1,000 average daily enrolment (ADE) to 39.54 per 1,000 ADE. We once again ask the government to "show their work" on how this percentage is generated, and how it compares to actual use.

- 3.91** In addition to being lazy policymaking, this approach creates knock-on effects for funding, and potentially disadvantages students in certain school boards. Funding for online courses is predicated on the assumed percentage use, per ADE; however, in situations where usage may be lower, no additional funding is provided to account for the discrepancy. In these cases, school boards are forced to find funding from other areas to make up the difference, and might be forced to reduce or cancel programs and services for students as a result.
- 3.92** *Generative AI*
There is an emerging issue that the government must proactively address: the role of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the classroom. The Association is keenly aware of the proliferation of AI, and the opportunities and significant concerns it brings – including the inappropriate use by some students.
- 3.93** Catholic teachers know their students best; however, the speed with which AI is developing presents an unprecedented challenge for teachers and education workers. While, at first glance, AI software may provide support in developing materials such as assessments or lesson plans, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has raised concerns that AI-generated materials can echo and perpetuate biases, spread dis- and misinformation, and can negatively disrupt labour markets – especially in high-skills fields (OECD 2023).
- 3.94** **It is the Ministry of Education’s responsibility to develop regulations, provide dedicated funding for professional development, and adapt or develop curriculum – in collaboration with teachers – to incorporate critical approaches about appropriate use of AI in the classroom.**
- 3.95** In developing such policies and regulations, the ministry must meaningfully consult with frontline teachers, to ensure that their classroom expertise is leveraged to foster the best possible learning environment for students. To this point, the Association was disappointed to recently learn of a government-funded study, led by a private sector education technology company, that explores the integration of generative AI into publicly funded education, with the aim of making recommendations to the government.

3.96 If publicly funded education is to properly address the challenges posed by generative AI, and appropriately harness its use, teachers must be at the centre of this discussion – involved in everything from policy development, to curriculum writing, to professional development opportunities, and more. Many of the emerging issues are the result of private sector encroachment into publicly funded education; **it is neither acceptable nor beneficial to turn to the private sector for solutions to public services.**

3.97 *Equitable Access*

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).

3.98 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).

3.99 As well, many families in Ontario cannot afford high speed internet, or the technology required to access online courses (Butler 2021; CBC 2019). Pursuing online learning without providing corresponding additional funding to ensure equitable access will have a negative impact on the student learning experience. In the government’s seemingly relentless pursuit of expanding online learning, too often they have failed to take into account the social, cultural, economic, and geographic factors that impact a student’s ability to engage with, and achieve success, in an online learning environment.

3.100 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.

- 3.101** As well, students and teachers must be provided with appropriate resources and supports to facilitate achievement. This includes **providing teachers who demonstrate interest with teacher-led, teacher- directed professional development opportunities related to online learning.**
- 3.102** 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).
- 3.103** The Minister of Education has admitted this publicly on numerous occasions (OHRC 2020; TVO 2020). In 2022, 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).
- 3.104** 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.**

3.105 Education Quality and Accountability Office

The 2023 release of Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized test results sparked a media frenzy, with local publications either lauding or deriding the results of their local communities, depending on scores. Depending on location, Ontarians were met with headlines such as “Niagara school board students well above provincial EQAO results;” “EQAO results show Grand Erie made some gains, still below provincial average;” “Local Owen Sound students achieving below provincial averages in EQAO results” (Redmond 2023; Ruby 2023; Cowan 2023).

3.106 While such headlines serve to drive newspaper readership, they conceal 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).

3.107 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). This aggregate report card data is available to the Ministry of Education.

3.108 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 socioeconomic status” (Eizadirad 2018).

- 3.109** The tide has been turning against EQAO testing for a number of years. 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.
- 3.110** 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).
- 3.111** 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.

3.112 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).

3.113 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.

3.114 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.

3.115 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.

- 3.116** In January 2024, the government announced a “revamp” of the Full-day Kindergarten curriculum (Ontario Newsroom 2024). This, according to the Minister of Education, would instil a “back-to-basics” approach, placing emphasis on math and literacy, with mandatory, direct instruction time on phonics, fractions, pre-coding skills, among other elements (Rushowy 2024).
- 3.117** The Association was given no advance notice of the changes and, as has become commonplace with Ministry of Education announcements, the press conference resulted in more questions than answers. In particular, the Minister provided no details about the implementation plan for the curriculum, nor were any specifics provided about which – if any – training and resources would be made available to teachers in order to facilitate successful implementation. While additional details are presumably forthcoming, the Association hopes that this does not become another underfunded Ford Conservative government initiative – one that fails to provide the time, resources, and planning necessary to effectively implement curriculum changes.
- 3.118** Despite the Minister’s attempts to frame the announcement as ground-breaking, it is worth noting that numeracy, literacy, and child and skills development are already embedded into the Full-day Kindergarten curriculum, and teachers and education workers engage these topics with students every day. Further, if the government is going to continue to cite the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s *Right to Read* report, as justification for making sweeping policy and curriculum changes, then we encourage the government to *also* act on the report’s recommendations to dramatically increase investment, including the hiring of additional and dedicated teachers and education staff.
- 3.119** With the proper support, the investment in FDK will continue to pay dividends long into the future for students, families, the economy, and society. **To best serve students and to set them up for long-term success, within the publicly funded education system and after, the government must continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise – this should include investment to provide the necessary time, resources, and professional development training for teachers, to ensure successful implementation of any changes or curriculum updates.**

3.120 Indigenous Education

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).

3.121 Reports point to some progress being made in recent years toward implementing Indigenous education strategies and programs in Ontario schools. For instance, in 2012-13, only 34 per cent of elementary and secondary schools reported having professional development opportunities for school staff on Indigenous education. By 2022-23, this figure had risen to 76 per cent in elementary and 82 per cent in secondary schools. In addition, between 2012 and 2022, the proportion of schools offering Indigenous languages programs increased from four to 13 per cent in elementary schools, and from 11 to 20 per cent in secondary schools (People for Education 2023a).

3.122 Nevertheless, there remain 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 (Cimellaro 2023; 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.**

3.123 Looking specifically at funding allocations for the Indigenous Education Grant, although investment has increased over the past several years, it is still well short of what is required and – in some cases – calculation changes have created disparities in funding disbursement.

3.124 Overall, funding to the 2023-24 Indigenous Education Grant increased by 14 per cent, following a 2022-23 increase of 24.6 per cent – although this still lags behind what funding would be for this grant, had the current government not made drastic cuts when it first came into office.

- 3.125** New in the most recent education budget was a “First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies Allocation,” which provides \$645.64 per student enrolled, with prorating conditions at particular enrolment levels.
- 3.126** Anticipating that enrollment estimate revisions would produce net-funding-losses in certain situations, the government has included a One-time Realignment Mitigation Fund. This contingency funding is necessary – for instance, despite the increase to the overall grant, the Sudbury Catholic District School Board incurred a \$200,000 decrease in funding due to estimate revisions. **It is critical that this realignment funding is not temporary or time limited. This realignment contingency funding must be made part of the annual Indigenous Education Grant. More broadly, where there are mitigating funds, additional monies must be made available.**
- 3.127** 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).
- 3.128** The government must also follow through on its repeated stated commitments to redress learning gaps and improve outcomes among Indigenous students. To this end, it was certainly unhelpful when – in the spring of 2022 – the government made an unwarranted last-minute decision to substantially modify or remove sixteen Indigenous-related expectations in Ontario’s new science and technology curriculum for Grades 1 to 8 (McInnes 2022). This decision was even more baffling given that the government spent months consulting with Indigenous stakeholders to develop the curriculum materials (Alphonso 2022a).
- 3.129** The government cannot and should not turn its back on these efforts, especially as the need to address Indigenous education, and the education of Indigenous students, will only become more urgent, given that Indigenous children are the

fastest-growing child population segment in Canada (UNICEF Canada 2018). It has been well established that 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).

3.130 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.

3.131 Unfortunately, the government has too often chosen to implement sweeping changes without providing teachers much-needed opportunities for professional learning. The new language curriculum for Grades 1 to 8, and a new de-streamed language curriculum in Grade 9 provides a case-in-point.

3.132 The announcement was made in late June, leaving teachers without the time, resources, and supports necessary to understand and master the new material, before the start of next school year. And while Catholic teachers have always supported making regular curriculum updates, and have voiced our support of destreaming in an effort to eliminate racism, discrimination, and all systemic barriers, what the government implemented was underfunded, oversimplified, and rushed – an approach that is demonstrably counterproductive to achieving student success.

3.133 Ideally, curriculum updates and implementation involve 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).

3.134 The Association has offered to provide its expertise to ensure the government's efforts to update and implement curricula are accompanied by appropriate teacher-led professional development opportunities, resources, and other supports that provide the best possible learning environment for all students. It has been as disheartening and frustrating for Catholic teachers to be asked by the government

to provide recommendations on curriculum updates – only to have our expertise roundly ignored.

3.135 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.

3.136 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). **The government must also commit to providing sufficient time for professional development ahead of the implementation of any curriculum changes.**

3.137 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 that has been echoed by the Auditor General of Ontario (2017).

3.138 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.

3.139 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 within our society.**

3.140 Adult and Continuing Education

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.

3.141 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 not just an inflationary cut, but a nominal-dollar cut of from the previous year (Ministry of Education 2023).

3.142 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.

3.143 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.

3.144 The government should recognize that adult and continuing education is invaluable to the socio-economic well-being and social mobility of communities. **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.**

3.145 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 roughly 600,000 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.

3.146 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).

- 3.147** 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).
- 3.148** 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.
- 3.149** The government has made overtures toward this, in recent consultations on school disposition and schools on shared sites. The Association has offered its analysis and recommendations for both topics in recent submissions (OECTA 2023a; OECTA 2023b).
- 3.150** With respect to shared facilities, specifically for co-terminus boards, as noted in our submission to government, any decision to undertake such arrangement would have to be done while protecting each school system’s unique framework and structures, and upholding the rights outlined in Section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867. With those rights protected and maintained, there exists significant opportunities to make efficient use of resources while ensuring that more communities have access to important public services.
- 3.151** 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.

4. A FAIR AND JUST SOCIETY

4.01 Catholic teachers take a broad view of our responsibility to make this province a better place. This is not simply a philosophical position. Every day, teachers see the real-world consequences of social and economic inequities – we see it on the faces of students who have difficulty focusing because they have come to school hungry. We see it on the faces of students whose parents are unable to assist with homework because they must work multiple, low-paying jobs. Teachers have a front row seat to the impact socio-economic factors play within a student’s educational journey – and this has steeled our resolve to make this province, and world, fairer and more just for all.

4.02 Ontario is a wealthy province, with the capacity to build a society in which everyone has genuine opportunities to participate and succeed; but achieving this goal will require shifts in attitudes and bold investments in infrastructure, public services, and people.

4.03 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).

4.04 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).

4.05 For many years, our Association has advocated for accessible and affordable child care in Ontario. Sadly, the Ford Conservative government has met these requests

from ourselves and others 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 transfer promised funds to municipal service managers, therefore making it very difficult for them to pass on proper levels of funding to the frontline operator (Jones 2024).

- 4.06** The initial optimism that arose after the provincial government finally – and belatedly – signed on to the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) plan in March 2022 has waned, as the program has come under threat due to the Ford Conservative government’s refusal to reach sustainable funding agreements with providers (CBC News 2024a). Across Ontario, child care centres are contemplating closure as the provincial government refuses to provide the funds necessary to maintain operations (Yazdani 2023a; Khan 2023).
- 4.07** One of the critical, long-standing issues facing the sector is a staffing shortage, precipitated by low pay for workers. Carolyn Ferns, Policy Co-ordinator at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, describes the situation as a crisis that is only getting worse (Ferns and Powell 2023). The Ford government is well aware of the problem: internal government documents project a shortfall of 8,500 child care workers by 2026, continuing a trend that saw the workforce decrease by seven per cent between 2019 and 2021 (Jones 2023a). Although the government announced a wage-floor increase of \$3.86 per hour, advocates and experts say this is not nearly enough to stem the current trend or attract enough new individuals into the profession (Jones 2023a).
- 4.08** Added to the staffing shortage is an infrastructure gap. A report by the FAO estimates that the province will be more than 220,000 child care spaces short of meeting demand by 2026 (Jones 2024). 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).
- 4.09** 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.

- 4.10** 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 are at risk of closing (Simon et al 2022).
- 4.11** 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.
- 4.12** 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 a phase-in of fully-publicly funded child care, co-ordinated with the creation of licensed child care spaces sufficient to meet demand, while also addressing recruitment and retention issues through measures such as providing a living wage to early childhood educators.**
- 4.13 Employment and Economic 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 improve our social safety net accordingly, our economy and society are at risk.
- 4.14** Juxtaposed against workers' struggles is the exorbitant pay enjoyed by Canadian company CEOs, which in 2022 reached record levels. In that year, Canada's 100 highest-paid CEOs made 246 times more than the average worker wage in Canada – and it took these CEOs only eight hours to achieve the average *annual* income of a Canadian worker. This growing gap between workers and CEOs has led economist

David Macdonald to characterize Canada as having entered a “New Gilded Age” (Macdonald 2024).

4.15 We must confront rampant inequality with aggressive and progressive government policy. And while we should strive to improve the lives and compensation of all workers, we must continue to recognize persistent and historical factors that impact different workers in different ways.

4.16 *Addressing Employment Equity*

Women, racialized workers, Indigenous Peoples, and other equity-deserving groups, continue to confront disproportionate disadvantages in society and the economy. In 2022, employees who identify as women, aged 25 to 54, earned 13 per cent less per hour, on average, than their male counterparts – a gap that widened by 1.9 per cent compared to last year (Ontario Pay Equity Office 2023). In other words, women in this age group earned \$0.87 for every dollar earned by men – this disparity is even greater for racialized women, women who are newcomers to Canada, women with disabilities, Indigenous women, and transgender women (Drolet 2022; Ontario Pay Equity Office 2023).

4.17 At the same time, the unemployment rate gap between racialized and non-racialized workers has widened. Data reveal that, in Ontario, the unemployment rate for racialized workers is 7.3 per cent, compared to 4.8 per cent among non-racialized workers (Statistics Canada 2024). Within the racialized worker population in Ontario, those identifying as being from Arab or Black population groups experienced the highest rates of unemployment – 11.6 and 9.3 per cent, respectively (Statistics Canada 2024).

4.18 The recent release of the federal government’s Employment Equity Act Review Task Force report highlighted a number of structural and systemic barriers faced by workers from equity-deserving and Indigenous groups within federally-regulated workplaces (ESDC 2023a). Along with a series of recommendations, the report proposed a framework for next steps, centred on three pillars: implementation through barrier removal, meaningful consultations, and regulatory oversight.

- 4.19** While the federal government has taken an important step in the right direction, in Ontario the government has moved backwards. In 2018, the Ford government repealed Bill 148, which had introduced a series of labour reforms based on the *Changing Workplaces Review* – a multi-year, multi-sector consultation (Crawley and Janus 2018). **The Ford government should immediately re-engage a review of Ontario workplaces, and adopt the necessary changes to labour legislation that would remove structural barriers to participation and ensure equity in all Ontario workplaces.**
- 4.20** *Poverty and Food Insecurity*
Closely related to employment equity are the interconnected issues of poverty and food insecurity. Catholic teachers see this reality in our classrooms, as students from families of lower socio-economic status disproportionately come to school hungry – a factor that has knock-on effects for student learning (Anisef, et al. 2017).
- 4.21** In a province as wealthy as Ontario, poverty – and especially child poverty – should not be an issue. Nevertheless, Ontario’s child poverty rate stands at a staggering 13.4 per cent, with more than a half a million children living in poverty – with racialized children experiencing a higher poverty rate than non-racialized children (Campaign 2000 2023; Statistics Canada 2022; Robinson, Tranjan, and Oliveira 2021).
- 4.22** As a direct consequence of this, food insecurity has reached an all-time high. Feed Ontario reports that more than 800,000 adults and children accessed a food bank in Ontario in 2023, an increase of 38 per cent compared to 2022, and a 60 per cent increase compared to pre-pandemic usage levels (Feed Ontario 2023).
- 4.23** The government must immediately address this ongoing crisis. The first step is to acknowledge the interconnectivity of factors that exacerbate conditions that create and perpetuate poverty: from the devaluing of women’s work to employment inequity between racialized and non-racialized populations to a weakened social safety net.

4.24 The Ford government must dedicate its efforts to creating decent jobs with higher wages, improving employment standards, ensuring better and more affordable access to education and training, redressing economic and employment inequities, and bolstering the province’s social safety net. At the same time, **the government should also invest in programs and initiatives, such as school breakfast and nutrition programs, that assist families who face challenges in providing children with healthy daily meals.** We have the resources and capacity to make a difference. As the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) concludes in a report on poverty in Ontario, “There should be no poverty in the midst of plenty” (Robinson, Tranjan and Oliveira 2021).

4.25 A Robust Social Safety Net

The continued inadequacy of Ontario’s social safety net demands far more than what has been provided to-date by the Ford Conservative 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.

4.26 *Strengthening Social Assistance*

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 the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW).**

4.27 The government lauded itself when, in May 2022, following intense public pressure, it announced a five per cent increase to ODSP rates, which worked out to roughly \$60 per month to those earning the maximum benefits. The government also praised itself for a promise to tie future increases to inflation.

4.28 However, it is worth remembering that the Ford Conservative government dramatically slashed ODSP rates after coming to office, and then froze those rates at the 2018 level for five years (Amin 2021). The result, according to the ODSP Action Coalition, is that rates are 40 per cent below the poverty line – and to this

day remain below the value of the 2018 level, when adjusted for inflation (Statistics Canada 2024a; DeClerq and O'Brien 2023).

- 4.29** A similar dynamic is evident in the Ford government's approach to OW. Almost 30 years ago, in 1995, then-Premier Mike Harris made historic and deep cuts to OW, slashing the program by 21.6 per cent, to a meagre \$520 per month for recipients.
- 4.30** As low and insufficient as this figure was, had OW simply maintained inflation at that base amount, it would today provide \$940 per month (Statistics Canada 2024a) – this would be \$207 *more* than the current Ford government rate of \$733 per month (Stapleton 2024).
- 4.31** Asked recently about his government's approach to social assistance at an Empire Club of Canada event, Premier Ford offered the following remarks: "What drives me crazy is people on Ontario Works – probably 3-400,000 [people] – that are healthy. It really bothers me that we have healthy people sitting at home, collecting *your* hard-earned dollars. We need to encourage them to contribute back to the province and find gainful employment" (Hauen 2023).
- 4.32** These breathtakingly insensitive comments betray an ignorance of the multilayered realities of poverty. In Ontario, in 2023, the average price for an individual seeking to rent a single room was \$1,040 per month (Freeman 2023). Even if one could find a better rate or cheaper location, one would still need to take into account the costs of food, clothing, transit, communications devices, and other personal expenses that are necessary prerequisites to be able to *look* for work and attend interviews. It is difficult to imagine how a person could meet these costs and expenses on the current OW rate of \$733 per month.
- 4.33** Taken together, the current maximum allowance for OW and ODSP (\$1,308 per month) does not go nearly far enough 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 doubled from 19 months to three years between 2009 and 2018 (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2018).

- 4.34** To make matters worse, the federal government’s introduction of the Canada Disability Benefit in 2022 has led the Ford Conservative government to contemplate an ODSB claw-back. Leaked government documents from a transition binder – when MPP Michael Parsa took over from MPP Merrilee Fullerton as Ministry of Social Services in 2023 – included a note that mused, “Some announced federal programs and initiatives could help to mitigate costs [to ODSP], depending on how they are implemented” (Mulligan and Bond 2023).
- 4.35** 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.
- 4.36** **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.** As well, **the government should revisit its premature cancellation of the Basic Income Pilot.**
- 4.37** **The Ford Conservative 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.**

4.38 *Meeting the Needs of Ontarians with Disabilities*

There are approximately 2.9 million Ontarians, aged 15 or older, currently living with one or more disability – representing one of the largest population categories in the province (Donovan 2023). As codified by several pieces of legislation – namely, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) – persons with disabilities are entitled to equal rights and opportunities, and freedom from discrimination (Government of Ontario 2005; OHRC 2023).

4.39 Nevertheless, persons with disabilities continue to face considerable barriers, both structural and explicit. A 2021 survey from Ipsos found that more than 75 per cent of respondents with disabilities reported negative experiences in their daily interactions and engagement with various services (Ipsos 2021). These negative experiences, which result from systemic barriers and persistent discrimination, manifest in a variety of ways.

4.40 For instance, a disproportionate number of persons with disabilities are underemployed or unemployed relative the general population. According to Statistics Canada, in 2022 the unemployment rate for Canadians living with disabilities was 6.9 per cent, nearly double the rate for those who do not live with disabilities (Statistics Canada 2023b). Evidence suggests that this disparity is due, in part, to unmet workplace accommodation, as well workplace discrimination in the form of attitudinal prejudices (Statistics Canada 2023b).

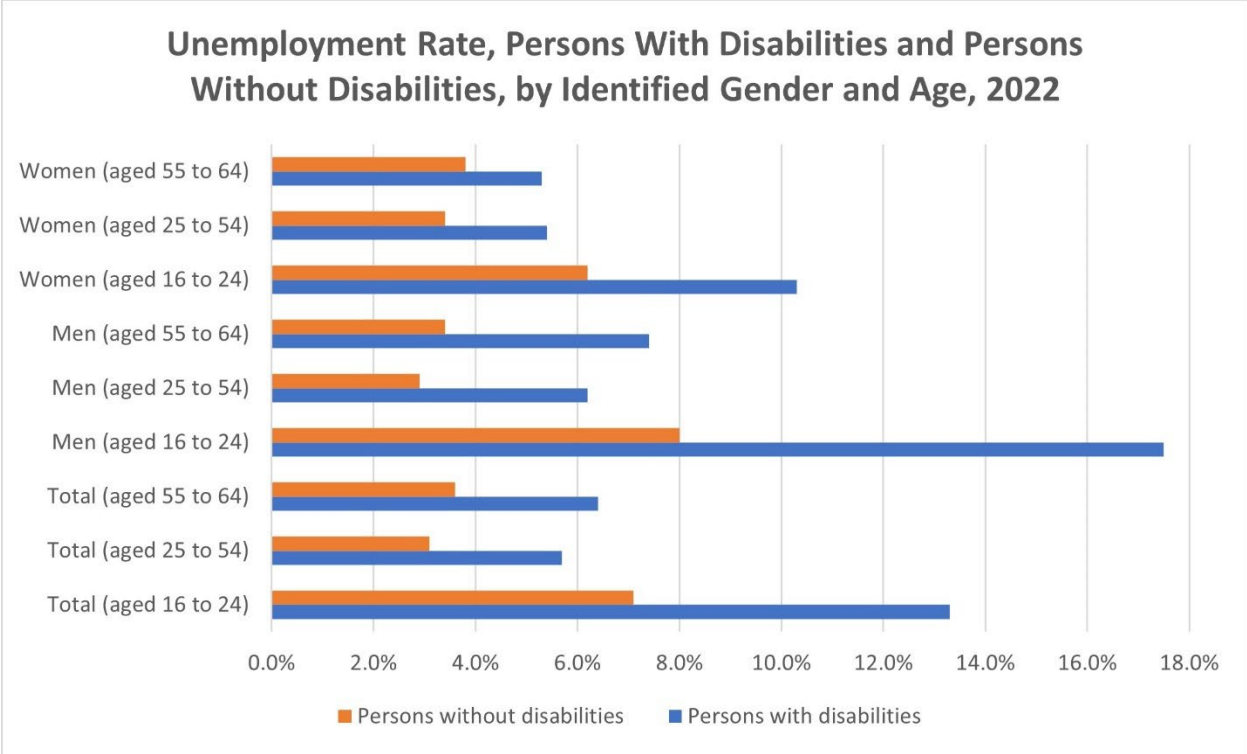


Figure 5- Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey; Canadian Income Survey; Labour Market and Socio-economic Indicators.

- 4.41** Despite a legal obligation to ensure the rights and opportunities of persons with disabilities, the Ford Conservative government has fallen well short of fulfilling its responsibilities.

- 4.42** In 2022, the government appointed Rich Donovan, Chair of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Alliance, to review the AODA and offer recommendations – the fourth such review of the legislation, which is required by Ontario’s accessibility laws. Delivering the final report in June 2023, Donovan presented a damning indictment of the Ford government’s inaction on this critical topic.

- 4.43** The report is clear that Ontario has reached a “crisis state” and the government has failed its obligation to make Ontario accessible. In fact, the report says it is a “near certainty” that the Ford government will miss its legally mandated target of ensuring accessibility by 2025. To address the situation immediately, the report proposes 23 tactical recommendations, categorized by four themes:
 - 1.** Research
 - 2.** Tools and Mechanisms for Behavioural Change

3. Mobilizing Government Actions

4. Built Environment

As the report makes clear, any further delays to implementation will pose “unacceptable risk” to the province (Donovon 2023).

- 4.44** Faced with such a scathing report and urgent call to action, the Ford Conservative government chose to hide the report for almost six months, ignoring appeals for its release and denying Freedom of Information requests on the questionable grounds of cabinet privilege (Loriggio 2023). Ultimately, the Ford government waited until after the legislature recessed for winter break, and quietly posted the report without an accompanying press release (Balintec 2023).
- 4.45** These are not the actions of a government that is sincere or dedicated to addressing issues faced by persons with disabilities. Catholic teachers **urge the government to immediately accept and act upon the recommendations in the Independent 4th Review of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act**. Furthermore, **the government must take all measures necessary to ensure AODA compliance by the target date of 2025, so that all Ontarians with disabilities enjoy equal rights and opportunities, and freedom from discrimination.**
- 4.46** *Ensuring Affordable Housing*
The topic of housing has become a controversial “political football” in recent times, but the facts are clear: Ontario, and Canada broadly, is in the midst of a housing crisis (DeClerq 2023a). In Ontario, policy expert Mike Moffatt speculates that to satisfy demand and account for population projections, 1.5 million homes will need to be built over the next decade – more than double the build rate over any 10-year period in the province’s history (BNN Bloomberg 2023).
- 4.47** For its part, the Ford government has not done nearly enough to meet citizens’ needs. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), there were a total of 85,770 housing starts in the province in 2023. This represents a seven per cent drop from the previous year, and well short of the government’s goal of 110,000 new housing starts (CMHC 2024).

- 4.48** The government’s preferred solutions, to date, have involved backroom deals to enrich developers, rather than a comprehensive plan to improve housing density and affordability. The situation is only growing more acute. With housing costs increasing, but wages and social assistance rates remaining stagnant, individuals are being forced to expend greater – and unsustainable – portions of their income to housing. This creates knock-on effects, increasing reliance on various forms of social assistance such as food banks and other food charities, which in turn strains these organizations’ ability to meet Ontarians’ needs (Fisher 2023).
- 4.49** This issue is particularly acute for women, and even more so for single mothers with infants or children, who are often forced to subsist on an unsatisfactory income due to maternity leave rates, or social assistance plans that do not meet basic costing needs.
- 4.50** The *National Housing Strategy Act* clearly states that adequate, safe housing is a fundamental human right. It is **incumbent upon the Ford Conservative government to work with all levels of government to address the supply issues as part of the housing crisis**. However, as they do so, **the government must also pay attention to ensuring the availability of “deeply affordable housing”** – defined as housing that is affordable to those earning up to 30 per cent of the area’s median income for rentals, and 80 per cent of the area’s median income for homes that are owned.
- 4.51** As part of any holistic solution to the housing crisis, the government must also consider greater protections for renters. As housing prices have skyrocketed, so too have rental prices. In 2019, economist David Macdonald from the CCPA calculated the minimum hourly wage that a person would need to earn in order to comfortably afford renting a one- and two-bedroom apartment in various Ontario cities – using the standard benchmark of dedicating no more than 30 per cent of one’s salary toward housing. (Macdonald 2019). The chart below uses Macdonald’s calculations as a basis, adjusting the figures for inflation to find the equivalent value in 2023-dollars.

City	One-bedroom	Two-bedroom
Toronto	\$32.19	\$39.11
Ottawa	\$24.71	\$30.27
Barrie	\$25.46	\$29.71
Oshawa	\$26.07	\$27.81
Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo	\$23.45	\$27.76
Kingston	\$22.49	\$26.79
Hamilton	\$22.04	\$26.44
Guelph	\$23.07	\$25.82
London	\$19.57	\$24.44
Peterborough	\$20.45	\$24.04
Greater Sudbury	\$19.08	\$23.48
Thunder Bay	\$18.55	\$23.14
St. Catherines-Niagara	\$19.44	\$23.12
Belleville	\$20.48	\$22.92
Brantford	\$20.09	\$22.36
Windsor	\$17.23	\$20.43

4.52 There are two points worth noting. First, in the time since Macdonald’s original study in 2019, rental prices across Ontario have increased dramatically; thus, the figures are likely to be even higher than those presented in the chart above. Second, with Ontario’s minimum wage currently at \$16.55 per hour, it is clear that many people are struggling to afford rent (Karim 2023; Ferreira 2022). This issue is not isolated to younger workers – in the past two decades, the percentage of Ontario workers 25 years and older who earn minimum wage has more-than-doubled, and this group represents almost 13 percent of the labour force (Statistics Canada 2019).

4.53 There are significant consequences that result from unaffordable rent prices – individuals are being displaced from their communities; some are forced to commute many hours between home and work; and in extreme situations, some are being priced out entirely of the ability to afford rent, and are left unhoused (ACTO 2018). There are a number of actions the government should take to

address this issue – first among these, **the Ford government should immediately reverse its decision to eliminate rent control and commit to strengthening protections for renters, especially those from lower-income families.**

4.54 *Addressing the Rise of Hate*

There has been a steep rise in incidents of hate and the polarization of societies in recent years, both globally and within Canada. In 2023, the Ontario government reported a 20 per cent increase in hate-related crimes over the previous year, and a recent poll conducted on behalf of Public Policy Forum found that, among Canadian youth, “ideological polarization” was the top-ranked fear for the future – overtaking climate change, a health crisis, and economic anxieties (Ontario Newsroom 2024a; Ling 2023).

4.55 There are a number of complicated and intersecting factors at play in the growth and spread of societal divisions – from shifts in political discourse and the factions within political parties, to the evolving ecosystems of news and social media, to the widening of economic inequities; to the psycho-social affects of isolation exacerbated by the pandemic, and more (CBC News 2023a; Rana and Jeffrey 2023; Ling 2023). Regardless of cause, these divisions are creating real-world consequences.

4.56 While the so-called “Trucker Freedom Convoy” and attempt to occupy downtown Ottawa captured a majority of headlines, at a more grassroots level the effects of hate and polarization are spilling over into the school environment, threatening the safety of students, teachers, and staff. At several points throughout the year, protests and counterprotests erupted on or near school grounds across the province. Ostensibly framed around “protecting children from indoctrination and sexualization” – in truth, these protests were led by far-right individuals who were opposed to school policies and practices that support 2SLGBTQIA+ students (Rosen 2023; Carter 2023; CBC News 2023b).

4.57 Thankfully, these events have not yet resulted in serious violence; however, they have produced heightened tensions, unsafe environments for students and staff,

and have led to a number of arrests – including of one protestor who was charged with possession of a weapon (Carter 2023).

- 4.58** In such moments, people often turn to elected officials for leadership. Sadly, rather than speak against hate and polarization, Premier Ford has fanned the flames of division. In September, speaking at the annual “Ford Fest” party, the premier appealed to his far-right base by accusing school boards and teachers of “indoctrinating” students, for the act of protecting students’ right to use gender pronouns of their choice (Teitel 2023). The premier’s comments were shameful, disrespectful, and potentially harmful – they also demonstrated a breathtaking lack of awareness of the critical role teachers play in creating safe spaces for the students we serve.
- 4.59** However, these comments were not accidental. By specifically using the language of “indoctrination,” the premier was drawing on a strategic approach popularized by right-wing elements in the United States, which is designed to discredit and de-professionalize teachers, and justify funding cuts. A host of US Republican politicians have adopted this tactic (Müller 2023).
- 4.60** For instance, Florida’s Republican Governor Ron DeSantis vowed to curb “woke indoctrination” and accused educators of using tax dollars to teach students “to hate our country or to hate each other.” And while in office, former President Donald Trump chastised “radical left indoctrination” and declared that he would cut funding to any school that taught “critical race theory,” “transgender insanity” or “any other inappropriate racial, sexual or political content” (Altschuler and Wippman 2023).
- 4.61** It would be easy to dismiss such language as rhetorical flourish. However, across America “woke indoctrination” is being used as the basis for sweeping legislation that targets equity-deserving communities and attacks the teaching profession. Since 2020, legislators in 28 states have passed more than 70 bills that seek to control what teachers and students can say and do at school. At the local school board level, there have been countless waves of library purges, banned books, and subject-matter restrictions (Chait 2023). These are not idle threats – students have been suspended, and legal action against educators has been pursued for violating these laws.

- 4.62** Viewed in this light, not only are the premier’s comments patently false – and not only are they unjustified attacks against teachers – but they are also dangerous and potentially harmful to students and staff.
- 4.63** It cannot fall on the government alone to stem the rising tide of hate and polarization; however, they certainly have a vital role to play. **The Ford Conservative government must set the tone by renouncing the support of far-right groups and individuals who stand in opposition to human rights. The government must also commit to working with other political parties and stakeholders, in true and meaningful consultation, and to improving their level of decorum in Ontario’s political discourse.**
- 4.64 Real Climate Action**
In discussing poverty and Ontarians’ livelihoods, the potential economic consequences of climate change cannot be ignored. One does not want to overemphasize moments in time, at the expense of broader trends, but it is worth noting that according to Environment Canada, December 2023 was the first time in recorded history that temperatures in the city of Toronto stayed above -5 C for the entire month. Taking a longer view, the two warmest winters in Ontario’s recorded history have both occurred within the past eight years (Jiang 2024).
- 4.65** It is well past time for the government to take bold and comprehensive action on climate change. A strong, progressive climate change action plan, focusing on leveraging green technology to de-carbonize Ontario will require significant investment, and changes 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.
- 4.66** 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. Having failed in their attempt to oppose the federal government’s carbon pricing plan, the Ford government will enjoy a windfall of \$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.

4.67 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.

5. CONCLUSION

5.01 It is difficult to identify any area in which Ontarians' lives have improved under the Ford Conservative government. The government's consistent attacks on public services and public sector workers have wrought havoc on the critical systems that all Ontarians rely upon. Chronic underfunding has left us with a health care system in crisis, a publicly funded education system that has been weakened, and a social safety net that has frayed to the breaking point – all the while, life has become less affordable.

5.02 None of these would make for effective campaign slogans as the next provincial election, scheduled for 2026, begins to emerge over the horizon.

5.03 The majority of Ontarians share the same basic values and priorities: we want a healthy, prosperous, and sustainable society and economy in which everyone has a fair chance to participate. The government has a critical role to play in achieving these ends. A government that is truly "for the people" should keep *all* citizens in mind and focus on moving the province forward, not backward.

5.04 The 2024 budget is an opportunity for this government to build a better, fairer, and more prosperous Ontario. To finally 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. To re-evaluate its misguided priorities that have placed profits ahead of people.

5.05 How (and whether) the government answers this call will go a long way toward informing voting decisions in 2026. As of now, one thing is clear: Ontarians deserve better.

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