

# GRANTS FOR STUDENT NEEDS 2022–23

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## TO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION



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 offer input for the development of the 2022-23 Grants for Student Needs.
- 1.02** The government's Education Funding Guide for the 2022-23 school year begins by presenting a guiding principle: "All students deserve to have every opportunity to reach their full potential and succeed personally and academically, with access to rich learning experiences that provide a strong foundation of confidence that continues throughout their lives" (Ministry of Education 2021). Catholic teachers fully agree with this sentiment.
- 1.03** However, almost every action taken by the Ford government since coming to office has worked in direct opposition to this principle. Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the government raised class size averages in elementary and secondary schools; cut programming for students with special education needs; cancelled Indigenous curriculum writing projects and anti-discrimination initiatives; implemented mandatory online learning credits for high school students, reducing vital in-person interaction with teachers by hundreds of hours; and cut more than \$1 billion from the education budget, while announcing a plan to freeze education spending over the medium term.
- 1.04** At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Association urged the government to abandon its ideologically-driven agenda, and to engage in meaningful consultation with frontline education professionals to ensure the safety of students and staff, and to address disruptions to student learning. Publicly, the Premier claimed "We're sparing nothing. Every idea possible, we're putting into the classrooms" (Arthur 2020). Sadly, this has proven to be little more than empty rhetoric.
- 1.05** Now, into our third school year under the cloud of COVID-19, the government's response can best be characterized as insufficient, belated, and oftentimes misleading. For instance, last year the government claimed to have spent "up to \$1.3 billion" to support school reopening. However, an interrogation of budget documents revealed that, in reality, the provincial government put forward only

\$413 million in additional funding – the remainder was provided by the federal government and by school boards, which were authorized to spend their reserve funding, if able. Essentially, as one school board chair put it, the government forced boards to “rob Peter to pay Paul” (Tranjan 2020; Wallace 2020).

- 1.06** This current school year has seen more of the same inadequacy and inaction from the government. The 2021 provincial budget revealed a \$1.3 billion cut to school funding (Ministry of Finance 2021). More recently, an additional \$500 million was unaccounted for in the fall economic statement (Ministry of Finance 2021a). When pressed to explain whether the missing half-billion dollars was a new funding cut, the Minister of Education could offer no explanation (Herhalt 2021). And, as reported by the Financial Accountability Office, over the next 10 years the Ontario government is planning to spend \$12.3 billion less on publicly funded education than what is needed in order to keep up with population growth, price inflation, and infrastructure needs (FAO 2021).
- 1.07** After suffering the longest in-person learning disruptions in North America, Ontario’s students need a learning recovery program that focuses on individual attention and student well-being. Instead, the government has doubled-down on the disastrous hybrid learning model, and mused openly about expanding online learning and privatizing aspects of publicly funded education in order to generate profit (PressProgress 2021).
- 1.08** The consequences of the government’s approach to publicly funded education are significant. While cuts and chronic underfunding negatively impact all students, they disproportionately affect students from vulnerable and equity-deserving populations, including those with special education needs; social, emotional, and mental health concerns; English as a second language learners; and students from families among lower socio-economic groups. The Ford government’s ill-conceived policies – such as mandatory online learning – have widened these inequalities and exacerbated disparities between students from traditionally high-performing and traditionally low-performing groups (Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin et al. 2020).
- 1.09** At the same time, the government’s refusal to implement health and safety measures called for repeatedly by medical and public health experts has increased

the risk posed to everyone in the school environment. At the time of writing, there have been more than 6,000 school-related COVID-19 cases this school year (Ministry of Education 2021a). In addition, schools have accounted for nearly 40 per cent of COVID-19 outbreaks in Ontario (Ontario 2021). Meanwhile, learning conditions for students continue to be negatively affected by school reorganizations, insufficient resources, and school boards' continued reliance on the hybrid model.

- 1.10** As we look ahead to the post-pandemic world, it is crucial that we take the opportunity to reset and reinvest in the long-term health and prosperity of our province – this must include addressing the significant learning loss and mental health challenges that students will be facing as a result of COVID-19-related disruptions (Gallagher-Mackay 2020; Alphonso 2021). Ontario's publicly funded education system is one of the best in the world, and teachers and education workers have done everything possible to maintain the highest quality of learning for all students. But the Ford government's reckless cuts, focus on privatization, and refusal to work collaboratively with educators continues to threaten our schools, placing student success at risk.
- 1.11** As the provincial budget and education funding formula are developed for next year, it is imperative that the Ford government prioritize publicly funded education and do what is necessary to make schools as safe, welcoming, and productive as possible.

## **2. EDUCATION FOR ALL**

### **2.01 Consultation and Collaboration**

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

- 2.02** As the frontline workers in the field of education, teachers possess firsthand knowledge and experience of how education policy works in the classroom, and

which practices and methods are most conducive to student success. Genuine consultations with teacher unions and other education stakeholders could help to guide decisions about education policy in a way that would minimize disruption for students and ensure positive outcomes over the long run.

- 2.03** Unfortunately, the government has chosen a much less constructive route. Since they came to office, the Ford government has been developing policies with little understanding of how publicly funded schools in Ontario actually work, and a disregard for the perspectives of the professionals who work in schools every day. In the case of reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, our Association has been trying since March 2020 to engage the government in constructive dialogue about how to make schools as safe as possible while meeting the needs of all students, but our suggestions and proposals have been rejected at almost every turn. In some cases, meetings have been scheduled on very short notice, with little opportunity for serious conversation. And frequently, the government has made a disingenuous show of soliciting input, only calling in teachers' unions when decisions had already been made.
- 2.04** Following the government's announcement in July 2020 of its intention to de-stream the Grade 9 math curriculum, the Association urged the government to consult with educators to ensure that the proper resources and supports were in place to improve equity and diversity in Ontario's publicly funded schools, so such a program would not inadvertently exacerbate existing problems. No such collaboration occurred, and instead when a de-streamed math curriculum was released, its implementation was oversimplified, underfunded, and rushed, placing the success of destreaming in jeopardy.
- 2.05** International research has shown that a collaborative, professional relationship between governments and teachers' organizations is a key ingredient in successful education systems; it is still not too late for the Ford government to change their approach and avoid the chaos and confusion Ontarians have had to endure thus far (Schleicher 2020; Schleicher 2018). **Moving forward, it will be a far better use of everyone's time and resources for the government to engage in regular, open, and constructive dialogue with teachers and education workers, and to heed the advice of those on the frontlines of publicly funded education.**

## **2.06 Learning Recovery**

The Ford government's refusal to address COVID-19 and provide a safe and sustainable learning environment for Ontario students in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years led to the longest pandemic-related in-person learning disruption in North America, with students out of physical classrooms for more than 20 weeks (Barrett et al. 2021).

**2.07** The pandemic is not over. COVID-19, and the government's inadequate response, continues to be disruptive, negatively impacting student learning and well-being. While the 2021-22 school year has not been impacted by a province-wide disruption to in-person learning, individual schools and classrooms have been subject to COVID-19-related closures. Continued community spread also remains a factor, as students with COVID-19 symptoms are required to stay home, pending negative test results or self-isolation. These disruptions, although more localized, remain significant barriers to teachers and parents attempting to support learning recovery.

**2.08** According to research conducted by the Ontario COVID-19 Science Table, the effects of pandemic-related school disruptions have been unequal, disproportionately and negatively impacting "low-income families in which racialized and Indigenous groups, newcomers, and people with disabilities are overrepresented." The science table further raises concerns that students' learning loss, if not immediately addressed, may impact this generations' future economic productivity and earning potential (Barrett et al. 2021).

**2.09** For a robust learning recovery, the science table affirms the position of the World Bank and United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which calls on G20 countries to implement "explicit education recovery strategies, and for these strategies to be funded in addition to regular schooling budgets." The science table concludes that a successful learning recovery program must address "the long-term mental health, health, and education problems arising from COVID-19-related school closures" (Barrett et al. 2021).

**2.10** Any effective approach to learning recovery must be comprehensive, multi-year, and involve inclusive supports. Teachers will need opportunities to assess students, formally and informally, as guided by their professional judgement, to determine



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

**2.11** This is only the beginning. The Ford government cannot take a “wait-and-see” approach to learning recovery, as it did with its incomplete and inadequate 2021-22 back-to-school plan. As Catholic teachers have seen first-hand in the classroom, the government’s rushed planning, and lack thereof, only leads to massive confusion and disruption, negatively impacting student learning and mental health.

**2.12** To address learning loss and support a robust recovery focused on student success, **the government must invest in reduced class sizes, so students can get the focused, individual attention from teachers they need and the stable learning environment they deserve; more professional services and supports, to address learning loss and mental health needs; and immediate, substantial investments in school infrastructure and technology.**

**2.13 Class Size**

The Ford government was widely criticized for refusing to reduce class sizes in the 2020-21 school year to facilitate proper physical distancing and prevent the spread of COVID-19, something medical experts at the Hospital for Sick Children said should be a “priority strategy” for reopening schools (Ogilvie and Mendleson 2020).

**2.14** Doubling-down on this reckless approach, at the start of the 2021-22 school year, the Ford government voted unanimously against a motion to cap class sizes at 15 students, to protect the health and safety of everyone in the school environment (Taylor 2021). As a result, parents have reported their children being in classes of 30 to 40 students (Tsekouras 2021). The government’s continued refusal to address the issue of class size not only poses risks to health and safety, but also denies students crucial interaction with educators.

- 2.15** The benefits of smaller class sizes are well established. For example, after a thorough review of the research, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach (2014) of the US National Education Policy Center concluded, "Class size is one of the most-studied education policies, and an extremely rigorous body of research demonstrates the importance of class size in positively influencing student achievement." By contrast, no study currently exists that documents advantages for student learning that result from increasing class sizes.
- 2.16** In the most comprehensive and well known study, the Tennessee STAR project, assessment results consistently favoured those students who had been in small classes, with carryover effects lasting throughout their academic careers (Finn et al. 2001; Krueger and Whitmore 2000; Mosteller 1995). Reductions in class size have also been associated with improvements in students' psychological engagement with school, more positive reactions to teachers and peers, higher levels of interest and motivation, lower levels of boredom and anxiety, a greater sense of belonging, and more optimism and confidence (Dee and West 2011). There are also long-term socio-economic benefits associated with smaller class sizes, such as public savings in terms of lower health and welfare costs (Fredriksson, Öckert, and Oosterbeek 2011; Krueger 2003; Muennig and Woolf 2007).
- 2.17** While class size reductions are generally targeted toward primary students, these factors also point to the benefits of smaller classes for junior, intermediate, and secondary students, who are often dealing with a range of intellectual, social, and emotional challenges while struggling to develop "the skills of productive citizenry." All students need the time and attention of a dedicated teacher, which can only be guaranteed if class sizes are manageable (Wasley 2002).
- 2.18** The Ford government has pointed to jurisdictions in Canada with higher class size averages than Ontario as counterevidence to the benefits of smaller class sizes. However, it is important to note that collective agreements in British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec offset higher class size averages by ensuring additional supports/educators based on class composition. The fact is, reductions in class size since 2003 have resulted in Ontario achieving the highest four- and five-year graduation rates in the province's history, and Ontario's system of publicly funded education routinely ranks among the best in Canada and the world.

**2.19** As the next provincial election draws near, Ontarians will certainly not forget that the government previously increased class sizes in Grades 4 to 12 – and sought even greater increases in class size averages for secondary students – even though this idea had been overwhelmingly rejected in the government’s public consultation (Rushowy 2020; Dhanraj 2019). These have been troubling examples of the Ford government clearly prioritizing financial savings over student well-being.

**2.20** **As we look ahead with the goal of resetting post-pandemic, all students deserve the opportunity to interact with their peers in a safe and enriching environment, and to receive the individual attention they need to realize their full potential. It is more important than ever that the government commit to lowering class size averages in Ontario’s publicly funded schools.**

#### **2.21 Mental Health**

There are longstanding shortcomings in Ontario’s mental health system, particularly as it pertains to children and youth. Studies indicate that almost 20 per cent of students in Grades 7 to 12 in Ontario report their mental health as fair or poor, and the majority say they do not know where to turn for assistance (MHASEF Research Team 2015; Boak et al. 2017; Statistics Canada 2020). A 2020 survey conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health found that one-in-six Ontario students in Grade 7 to 12 had “seriously considered suicide,” and one-in-five had experienced “critical psychological distress” (CAMH 2020). More than 28,000 children and youth are waiting to access mental health services, more than double the estimated figure from three years ago. Many of these children and youth are having to turn to emergency services through clinics and hospitals (CMHO 2020; MHASEF Research Team 2017).

**2.22** The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified and exacerbated these issues. In a recent study of 2,700 participants ranging in age from two to 18 years old, conducted by the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids), researchers identified that heightened levels of depression and anxiety among children and youth seen at the start of the pandemic has persisted (SickKids 2021). The study concludes that the pandemic has contributed to a “sustained negative impact on the mental health of Ontario children, youth, and their families.”

**2.23** Sadly, the impact of mental health challenges have not been felt equally. Research shows that families who were already vulnerable prior to the pandemic – for example

those with lower household income and parental education rates – have been “disproportionately impacted by economic hardship as a result of the pandemic, such as job loss and food insecurity” (SickKids 2021). These consequences have been accompanied by higher rates of child abuse, neglect, physical inactivity, and instances of anxiety and depression (Carpenter 2020; Pringle 2020). **The government must acknowledge the relationship between mental health and equitable student outcomes. All mental health interventions should be culturally responsive and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of students.**

- 2.24** Parents and teachers have also expressed concerns about the amount of time young people are spending with electronic devices rather than peers. Researchers from SickKids found that “increased time on screens had a wide-ranging impact on the mental health of children and youth” (Fahmy 2021; McGinn 2020; SickKids 2021). The Ford government has only made this problem worse by expanding online learning, and promoting school boards’ adoption of the failed hybrid model.
- 2.25** The Ford government has not done nearly enough to address the mental health crisis facing school-aged children in Ontario. While the government contends it is building a modern, comprehensive mental health and addictions system, with planned investments of \$3.8 billion over 10 years, it is worth noting that the per-year planned funding is *less* than the annual amount promised by the previous government.
- 2.26** The government must also grapple with the realization that its actions – and inaction – have contributed to a deterioration of student mental health. Experts have highlighted that keeping schools open safely to in-person learning is a critical factor in promoting student well-being, as it enables teachers and education workers to provide the individual attention and holistic social, emotional, and academic supports necessary to best realize student success (CMHO 2021). However, the Ford government’s refusal to prioritize health and safety throughout the first two school years of the pandemic led to Ontario suffering the longest school closures of any jurisdiction in North America, with detrimental consequences to student mental health and well-being (CMHO 2021; SickKids 2021).
- 2.27** As we prepare to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, and to support the mental health needs of students, Catholic teachers recommend that the government

immediately and dramatically **enhance investments into mental health services in schools, and expand school-based resources, supports, and services. This should include funding to support ongoing mental health-related professional development opportunities for educators, as well as the hiring of additional mental health professionals, including social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, child and youth workers, and school mental health workers.**

- 2.28** Providing supports in schools, where children and youth already spend much of their time, can help reduce stigma, connect students to their communities, and deliver more responsive, cost-effective service. **Annual funding for Student Mental Health Ontario must be increased in a manner that reflects sustainability and long-term needs.**
- 2.29** Of course, geographic and demographic needs will need to be considered to ensure that no regions or populations are disadvantaged. For the most efficient and effective services, **there should be co-ordination between the Ministry of Education and other ministries, further exploration of the community hub model, and regular consultation with the representatives of frontline teachers and education workers.**
- 2.30** 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 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The vast majority – including 99 per cent of OECTA members who completed the survey – do not feel they are being supported by the Ministry of Education as they cope with these struggles.
- 2.31** In addition to **targeting mental health resources specifically for teachers**, the government can learn from its failure to engage in genuine consultation with frontline workers, the pattern of last-minute decision-making, and the open antagonism with regard to synchronous learning and teachers' professional judgment. The government should also **ensure that school administrators**

**are honouring teachers' contractual rights to access sick leave for mental health issues, including investigating the reasons for, and redressing, the shortage of qualified occasional teachers.**

### **2.32 Online/Hybrid Learning**

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

**2.33** Research conducted throughout the pandemic confirmed concerns expressed by OECTA and experts, including how online learning was having a disproportionate negative impact on "students of colour from low-income households," and how the platform "is producing new geographies of inequality" in which only a minority of students succeed (Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin, Wyatt, and Le 2020; OECTA 2020; Farhadi 2019; Jackson 2020). However, as the pandemic has worn on, several new and insidious developments have come to light.

**2.34** The first issue concerns the government's expansion of online learning as a means by which to pursue privatization. In July 2020, the government amended the *Ontario Educational Communications Authority Act*, which empowered the Minister of Education with greater authority over entities that provide distance learning education, such as TVO/TFO. At the time, the Association made clear that, in theory, this change could bring arms-length entities under the control of the government and allow for the expansion of distance or e-learning well beyond anything related to the COVID-19 emergency.

**2.35** Subsequently, a confidential Ministry of Education Memo obtained by the *Globe and Mail* confirmed that the government was considering legislation that would make remote learning permanent for all grades in publicly funded schools, beyond the pandemic (Alphonso 2021a). The leaked documents proposed to make TVO/TFO responsible for developing content for online courses, as well as for maintaining the course catalogue that students would access centrally. Further, the documents proposed to task TVO/TFO with creating a "global development strategy to market Ontario online courses... [to] generate revenue."

- 2.36** While legislation has not been pursued since this news emerged, the spectre of expanding online learning and pursuing a privatization scheme would be disastrous. Students would lose out on the benefits of in-person learning, including vital interactions with teachers, education workers, and other students. Inequality would increase and learning gaps would widen, especially among students with special education needs or those from vulnerable and equity-deserving communities. This would also lead to an erosion of Ontario’s world-class publicly funded education system and represent a backward step toward realizing student success.
- 2.37** A second development that threatens the student learning experience is the so-called hybrid model. The hybrid model was adopted originally by several Ontario school boards in 2020 as an “emergency response” to the COVID-19 pandemic, to meet the synchronous remote learning requirement under Policy/Program Memorandum 164 (Ministry of Education 2020). Even at the time, the movement to a hybrid model was the result of a lack of adequate funding from the government to allow school boards to establish online-only schools (Farhadi 2020).
- 2.38** Since its adoption, the reckless funding cuts pursued by the Ford government have forced an increasing number of school boards to turn to this fractured model of learning, to the detriment of students and teachers. When teachers are forced to split their attention between students in-class and online, it compromises the learning experience for everyone.
- 2.39** Research has clearly established in-person instruction as the ideal and most equitable model of learning for students (Cornelius-White 2007), as well as the negative impact online/hybrid learning has on student engagement (Maimaiti et al. 2021). The Minister of Education has admitted this publicly (OHRC 2020; TVO 2020).
- 2.40** At the same time, studies show that the hybrid model disadvantages many students, and has a disproportionately negative impact on students with special needs, those with social and mental health concerns, English as a second language learners, and equity-deserving students. It also leaves behind students without high-quality internet or technology. All of this can exacerbate issues of student mental health and well-being, which have increased as a result of the pandemic (Wong 2021; Farhadi 2020; Farhadi 2021; Jalaluddin 2021).

- 2.41** Regardless of whether students are in-person or learning from home, they deserve the full attention of a dedicated teacher. **The government must immediately end the failed hybrid model, and provide funding necessary for in-person and online-only schools.**
- 2.42** In a related matter, the pandemic has also laid bare ongoing and significant issues with delivery infrastructure. Reliable broadband access remains uneven across the province, with northern and rural areas facing significant gaps in service. This has been compounded by several internet outages, even in urban areas (McKay 2021).
- 2.43** As well, many families in Ontario cannot afford high speed internet, or the technology required to access online courses (Butler 2020; CBC 2019). Pursuing online learning without providing corresponding additional funding to ensure equitable access will have a negative impact on the student learning experience. While there are decided advantages to in-person learning, **the government must provide predictable and ongoing funding to ensure that every student who needs it has access to their own electronic device. In addition, any educator required to deliver instruction remotely must be issued the technology and/or devices required for the task by their school board.**
- 2.44** As the government begins to think about the education sector beyond the current pandemic emergency, it will be essential to provide students and teachers with appropriate resources and supports to facilitate achievement. This includes **providing teachers who demonstrate interest with teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development opportunities related to online learning.**
- 2.45** In addition, **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. The government also should commit to studying the pandemic experience of online learning, to identify persistent structural gaps, and then address those gaps with adequate investments.**
- 2.46 Destreaming**  
Catholic teachers have always supported efforts to eliminate racism, discrimination, and all systemic barriers in our schools, and we will continue to advocate for action,



offering our perspectives on how to implement destreaming successfully (OECTA 2021).

- 2.47** Unfortunately, the government's announcements to-date regarding destreaming amount to little more than exercises in performative anti-discrimination policy. 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 risks jeopardizing the success of any destreaming efforts (Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education 2021).
- 2.48** To make matters worse, by simply ending applied-level courses and forcing students into academic-level subjects, as the government announced in a memo to school boards, there are questions as whether the government is using destreaming as a means to make further funding cuts to education, and potentially increase class sizes. If the government is to take destreaming seriously, there are several considerations to bear in mind.
- 2.49** First, because destreaming has been presented as a means of eliminating inequity in publicly funded schools, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized and equity-deserving students, it is important to acknowledge that destreaming alone will not eradicate some of the other causes of disadvantage, such as poverty and racial discrimination in the wider community. Destreaming should be part of a broader discourse on equity and inclusion, including wide-ranging educational reforms (Jakubowski et al. 2016; OECD 2010). This should involve a variety of supports, funded properly by the government, for students who are experiencing learning gaps in destreamed classes, as well as other measures to address inequities, such as through the Learning Opportunities Grant.
- 2.50** The government must also acknowledge that a transition toward destreaming will require appropriate teacher-led professional development opportunities, resources, release time, and other supports to ensure we are providing the best possible learning environment for all students. It will also be necessary to consider a range of associated factors that could undermine destreaming efforts, such as class size and composition, where research indicates that smaller class sizes better allow

teachers to provide individual attention and differentiated instruction for all students (Fogliato 2017).

**2.51** Ultimately, the success of any destreaming policy will depend in no small measure on the government's willingness to engage in immediate, meaningful, and consistent consultation with education stakeholders. Any endeavours to write curriculum, support documents, or policy should be done in collaboration with teachers, who are the frontline workers tasked with delivering curriculum, and teacher unions. At the same time, there must be a focused effort on expanding current societal attitudes toward ideal educational outcomes, as well as greater student and parental understanding of the full range of post-secondary pathways.

**2.52 The Ministry of Education must provide a robust suite of supports and community engagement to promote success. Mental health and wellness must be a centrepiece of this approach. This will require the hiring of additional resource teachers, educational assistants, special education supports, social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, and culturally responsive counsellors.**

**2.53 The government must also provide funding for professional development, support resources, release time, and other supports needed to transition to full implementation.**

**2.54 The government must engage education partners in sustained, meaningful consultation and collaboration in developing destreaming policy and rewriting curriculum documents.**

**2.55 Special Education**

For some time, schools across the province have been experiencing difficulty providing for all students' special education needs. It has been reported that more than 80 per cent of school boards are spending more on special education than they are allotted by the province, and some students are being asked to stay home because their school is unable to provide appropriate services and supports on a daily basis (McQuigge 2018; Rushowy and Ferguson 2015).

**2.56** 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 school and 77:1 in secondary school (People for Education 2019).

- 2.57** Across the province, because school boards are reluctant to go through the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) process, students often go far too long without their learning needs being acknowledged. Given the frequent disruptions to in-person learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the backlog of students waiting to begin the IPRC process has increased. Students do not get the proper interventions while they are awaiting identification, and it is more difficult to build new skills or change attitudes when identification finally happens (OECTA 2020). As such, additional resources will be required to ensure all students are able to begin the IPRC process in a timely manner.
- 2.58** The COVID-19 pandemic has had a unique impact on students with special education needs. Studies indicate that there has been a significant disruption to the education of these students (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021), and that they have faced particular challenges and anxieties, with advocates saying that students have not received the supports they need for either in-class or remote learning (OHRC 2020; Trick 2020). More broadly, while there is anecdotal evidence, there remains a lack of comprehensive data on the degree to which students with special education needs have had their learning disrupted by COVID-19.
- 2.59** If the Ford government is to address this issue, it will need to improve upon past performance. For example, the government previously drastically reduced a planned, long-needed increase to the Special Incidence Portion, which provides specialized staff and materials for high needs students. They also cut the Local Priorities Fund, only replacing it with the Supports for Students Fund after a lengthy struggle by OECTA and other education unions at the bargaining table. More recently, the government's fall economic statement made no mention whatsoever about additional funding to support students with special education needs.
- 2.60** The government has also put families of children with autism through an incredible ordeal, first announcing a widely condemned move from a needs-based support system to a fixed amount, then walking back this decision but delaying implementation of the new program, leaving more than 27,000 children on the waitlist for services (MacMillan 2021; Waberi 2020; Sharkey 2019). In March, the

Ford government promised that by the end of 2021, there would be fewer than 8,000 children on the waitlist for needs-based autism programs. As of November, the list stands at more than 50,000 children, and counting (Turner 2021).

**2.61 As we look forward to a post-pandemic publicly funded education system, 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 will have occurred.**

**2.62 Safer Schools for All**

Over the past two years, the focus on health and safety in schools has been on the Ford government's inadequate efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and failure to ensure safe in-person learning. Despite calls from medical and public health experts, including robust recommendations from the Ontario Science Table and the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids), the Ford government has not implemented key school safety recommendations (Science, Thampi, and Bitnun, et al. 2021; SickKids 2020).

**2.63** Among these shortcomings, the government's current vaccination disclosure policy falls well short of what is needed. To provide the greatest level of protection to our students and communities, the Association, along with the affiliate Ontario teacher unions, have called on the Ontario government to implement a mandatory vaccination program in schools. We believe that everyone working in or attending a school, who is eligible and can be safely vaccinated, should be vaccinated. The government should introduce a mandatory vaccination program, which must include provisions that ensure that those who are unable to be vaccinated for medical or religious reasons receive all the required employment accommodations and are not disadvantaged in any way. Furthermore, following the recent announcement from public health officials that the COVID-19 vaccine has been deemed safe for use by children aged five to 11-years old (Tunney 2021), the government needs to add the COVID-19 vaccine to the list of required immunizations in the *Immunization of School Pupils Act*.

**2.64** As we look ahead to the 2022-23 school year, with widespread vaccination of staff and students, we must remember the significant challenges that existed before COVID-19. Of particular concern is the problem of violence against teachers and education workers. In our 2017 survey of classroom teachers, 85 per cent of

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

- 2.65** This has repercussions for everyone in the school community. More than three-quarters of OECTA survey respondents said violence in schools makes teaching more difficult, and more than a quarter have had to take time away from work due to the physical or mental toll of a violent incident (OECTA 2017).
- 2.66** Despite greater attention being paid to this problem over the past few years, and negotiated obligations requiring school administrators to report incidents of violence, we are still a long way from implementing the solutions outlined in our *Safer Schools for All* platform (OECTA 2017a).
- 2.67** The situation will only become more acute as more students return to in-person learning following the COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship between isolation, school closures, and mental health challenges among students has been well established (St. George et al. 2021; SickKids 2021). And during school closures, some students may not have had regular access to the mental health supports they require. As such, it is imperative that **the government provide resources and supports for more child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and other professional services to help students deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs.**
- 2.68** These investments will help students manage their behaviours and realize academic success in the short and long term, while enabling teachers, education workers, and the rest of the school community to focus on making learning happen in a safe and secure environment. **To ensure comprehensive and inclusive supports the government should be encouraging and facilitating collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services on a proactive, multi-faceted response that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of school violence.**

## **2.69 Infrastructure and Technology**

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

- 2.70** While the issue of school infrastructure is not a new problem, unfortunately the current government has done little to rectify the situation. In July 2020, the Minister of Education announced \$500 million toward refurbishing schools, as part of the government's 10-year, \$13 billion commitment. However, observers were quick to note that this was \$3 billion less than what the previous government had committed to spend over the same period (Benzie 2017), and well short of what is needed to keep pace with the repair backlog. The 2021 fall economic statement also revealed that the Ford government plans to reduce investments in school infrastructure by almost \$1 billion over the next two years.
- 2.71** Data also show a persistent lack of funding in technology, poor or uneven internet connectivity in schools, and insufficient access to technology-related professional development for teachers (People for Education 2019). A 2018 report by the Ontario Auditor General found that students' access to classroom technology varied widely across the province, as did the age of equipment and software.
- 2.72** 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 has revealed that school facilities are not well-positioned to respond to public health emergencies, with small, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate, dated, and substandard ventilation systems, where such systems exist. The government has partially recognized this situation, using a federal-provincial cost sharing program to earmark \$600 million for ventilation improvements, and promising standalone air-purifying (HEPA) units for classrooms without mechanical ventilation systems (Chidley-Hill 2021).
- 2.73** Unfortunately, as has been the case since the beginning of the pandemic, the government was not proactive and did not act quickly enough or use the time in

which physical facilities were closed to ensure the necessary ventilation upgrades. As a result, in many school boards, major ventilation upgrades were not ready for the start of the 2021-22 school year and, to date, remain outstanding (Mojtehdzadeh, Warren 2021). And while HEPA units have provided a stopgap, they cannot be relied upon as a long-term solution. **The government must act proactively and make the necessary investments to ensure that all schools have ventilation systems that meet the health and safety standards set by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers, effectively reducing the airborne spread of COVID-19.** To ensure that this process is transparent, the government must also institute a provincial standard for air quality measurements in schools, with publicly available metrics to indicate whether standards are being met.

- 2.74** Out-of-date and poorly maintained facilities, and technology that has not kept pace with students' educational needs, have an immediate and detrimental impact on the learning environment. Research has clearly established the relationship between school facility conditions, student academic achievement, and teacher effectiveness (Earthman 2002). Quite simply, no one should be forced to work or learn in buildings with leaking roofs, poor ventilation, mold, and other dangers. **The government must provide immediate, stable, and sufficient annual funding for infrastructure and repairs, new technology, as well as services and supports for all students, including those with special education and mental health needs.**

**2.75 Education Quality and Accountability Office**

Catholic teachers are concerned by the Ford government's decision to reinstate EQAO testing in Grades 3 and 6, and introduce revised math testing in Grade 9, for the 2021-22 school year. The COVID-19 pandemic is not over, and students are still suffering from the longest in-class learning disruption in North America. The government should be dedicating its attention and resources to the essential supports students and educators need for a robust learning recovery, not prematurely reintroducing EQAO testing and making overtures to "modernize it."

- 2.76** 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). Looking specifically at Ontario, recent research from international education expert Andy Hargreaves (2020) found that any supposed benefits of EQAO for monitoring progress and stimulating higher expectations for achievement “have been outweighed by the harmful consequences for broad excellence, equity and well-being.” He also found that teachers – the professionals who work directly with students in the classroom – were concerned about the effects of the testing not only on students’ health, but also on learning and innovation.

- 2.77** 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 our professional judgment to conduct assessments for, as, and of learning. We use the results of these assessments to modify our instruction and provide individual attention, as well as to complete provincial report cards (OTF 2017).
- 2.78** The tide was already turning against EQAO testing before the COVID-19 crisis arrived. 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. Unfortunately, the Ford government appears to have discarded this advice, in favour of an ideology that views standardized testing as inherently useful. Where once the Chair of the EQAO was a part-time position, the government created a full-time job and appointed a defeated Progressive Conservative election candidate to the role. This is on top of the costly bureaucracy at the Ministry of Education that exists to deal with EQAO initiatives. The government has also expanded the mandate of the agency to conduct hastily devised, poorly considered assessments for pre-service teachers, despite the fact that the EQAO itself found that “the fundamental goal of these tests – to improve student learning – is often not met” (EQAO 2019; Alphonso 2019).
- 2.79** 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 PISA and others.** This would produce statistically valid results at a fraction of the current costs, while reducing the level of student anxiety and allowing most teachers and students to remain focused on genuine learning activities and more meaningful classroom assessments.

## **2.80 Full-day Kindergarten**

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

**2.81** However, there are still some issues that are keeping the program from being fully effective for all students. For example, although the previous government took some action to address the problem, more still needs to be done to reduce the number of large and/or split Kindergarten and Grade 1 classes.

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

- 2.83** Research has shown that Ontario's FDK staff teams are uniting around the mission to support children and families (Pelletier 2014). Moreover, the current dynamic enables the teacher and ECE "to capitalize on children's individual needs and inquiries. They have the time to know their students very well and to identify problems and intervene early before a child becomes too frustrated and discouraged to try" (McCuaig 2019). Rather than disrupting this effective dynamic, the government should provide sufficient resources to ensure that a certified teacher and an ECE are present in all FDK classrooms at all times during the instructional day.
- 2.84** Comments made by the Minister of Education, with respect to ongoing child care negotiations between the provincial and federal governments, unfortunately suggest that the Ford government only sees FDK as a potential component of a federally subsidized national child care plan and an area of budget savings. FDK is not child care. It is a ground-breaking, world-leading education initiative that must be provincially funded through the education budget. FDK cannot be used as a bargaining chip with the federal government or viewed as a potential area to cut expenditures.
- 2.85** With the proper support, the investment in FDK will continue to pay dividends long into the future for students, families, the economy, and society. As we move toward a post-pandemic system of publicly funded education, **the government must continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise.**
- 2.86 Indigenous Education**  
The tragic discovery of unmarked graves at residential school sites across Canada in 2021, highlights the immediate need for the government to provide resources, supports, and curriculum updates to properly acknowledge the devastation that this country's residential school system has inflicted on Indigenous communities.
- 2.87** The 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission drew attention to a number of issues pertaining to Indigenous youth and education. While much of the focus has been on students attending on-reserve schools, it is important to note that in Ontario the majority of Indigenous students attend a provincially funded school. In fact, there are Indigenous students in almost every community: 92 per cent of elementary schools and 96 per cent of secondary schools have at least some Indigenous students (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013).

- 2.88** By now, most Ontarians recognize the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. In a 2019 survey, 81 per cent of elementary schools and 95 per cent of secondary schools reported having offered at least one Indigenous learning opportunity, a substantial increase from 2014 (People for Education 2019). However, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators still need support and resources to ensure they are properly reflecting Indigenous histories and knowledge in the classroom.
- 2.89** This is why Catholic teachers and others across Ontario were so disappointed that one of the government's first actions upon taking office was to abruptly pause planned curriculum resource writing sessions. And while the government has announced curriculum changes for the 2022-23 school year, which will see expanded Indigenous education in early grades, this important and essential learning for Ontario students is behind where it should be, had the Ford government prioritized Indigenous education.
- 2.90** There are also significant resource gaps in schools with high proportions of Indigenous students compared to other schools in the province, including lower than average access to guidance teachers, teacher-librarians, and music and physical education programs (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013). **These resource gaps must be overcome if we are going to address the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.**
- 2.91** The previous government was making significant steps in this regard, increasing funding and collecting data on a voluntary basis in order to provide appropriate programs and supports. The new government should not turn its back on these efforts, especially as the need will only become more urgent, given that Indigenous children are the fastest-growing child population segment in Canada (UNICEF Canada 2018). Integrating Indigenous students into their school communities and enabling them to realize their full potential will reduce marginalization and pay significant social and economic dividends over the long term (Sharpe and Arsenault 2010).
- 2.92** In the years prior to the current government taking office, the Indigenous Education Grant had increased substantially, in response to a nationwide call for a renewed effort toward reconciliation. But this government has shown time and again that this

is not an area of priority. After having been cut in the revised Grants for Student Needs for 2018-19, the grant has received only a modest increase over the past three years (Ministry of Education 2019, 2020a, 2021b).

- 2.93** And while the government did provide an additional \$2 million for Indigenous studies programs in the 2021-22 GSN, this is far below the investment necessary to redress current gaps within the Indigenous student population. Indigenous education is also an area that has been affected by the government's failure to recommit to the Local Priorities Fund. Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is one of the most urgent and fundamental issues for Ontarians. Rather than looking for areas to trim and save costs, the government should be actively supporting progress.

**2.94 Professional Development**

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

- 2.95** Unfortunately, the government has too often chosen to implement sweeping changes without providing teachers much-needed opportunities for professional learning. The revised elementary math curriculum provides a case-in-point. When the revised curriculum was announced, the Association and others called on the government to provide the appropriate time, resources, and supports necessary for teachers to understand and master the material (OTF 2020). Ideally, this would have involved structured, teacher-led professional development, including ongoing opportunities to meet with peers to collaborate, share classroom experiences and challenges, and refine methods over a period of at least two years (Wong 2020). Instead, the government insisted on implementing the curriculum in the middle of a pandemic, providing teachers with little-to-no guidance or professional learning supports.

- 2.96** Recent announcements regarding destreaming have followed a similar pattern. The Association has offered to provide its expertise to the government to ensure that destreaming efforts are accompanied by appropriate teacher-led professional

development opportunities, resources, and other supports to ensure we are providing the best possible learning environment for all students. But once again, these efforts have been rebuffed, with the government instead choosing to implement half-baked plans that are oversimplified, underfunded, and rushed.

- 2.97** Empirical and anecdotal research show that students thrive in environments where teaching strategies can be adapted to meet individual students' needs (Morgan 2014). It is therefore necessary that teachers be provided with teacher-led professional development opportunities on topics such as differentiated instruction, applying an equity lens to curriculum delivery, and more.
- 2.98** As the government ponders any additional future changes to curriculum, **it is imperative that resources be provided for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development – the most efficient and effective form of professional learning**. This will ensure that teachers' knowledge remains relevant and up-to-date, based on the current, job-embedded experiences of our colleagues, and designed to address the needs of our students (CEA 2015; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995).
- 2.99 English Language Learners**
- Currently, funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) programs is based on census data and immigration statistics. While these figures provide an estimate, they do not accurately reflect English Language Learners' needs based on actual proficiency. This problem was noted 15 years ago by the Education Equality Task Force, which also condemned the inadequacy of the duration of supports, a sentiment echoed more recently by the Auditor General of Ontario (2017).
- 2.100** The current funding formula also "fails to recognize the additional costs associated with higher densities of ESL needs in areas with high levels of immigration," while a lack of oversight and transparency mechanisms means some school boards might not be spending the funds on programming for students who need support (Mackenzie 2017). For instance, English Language Learners often require additional supports to acclimate to a new school and culture, especially those who have

recently arrived in Canada. These resources help English Language Learners connect to their schools and communities, which in turn contributes to their academic success.

- 2.101** The COVID-19 pandemic poses specific challenges to English Language Learners. Reports out of the United States found that that transition to hybrid learning “made school difficult for many students, but even more for English [language] learners” (Bamer 2021). Many of these learners require additional supports or extra assistance in order to better understand class instructions. As well, teachers often depend on nonverbal gestures to understand these students. The move to the hybrid learning model has made this more difficult; reports from Ontario and elsewhere indicate that English Language Learners are not receiving the supports they require, which has raised concerns that these learners may suffer from additional learning loss once the pandemic is over (Kim 2020; Alphonso 2020). **Smaller class sizes and investing more in English language supports, including properly trained teachers, will ensure students are able to interact with their peers, achieve academic success, and ultimately contribute in our society.**

**2.102 Adult and Continuing Education**

Adult and continuing education programs are funded at roughly two-thirds the level of regular day school credit programs, which has previously been calculated to result in annual underfunding of \$112 million (Mackenzie 2015). Since coming into office, the Ford government has repeatedly cut the adult and continuing education budgets, only recently increasing funding allocations by \$17 million in the 2021-22 projections.

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

**2.104** The COVID-19 crisis has made the situation more precarious for adult and continuing education learners, many of whom are encountering additional barriers to participating in or completing their educational goals (James and Thériault 2020). The government should recognize that adult and continuing education is invaluable to the socio-economic well-being and social mobility of communities, especially as we emerge from the pandemic. **Funding is required so that school boards can provide the necessary supports to improve language skill assessment. At the same time, adult learners require additional and specific mental health supports to improve chances for successful completion of their respective programs.**

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

#### **2.106 Holding School Boards to Account**

The Ford government's incomplete and inadequate plan to resume in-person learning in September, coupled with a downloading of COVID-19 planning and a lack of funding provided to school boards for the 2021-22 school year has resulted in wild inconsistencies in health and safety measures, programming, and learning conditions. This is unacceptable in a publicly funded education system that prides itself on equity and inclusion.

**2.107** But even before the pandemic, Catholic teachers had concerns about inconsistencies and lack of accountability in school board spending. For example, our Association has for many years been raising the issue of how school boards are using Special Purpose Grants, such as the Learning Opportunities Grant or funds for English as a Second Language programs. With an overall education budget that does not match

student needs, and legal pressure to balance their books, school boards are compelled to use these grants to fill gaps in funding for core programs and expenses. The Toronto District School Board receives the most attention in this regard, but Catholic teachers report similar situations in boards across the province (Queiser 2017; Brown 2013; Casey 2013).

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

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

**2.110 Publicly Funded Catholic Education**

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

**2.111** There is a common misconception that merging Ontario's school systems could save a significant amount of money, but history and scholarship suggests the opposite is true. Dr. John Wiens, former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, put the matter succinctly: "If it's about money, I think there is actually no evidence to show at all that anybody has saved money by [consolidating boards]" (CBC 2016). In Alberta, a study of the restructuring of the school system in the late



1990s found that the implementation costs associated with the mergers exceeded any resulting savings (Pysyk 2000). Ontario's experience with school board amalgamation in the late 1990s led to hundreds of millions of dollars in costs for transition and restructuring. Even conservative organizations like the Fraser Institute have found that amalgamating large organizations almost always results in high transition costs and limited long-term savings (Miljan and Spicer 2015).

**2.112** At the same time, there are opportunities to make more efficient use of education resources, by using provincially funded buildings in more collaborative ways and incentivizing inter-ministerial and municipal co-operation. One potential avenue is shared facilities, specifically for co-terminus boards. In its 2014-15 Pre-Budget Consultation Summary, the previous government noted that "co-locating the schools of coterminous boards in the same facility was an idea with fairly broad support" (Ministry of Education 2014). Naturally, this would have to be done while protecting each school system's unique framework and structures, but there are significant opportunities to make efficient use of resources while ensuring that more communities have access to important public services.

**2.113** There are several successful examples of such arrangements in Ontario. The Humberwood Centre houses Holy Child Catholic School, Humberwood Downs public school, a branch of the Toronto Public Library, the Humberwood Community Centre, as well as the 280-space Macaulay Child Development Centre. In Brantford, St. Basil's Catholic Elementary School and Walter Gretzky Elementary School each have a wing in the 90,000-square-foot shared facility. These sorts of shared facilities can be helpful in maximizing cost efficiency, specifically in rural areas where enrolment declines have raised the specter of school closures.

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

### **3. CONCLUSION**

- 3.01** The Ford government's track record on publicly funded education since coming to office has been marked by reckless cuts, combative disrespect toward educators, and misguided priorities. The plan to cut \$12.3 billion in education funding over the next 10 years will have a devastating impact on student learning and success over the short and long term. Now is the time to reinvest. The government must end the cuts to publicly funded education and ensure the resources necessary to address learning loss and mental health concerns, so students can recover from the previous chaotic and disruptive school years.
- 3.02** Ontario's publicly funded education system is world class, thanks to its teachers, education workers, students, parents, and supporting communities – a fact that COVID-19, and the dedication of these groups, has made abundantly clear. It is past time for the Ford government to recognize this as well, and work to strengthen our publicly funded school system with the necessary investments to benefit all Ontarians now and in the future.

### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.01 That the government engage in regular, open, and constructive dialogue with teachers and education workers, and to heed the advice of those on the frontlines of publicly funded education.**
- 4.02 That the government invest in reduced class sizes, so students can get the focused, individual attention from teachers they need and the stable learning environment they deserve; more professional services and supports, to address learning loss and mental health needs; and immediate, substantial investments in school infrastructure and technology.**
- 4.03 That the government commit to lowering class size averages in Ontario's publicly funded schools.**
- 4.04 That the government 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 students.**

- 4.05 That the government immediately and dramatically enhance investments into mental health services in schools, and expand school-based resources, supports, and services. This should include funding to support ongoing mental health-related professional development opportunities for educators, as well as the hiring of additional mental health professionals, including social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, child and youth workers, and school mental health workers.**
- 4.06 That the annual funding for Student Mental Health Ontario be increased in a manner that reflects sustainability and long-term needs.**
- 4.07 For the most efficient and effective services, there should be co-ordination between the Ministry of Education and other ministries, further exploration of the community hub model, and regular consultation with the representatives of frontline teachers and education workers.**
- 4.08 In addition to targeting mental health resources specifically for teachers, the government should also ensure that school administrators are honouring teachers' contractual rights to access sick leave for mental health issues, including investigating the reasons for, and redressing, the shortage of qualified occasional teachers.**
- 4.09 That the government immediately end the failed hybrid model, and provide funding necessary for in-person and online-only schools. This includes providing teachers who demonstrate interest with teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development opportunities related to online learning.**
- 4.10 That the government cease the expansion of online learning, as well as the extension of service delivery to third party entities beyond the publicly funded education system.**
- 4.11 That the government commit to studying the pandemic experience of online learning, to identify persistent structural gaps, and then address those gaps with adequate investments.**

- 4.12 That the Ministry of Education provide a robust suite of supports and community engagement to promote success. Mental health and wellness must be a centrepiece of this approach. This will require the hiring of additional resource teachers, educational assistants, special education supports, social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, and culturally responsive counsellors.**
- 4.13 That the government provide funding for professional development, support resources, release time, and other supports needed to transition to full implementation.**
- 4.14 That the government engage education partners in sustained, meaningful consultation and collaboration in developing destreaming policy and rewriting curriculum documents.**
- 4.15 That the government enhance support for students with special education needs, to successfully reintegrate them with their peers and mitigate any learning loss that will have occurred.**
- 4.16 That the government provide resources and supports for more child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and other professional services to help students deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs.**
- 4.17 That the government encourage and facilitate collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services on a proactive, multi-faceted response that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of school violence.**
- 4.18 That the government act proactively and make the necessary investments to ensure that all schools have ventilation systems that meet the health and safety standards set by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers, effectively reducing the airborne spread of COVID-19.**

- 4.19 That the government provide immediate, stable, and sufficient annual funding for infrastructure and repairs, new technology, as well as services and supports for all students, including those with special education and mental health needs.**
- 4.20 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 PISA and others.**
- 4.21 That the government continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise.**
- 4.22 That the government address the 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, so as to address the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.**
- 4.23 That any curriculum changes be accompanied by resources for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development – the most efficient and effective form of professional learning.**
- 4.24 Smaller class sizes and investing more in English language supports, including properly trained teachers, will ensure students are able to interact with their peers, achieve academic success, and ultimately contribute in our society.**
- 4.25 That the government recognize that adult and continuing education is invaluable to the socio-economic well-being and social mobility of communities, especially as we emerge from the pandemic. Funding is required so that school boards can provide the necessary supports to improve language skill assessment. At the same time, adult learners require additional and specific mental health supports to improve chances for successful completion of their respective programs.**

- 4.26 To hold school boards to account, there should be an annual process of consultation with teacher representatives at each school board regarding locally determined expenditures, as well as prompt reporting with real-time transfers of data where possible.**
- 4.27 That the government explore options for shared services agreements and collocating 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.**

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