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OECTA

Submission to the Ministry of Education Consultation

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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** Catholic teachers take a broad view of our role in the publicly funded education system and society as a whole. We advocate not only for our own rights and working conditions, but also for the needs of students and our communities. To this end, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) has a long history of contributing well-considered, evidence-based ideas in the development of education and social policy (OECTA 2018a).
- 1.02** The results of our efforts speak for themselves. Ontario's publicly funded education system is widely considered one of the best in the world. Over the past 15 years, we have fostered increased literacy and numeracy, advances in early childhood education, and a dramatic reduction in the number of low-performing schools. According to the latest results of the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Ontario remains one of the top-performing jurisdictions in reading, mathematics, and science (CMEC 2016; OECD 2016). We can also pride ourselves on our commitment to equity, which is evidenced by the relatively small gaps in performance between high- and low-income students, and between Canadian- and foreign-born students.
- 1.03** These outcomes have been achieved in large part due to the co-operative relationship between policymakers and teachers. A wide body of evidence from around the world shows that education systems work best when teachers' professionalism is respected and education policy is developed collaboratively, and Ontario has been put up as a model for others to follow (OECD 2011; Carini 2008). As Andreas Schleicher (2018), Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), writes, "[The] countries with the strongest student performance also have strong teachers' unions who are treated as trusted professional partners, working constructively with policymakers to facilitate a constructive dialogue based on research and evidence."
- 1.04** In this spirit, Catholic teachers hope this submission to the government's education consultation is only the starting point for an ongoing process of engagement, one based on open dialogue that respects teachers' qualifications, experience, and perspectives. By working toward a shared set of priorities, based on shared values,

government, teachers, parents, and the public can help give Ontario's students the best possible chance to succeed at school and in life.

2. STEM LEARNING

2.01 There is no doubt that STEM learning must be a key part of any 21st century education. All students should be provided with opportunities to engage and realize their full potential in these subjects. In the publicly funded education system and in society at large, we should be making a particular effort to foster the development of female students and others who have previously been excluded from these fields.

2.02 The good news is that Ontario's publicly funded education system is already doing an excellent job in these areas. There is a popular misconception that students are struggling in math, but the reality is that Ontario's students continue to excel by national and international standards. While there is always room for improvement, going back to basics will not get our students where they need to go.

2.03 To continue moving forward, we must ensure that the proper resources are in place to provide meaningful instruction and opportunities. For example, the need for technological infrastructure and hardware is beyond what funding provides, and school boards are not able to keep pace with constant innovation. This has resulted in inequality between boards, as well as the proliferation of "bring your own device" policies, which have the potential to widen the digital divide between students. The government must close the technology gap among schools and students, so that it does not result in achievement gaps (MacDonald 2014; People for Education 2014). Teachers also need time and resources to develop proper plans and lessons, to make the most effective use of technology in the classroom (Jacobsen 2010; Means et al. 2010).

2.04 Any discussions around STEM learning must acknowledge that teachers are trained, qualified, and certified professionals. Reforms to curriculum or assessment should involve extensive consultation with teachers, and respect our professional needs and judgment. Furthermore, 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.

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). The government has recently moved to implement a math test for incoming teachers, but a more fruitful method would be to ensure that teachers have the resources and supports necessary to deliver math content in the classroom. Especially if the government intends to change the curriculum, it is imperative that resources continue to be provided for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development – the most efficient and effective form of professional learning (CEA 2015).

- 2.05** Finally, we must be wary of any attempts by the private sector to influence curriculum or programs in publicly funded schools. While it is understandable that businesses want to ensure graduates will have the skills necessary to work in fast-paced, knowledge-driven industries, it is imperative that the publicly funded education system remain equitable, accessible, and focused on student needs and the public interest. This includes a recognition that STEM subjects are only part of a well-rounded education.

3. SKILLED TRADES

- 3.01** Laying a foundation of job-related abilities should be one function of the publicly funded education system. However, young people are entering a rapidly evolving labour market, and they will need to continually upgrade their knowledge and technical skills throughout their lives to meet the requirements of jobs that do not yet exist (WEF 2016). Therefore, the overarching goal of publicly funded education should be to prepare students with a broad range of values and competencies that will enable them to adapt. We also must remain focused on the needs of students and the public, rather than the desires of business interests.

- 3.02** It certainly should not be the expectation that every graduate will go on to university. Many of the jobs that will be most in demand over the next few decades will require a high level of skills, but not necessarily a university degree. Public awareness campaigns and labour market information should be used to promote the skilled trades as viable and potentially lucrative career options. More resources should be provided for guidance counselling, to help students and families make informed choices about post-secondary goals and planning (Sorensen 2013).

- 3.03** We must be careful that job-readiness does not become a main objective of the publicly funded elementary and secondary education systems. Employers, not the public, should bear the bulk of the responsibility for training young people on job-specific knowledge and skills (Zizys 2014). The idea of a mismatch between the needs of employers and the abilities of students is greatly exaggerated (Goar 2014). What is described as a skills gap is in most cases simply an experience gap, the result of businesses being unwilling to invest in on-the-job training or pay appropriate wages (Jackson 2014; Sandell 2012). Under no circumstances should private businesses be influencing the development of curriculum, or transferring the risk and cost of job training to the public.
- 3.04** Experiential learning can be a valuable way for some students to develop skills, confidence, and attitudes about learning and working. But not all experiential learning programs are equally demanding or beneficial. The government should ensure that in all cases, learning expectations are high and the integrity of credits is maintained. Furthermore, students should not be required to participate in experiential learning if the programs do not match their interests or goals. We should also be wary of allowing private industry to design and implement experiential learning projects for their own benefit.
- 3.05** Parents, teachers, and the general public want students to be prepared to move the economy forward, but publicly funded education should be about much more. We must continue to seek a balance between instilling hard skills, encouraging collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving, and fostering the development of thoughtful, creative, caring, well-rounded citizens.

4. STANDARDIZED TESTING

- 4.01** There are serious and well-founded concerns about the stress that high-stakes testing causes for students, teachers, and administrators (Kempf 2016). Although EQAO tests are supposedly not meant to be used to rank schools, we know they are often employed as a basis for comparison. Trustees and superintendents feel nervous about how their schools will measure up, which leads to pressure being exerted on principals, who pass it on to teachers, who then have to spend weeks focusing on the specific types of questions and answers that will be found on the

tests. If results in one year are deemed unsatisfactory, the anxiety is only heightened the following year. We also know that some boards and schools are diverting precious funds toward test preparation materials, which could be used for books, events, or equipment.

4.02 Students most especially feel the pressure to perform well on EQAO tests – and the OSSLT is a requirement to graduate. The stress and anxiety exacerbates learning challenges, mental health issues, or other issues that students are experiencing, and often negatively affects their performance.

4.03 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 provides 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, which we then use to modify our instruction and provide individual attention, as well as to complete provincial report cards (OTF 2017).

4.04 If the government still believes that some sort of province-wide testing is necessary, they should at least move toward a random sampling model. This would produce accurate 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.

5. LIFE SKILLS

5.01 School is where children learn how to live in the world; preparing them to meet life's challenges goes beyond teaching reading, writing, and math. While these basics are fundamental building blocks of learning, they are not adequate to prepare students for our rapidly changing economy, the complexities of an ever-changing society, or the rigours and demands of adulthood. Globalization and advances in technology have made the world more fast-paced and interconnected than ever before, which makes it all the more vital that we graduate students who can appreciate diverse

opinions and work constructively together. To help our students become engaged and responsible citizens, we need to go beyond the basics.

- 5.02** We should be mindful of the extent to which much of this is already happening. Financial literacy and other household skills are useful elements of a comprehensive, 21st century education, but so are critical thinking, problem solving, and effective communication and teamwork. Teachers, especially those in the publicly funded Catholic education system, infuse these skills in lessons across the curriculum (OECTA 2018b). Subjects such as arts, music, environmental studies, and health and physical education – taught with an up-to-date, inclusive curriculum that reflects the realities of modern society – are essential for helping students develop robust, well-rounded, highly transferable skills. Contrary to the popular misconception, our schools are already doing an excellent job of preparing students for the “real world.”
- 5.03** Ontario’s publicly funded education system has been recognized for its commitment to equity, and it is important for these efforts to continue (Coughlan 2017). This would include, among other things, honouring the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, continuing to protect and promote Gay-Straight Alliances, and supporting anti-racism initiatives. These initiatives help students to understand and work with one another in a safe and welcoming learning environment. The government should also provide adequate funding to ensure that all students have equitable access to programs and activities, regardless of their socio-economic background.
- 5.04** If the government plans to update the curriculum to pay more particular attention to financial literacy or other practical life skills, it is crucial that the programs be developed in close consultation with teachers. We know the previous government had instituted a number of pilot projects, but to date teachers have received no indication as to the outcome of those projects, or any information about who would be tasked with writing a new curriculum. We must be sure that all changes are in the public interest, not the interests of business. Furthermore, classroom instruction must be delivered only by trained, qualified, certified teachers. Only professional teachers have the knowledge and judgment around teaching and assessment to properly plan units and lessons, individualize instruction, and gauge student progress.

6. TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

- 6.01** It is not entirely clear where the government has gotten the idea that a blanket ban on mobile phones in classrooms is needed or desired. Among teachers, for example, there are a wide range of views. The easiest and best solution would be to leave the use of mobile phones in classrooms to the discretion of teachers, who will use our professional judgment to determine when and how students should be able to access them.
- 6.02** One reason that some teachers might allow students to use mobile phones is that, like many technologies, they can be leveraged in ways that benefit student learning, when used as part of a well-designed pedagogical plan. However, it really should not be up to students and teachers to provide our own devices. To ensure equitable access, the government should be providing funding for appropriate hardware, software, and internet connectivity for all teachers and students throughout the school day. Teachers will use our professional judgment to determine when and how this technology can be used to deliver programming. Continued opportunities for teacher-led professional development will help to ensure that all teachers are familiar with the tools and prepared with proper learning objectives.
- 6.03** The proliferation of technology and its increased use in schools does raise important safety and privacy considerations. To address these concerns, students should be taught about issues such as cyberbullying through a modern health and physical education (HPE) curriculum, and school administration should ensure compliance with policies regarding acceptable use of technology, in addition to *Occupational Health and Safety Act* provisions related to workplace harassment.

7. HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

- 7.01** It is important to point out that, as of 2015, Ontario students were already learning an age-appropriate HPE curriculum. The 2015 curriculum was the product of a multi-year, multi-consultation process, which made major and necessary updates to respond to developments in law, technology, and society. In developing the curriculum, the Ministry of Education consulted with thousands of parents and

educators, as well as a broad cross-section of experts and stakeholder organizations (CBC News 2018).

- 7.02** In reverting to an older version, even on an interim basis, the government is subjecting students to a curriculum that was developed before smartphones, social media, and progress in the understanding of different sexual orientations and gender identities. A wide range of legal and health experts have outlined the dangers posed to students that result from removing discussions of current health information, contemporary civil rights, and the dangers associated with modern technology (see, for example, CPS 2018; OPHEA and OASPHE 2018; RNAO 2018).
- 7.03** If the government is intent on developing a new HPE curriculum, it must provide teachers with relevant, up-to-date information and resources. Topics such as consent, gender expression, and a host of LGBTQ+ issues must be included to ensure that students are prepared for the realities and challenges of modern life. While it might make some members of the community uncomfortable, we cannot ignore the fact that students are already learning about these topics on the internet or from their peers – it is crucial that the publicly funded education system provide them with proper information, from a trained source (Jolly 2015). It is also imperative that the curriculum be informed by a broad base of subject matter experts, including teachers and other education stakeholders, to ensure the safety and well-being of all students.

8. PARENTS' BILL OF RIGHTS

- 8.01** Educators agree that students learn best, and schools work best, when parents, guardians, or caregivers are active participants in their child's education. Research consistently demonstrates the positive link between parental activity and student learning (Ministry of Education 2012). Each and every day, teachers and parents work closely together toward a common objective: ensuring student success (see, for example, OECTA 2016).
- 8.02** In this effort, enumerating a formal "Parents' Bill of Rights" is an unhelpful exercise – one that threatens to drive a wedge between parents and teachers. Instead, it would be far more constructive to point to, and continue to build upon, the many positive

examples of parent-teacher collaboration that already exist. Across Ontario, parents are involved in their child's education in formal and informal ways, and to varying degrees. Central to this relationship are the open lines of communication that exist between parents and teachers. If parents have questions or concerns pertaining to their child, they are encouraged to speak with their child's teacher or principal, as many already do.

- 8.03** For those interested in more formal avenues of engagement, parent-teacher conferences, which can include other professionals involved in student learning, allow parents to consult with educators who interact with their children at school. Parents can also join School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees, where the partnership between parents, students, teachers, principals, school boards, government, and the community can be further strengthened.
- 8.04** In addition to these opportunities for involvement, parents have a great deal of tools and resources at their disposal to stay informed about their child's education. At the school level, teachers regularly provide information to parents on activities taking place in schools. This is especially true with regard to the health and physical education curriculum. For example, Catholic schools distribute a letter that outlines what will be discussed in the classroom when it comes to the sexual health and development aspects of the curriculum, and parents in all of the publicly funded education systems have the right to remove their children from certain lessons. Curriculum open houses, multicultural showcases, and co-operative education fairs provide additional opportunities for students and teachers to share projects that have been produced as a result of student learning. At the government level, regulations regarding Safe and Accepting Schools include requirements that keep parents informed in situations such as bullying. Through all of this, parents have the ability to request access to their child's Ontario Student Records (OSR) files, which are regularly updated by teachers.
- 8.05** Parental engagement can take many forms, and a wide variety of parental engagement strategies and effective practices are already in place. These strategies and practices are all predicated on communication and a positive, constructive relationship between parents and teachers. Rather than antagonize this relationship, we should look for additional ways to connect parents to teachers, schools, and the

community. Further developing this collaborative relationship will have a positive impact on student learning.

9. PUBLICLY FUNDED CATHOLIC EDUCATION

- 9.01** Throughout the consultation process, the government has asked respondents for feedback or ideas outside of the identified areas. As Catholic teachers, we would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to highlight the extraordinary benefits that publicly funded Catholic education provides to students, families, and the province as a whole.
- 9.02** Ontario's system of publicly funded education is among the best in the world, with impressive student achievement and sincere efforts to improve equity and inclusivity. Publicly funded Catholic schools have made remarkable contributions to the overall excellence of this world-renowned education system. In addition to teaching literacy, math, science, and other skills, Catholic schools develop 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 (Herbert and Childs 2013). There are almost 650,000 students attending publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario, including many non-Catholic students whose parents have chosen the system for their children.
- 9.03** Although some have agitated for merging the Catholic and secular school systems as a way to save money, ample evidence from previous municipal and school board mergers shows that the legal, administrative, and other costs inevitably overwhelm any potential savings (CBC News 2016; Miljan and Spicer 2015). We also need to be mindful of the incredible disruption that a merger would create, as boundaries would have to be redrawn and students would have to change schools. None of this would serve to address the real, pressing needs in Ontario's schools.
- 9.04** Publicly funded Catholic schools are ingrained in the province's history and culture. Rather than disrupt this successful system, we should continue to value the role that publicly funded Catholic education plays in our society.

10. CONCLUSION

10.01 Everyone involved in publicly funded education wants to help produce a healthier, more prosperous, more peaceful society. While we all have our own roles and responsibilities, students and the public are best served when everyone is moving in the same direction.

10.02 Catholic teachers have provided input on the key consultation areas identified by the government, but our overall position is that making our schools the best they can be does not require dramatic upheaval. Instead, school communities across the province have been clear and consistent that the most helpful course of action would be to provide safe, supportive, and well-resourced learning environments. Our Association looks forward to more opportunities to be formally involved in the development of education policy, to help build on past success and continue improving publicly funded education in Ontario.

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