



ONTARIO ENGLISH  
Catholic  
Teachers  
ASSOCIATION

400-65 ST. CLAIR AVE. EAST  
TORONTO, ON M4T 2Y8

T. 416.925.2493  
1.800.268.7230

[catholicteachers.ca](http://catholicteachers.ca)

# FALL 2020 BUDGET CONSULTATION

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## SUBMISSION TO THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE

October 2020

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**Catholic  
Teachers**  
ASSOCIATION

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

Liz Stuart  
President

David Church  
General Secretary

Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association  
65 St. Clair Avenue East, Suite 400  
Toronto, ON M4T 2Y8  
416.925.2493 or 1.800.268.7230  
Fax: 416.925.7764  
**[catholicteachers.ca](http://catholicteachers.ca)**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.01** In January, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) provided detailed input for the development of the 2020 provincial budget (OECTA 2020a). At that time, we urged the Ford government to abandon its preoccupation with cutting expenditures, and to consider the social and economic benefits of investments in education, health, and social services. We also called on the government to adopt a more collaborative approach, by engaging in genuine dialogue with stakeholders before making decisions.
- 1.02** The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has only further illustrated the need for the government to heed our advice. Policies to slow the spread of the virus, while necessary for public health, have caused a major economic slowdown, which has magnified the gaps in our existing social safety net. Moving forward, the goal must be to protect all Ontarians over the long term from the negative effects of health emergencies, natural disasters, and the whims of the market.
- 1.03** The pandemic has also demonstrated the consequences of developing and implementing public policies with insufficient planning, consultation, and investment. In the case of publicly funded education, the government was warned for months about the need to work with teachers and other stakeholders to create provincial guidelines, with sufficient funding, to facilitate the same health and safety standards in schools as exist everywhere else in the province. The government's failure to do so has been roundly criticized by health experts and families, and we are now seeing the results, with school-related cases rising across the province, classes being quarantined, and schools being forced to close due to COVID-19 infections among students and staff.
- 1.04** As the government prepares for the belated tabling of the 2020 budget amid the turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic, our Association will take this opportunity to highlight a few key priorities, which we hope will guide the government in managing the current crisis and rebuilding for the future.

## **2. A STRONG PUBLIC RESPONSE**

- 2.01** Over the past six months, through no fault of their own, millions of Ontarians have lost work, had their hours or wages cut, or been forced to make difficult choices due to health concerns or family care responsibilities. Women have been disproportionately affected, with their labour force participation rate falling to its lowest level in 30 years (Dessanti 2020). Important emergency measures have been implemented at both the federal and provincial levels, but the situation should prompt a thorough re-examination of Ontario's social policy framework, and a rethinking among the Ford government about the role of public programs and services in promoting health and prosperity for all Ontarians.
- 2.02** While nobody would have wished for or anticipated the suffering caused by the COVID-19 emergency, the social and economic policies that have left Ontarians vulnerable were not arrived at by accident. As the Ontario Federation of Labour (2020) has noted, the deregulation of health and safety standards, the rollback of workers' rights and protections, the erosion of progressive taxation, the retrenchment of welfare state programs, the privatization and underfunding of public services, and the disregard of equity-seeking groups – much of which the Ford government has participated in – have all led us to this point.
- 2.03** The Ford government has taken some steps to compensate for past mistakes. For example, the government introduced job-protected COVID-19 emergency leave, after previously having eliminated provisions of the *Employment Standards Act* that would have ensured paid sick days for all workers. They have also frozen rent increases for 2021, after previously having eliminated controls for new buildings and cut funding for housing support programs (Edwards 2020; Del Gobbo 2019). However, these are inadequate, short-term fixes to significant, long-term problems. Facilitating a just recovery from the COVID-19 emergency, and a better Ontario moving forward, will require permanently strengthening our labour laws and making sustained investments in public services.
- 2.04** Thus far, Ontarians have seen little evidence that the Ford government is up to the task. The Financial Accountability Office (FAO) recently crunched the numbers and found that the federal government is financing a whopping 97 per cent of Ontario's COVID-19 recovery efforts. While some of this is attributable to the fact that the

federal government is responsible for expensive income-replacement programs like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and its successors, this is still a glaring imbalance considering that the provincial government is responsible for high cost areas such as health care, education, and social assistance.

- 2.05** Worse is that although the Ford government set aside \$17 billion in emergency response funding for the 2020-21 fiscal year, the FAO found that as of September almost \$7 billion of this remained unspent. Finance Minister Rod Phillips says the money will be allocated “as needed,” but Ontarians would be right to wonder what the government is waiting for.
- 2.06** Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we already had a long way to go to build an Ontario that works for everyone (OECTA 2020b). For example, one in five children in Ontario live in poverty, with higher rates experienced by children who are Indigenous, racialized, recent immigrants, and/or in female-led families (Calabro 2020). With the arrival of this public health emergency having exposed and exacerbated the shortcomings of our social and economic structures, the government should be bold and proactive, investing in public programs and services that will benefit everyone in the long run. Our solutions cannot rely on market forces, private funding, federal government bailouts, or individual responsibility. Nor should the current budget deficit be used as pretext for dismantling the public sector. This is a public crisis; it demands a strong public response.

### **3. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE**

- 3.01** It has long been known that affordable, accessible, high quality early childhood education and care increases equity in outcomes at school and creates a strong foundation for lifelong learning (McCuaig, Bertrand, and Shanker 2012). It also improves labour force participation, particularly among women, which helps to boost household incomes and reduce poverty. According to one recent analysis, every public dollar spent expanding enrolment in early childhood education and care yields close to six dollars in economic benefits (Alexander et al. 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a stark reminder of the consequences of a lack of publicly funded, licenced child care, and renewed impetus to build a more robust public system as soon as possible (CCN 2020).

- 3.02** Before the pandemic, a fragile, market-based, underfunded system provided licensed spaces for only 23 per cent of Ontario children up to age 12, with median parent fees in the thousands of dollars per month (Ministry of Education 2020a). When the public health emergency forced most centres to close, many families had to scramble to find care – with the additional care burden in the home falling predominantly on women (Dunham 2020). Meanwhile, 70 per cent of licenced centres across the country had to lay off all or part of their workforce, and many are uncertain as to whether they will ever be able to reopen (Friendly et al. 2020).
- 3.03** Affordable, accessible, high quality child care can play a threefold role in a recovery from the COVID-19 emergency. As economist Armine Yalnizyan (2020) puts it, “Beyond simply facilitating women’s return to work – and, indeed, being a source of employment – the decision to ensure child care is affordable high-quality early learning, accessible to all families, will maximize the future of the next generation of Canadian children, lowering public spending and increasing revenues for governments and society. We may choose to act, or not; but we will reap what we sow.”
- 3.04** For its part, the federal government has responded by extending the Canada-Ontario Early Learning and Child Care Agreement for another year, with an investment of \$147 million. And the recent throne speech contained a promise to work with the provinces and territories to ensure that high quality care is accessible to all. But child care is ultimately a provincial responsibility, so it is incumbent upon the Ford government to show leadership.
- 3.05** Regrettably, having previously opted for a child care tax credit rather than a publicly funded program, which experts say will result in an overall lower quality of care (Cleveland 2019; Monsebraaten 2018), the Ford government’s recent review of child care in the province focused on increasing the role of unlicensed care, increasing child-to-staff ratios for some age groups, increasing the role of unqualified staff, and reducing administrative burdens (Ministry of Education 2020b). Although we recognize the government’s ideological opposition, Catholic teachers continue to call on the government to commit to an affordable, high quality, publicly funded, and universally accessible system of child care – the most efficient, effective, and equitable option for all Ontarians.

#### **4. QUALITY PUBLICLY FUNDED EDUCATION FOR ALL**

- 4.01** Thanks to the hard work and resolve of teachers, education workers, families, and other Ontarians, the government was forced to retreat from the \$900 million in cuts to core per-pupil funding and programs for vulnerable students that were contained in the 2019-20 education budget. But there were still a number of areas that deserved attention prior to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extraordinary situation we now find ourselves in has only increased the need for immediate, substantial investments to make our schools as safe, inclusive, and productive as possible. Unfortunately, the Ford government has remained committed to their goal of spending as little as they think they can get away with on publicly funded education.
- 4.02** It has been estimated that it would have cost roughly \$3 billion for something approaching a comprehensive plan to reopen schools as safely as possible, including investments to reduce class sizes to ensure physical distancing, provide sufficient caretaking staff and cleaning supplies, ensure safe student transportation, and provide personal protective equipment for all students and staff (Rushowy 2020). Many experts have also called for substantial investments to improve ventilation and filtration in school buildings, with one professor of civil engineering saying that the funding allocated thus far “doesn’t even pass the laugh test” (D’Amore 2020; Siegel 2020). And services and supports for students are needed now more than ever, to help deal with the mental health issues and learning gaps that have been created or exacerbated by the pandemic and last year’s school closures.
- 4.03** Despite all this, when inflation is factored in, core per-pupil funding for 2020-21 is effectively below what was provided in 2018-19. And while the government claims to have spent “up to \$1.3 billion” to support school reopening, the real numbers tell a different story.
- 4.04** The Ford government is eager to take credit for what it calls a “robust” plan, but the reality is that the province has put forward only \$413 million in additional funding to reopen schools. Another \$381 million was provided by the federal government, with

a second installment expected in January. The other \$496 million comes from the reallocation of school board reserves. This means it has been left up to school boards, if they are able, to decide whether to make this money available – and if they choose to do so, it will come at the expense of cuts to other programs and investments. Essentially, as one school board chair put it, the government has forced boards to “rob Peter to pay Paul” (Wallace 2020). Further analysis has revealed that the amount actually available from school board reserves is closer to \$150 million (Tranjan 2020).

- 4.05** At this point, it is clear that the Ford government has no intention of putting forward the resources that would support their claim to be “pulling out all the stops.” But teachers, students, families, and health experts will continue pushing the government to take seriously its responsibilities and step up with real investments in publicly funded education, before it is too late. This means the government must revise the plans laid out in previous budgets to freeze education funding over the next few years.
- 4.06** We will also continue to call on the government to engage in genuine consultation with teachers’ unions. 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 with little regard for the perspectives of the professionals who work in schools every day. In the case of school reopening, our Association has been trying since March 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 every turn. When meetings have taken place, it has usually been clear that the decisions have already been made. International research has shown that a collaborative, professional relationship between governments and teachers’ organizations is a key ingredient in successful education systems; it is 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).

## 5. CONCLUSION

**5.01** The belated release of the 2020 provincial budget presents the Ford government with yet another opportunity to move away from the recklessness and obstinacy that have characterized their first two years in office. Now more than ever, it is time to acknowledge the role of government in providing security and opportunity for all citizens. It is time to listen to the perspectives of teachers and others in the community who have experience and expertise in their fields, and to make the necessary investments to ensure our public services work for everyone. And it is time to be honest with the public about what the government is or is not doing. The Ford government is fond of saying that we are all in this together, and that the “Ontario spirit” involves making sure no one gets left behind – it is time to translate these platitudes into meaningful and lasting public policies.

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