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OECTA SUBMISSION TO THE ONTARIO POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY CONSULTATION

TO THE MINISTRY OF CHILDREN, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

April 2020

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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** The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input in the development of a new Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario.
- 1.02** This is an especially important time to be discussing poverty reduction, as Ontario is currently grappling with the crisis caused by COVID-19. While the government has put in place a number of emergency measures, this extraordinary situation is magnifying the hardships faced by millions of Ontarians every day. The health and well-being of our family, friends, and neighbours should not be left vulnerable to health emergencies, natural disasters, or the whims of the market. The fundamental goal of any government, of any political stripe, should be to ensure that all Ontarians are able to live with an adequate measure of dignity and stability.
- 1.03** Ontario's Catholic teachers view issues of poverty and inequality primarily through the eyes of our students and their families. Evidence indicates that the targeted poverty reduction efforts Ontario has implemented since 2008 have been effective, but need to be bolstered. While the rate of child poverty has been reduced, almost one in five children in Ontario, and one in seven families with children, still live in poverty (Mustachi 2017). These families are forced to make difficult decisions about how or whether to access necessities like housing, energy, child care, transportation, or food.
- 1.04** Teachers see the effects in our classrooms every day, as students arrive at school tired, hungry, anxious, and unprepared. We meet parents and guardians who are struggling with precarious work or inadequate social assistance. Research shows that children from low-income families often start school already behind their peers, because these families often have limited time and resources to provide their children with early learning opportunities (Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller 2007). Some research even indicates that the stresses of poverty can change a child's brain structure (Proudfoot 2020).
- 1.05** The consequences of poverty go beyond the individuals and families directly affected by it. Recent research shows that increased costs for the justice and health care systems, lost economic opportunity, and forgone tax revenues cost Ontario as much as \$33 million per year (Lee and Briggs 2019). It is imperative that whenever we

emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, the government continues to recognize the necessity of public programs and services to protect all Ontarians.

2. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

- 2.01** The government has expressed an interest in relieving cost pressures on low-income Ontarians. Presumably, this means reducing consumer prices and providing further tax relief. But the most important role for any government is to provide affordable, accessible, high-quality public services. As Catholic teachers and many other advocates have been saying for years, this should include a universal, publicly funded system of early childhood education and care (ECEC).
- 2.02** Affordable, accessible, high quality ECEC increases equity in learning outcomes, reduces poverty, and creates a strong foundation for lifelong learning (McCuaig, Bertrand, and Shanker 2012). It also improves labour force participation, particularly among women, and helps to boost household incomes. These benefits are shared by society and the economy as a whole. According to one analysis, every dollar the public spends expanding enrolment in ECEC yields close to six dollars in economic benefits, thanks to increased economic productivity and lower social costs (Alexander et al. 2017).
- 2.03** Quebec's child care model, which has now been in place for more than 20 years, offers ample evidence of the tremendous benefits and cost-effectiveness of this type of program. The government spends roughly 0.6 per cent of GDP on the program, which is equal to the average spending among advanced economies for early childhood education and care. In return, the labour force participation rate of women in Quebec has increased to 85 per cent, compared to 80 per cent elsewhere in Canada. The rate for mothers of children up to age five has increased to 80 per cent, compared to 71 per cent elsewhere in Canada. Furthermore, using 2008 data, it has been calculated that the total increase in revenue exceeded the total increase in expenditure by \$919 million (Fortin 2018).
- 2.04** Unfortunately, the Ford government's ideological opposition to public services has put an abrupt end to the progress Ontario had been making toward a more robust child care system. The government has removed the cap on provincial funding for private child care, and cut funding for fee subsidies for low-income families. This runs counter to all of the available evidence about the high cost of child care, and

the importance of supporting licensed, not-for-profit options as the best way of ensuring accessible, high quality care (Cleveland 2018; Mahoney 2018; Macdonald and Friendly 2017). The government also loosened regulations on carer-to-child ratios in unlicensed child care spaces, just a short time after these regulations were enhanced in response to tragic deaths (Reddekopp 2018).

2.05 There are currently licensed child care spaces for just over 20 per cent of children under the age of 12 (Friendly et al. 2018). And in many cases, child care workers and early childhood educators work for low wages in poor conditions (AECEO 2017; Halfon and Langford 2015). The government's tax credit will only exacerbate these problems. Despite the fact that it will cost roughly \$70 million more per year than the government projected, it is unlikely to help low-income recipients, as only 0.1 per cent of families will be eligible for the full credit (FAO 2019a). With the value of the credit being significantly lower than the actual cost of child care, many parents may be forced to opt for lower-cost, lower-quality care, which will cost all Ontarians more in the long run (Cleveland 2019; Monsebraaten 2018a).

2.06 Despite the Ford government's ideological opposition, it is indisputable that introducing an affordable, high quality, publicly funded, and universally accessible system of child care would be one of the most effective, tangible things we could do to combat poverty and inequality.

3. QUALITY PUBLICLY FUNDED EDUCATION

3.01 In recognition of the importance of publicly funded education for creating opportunities for everyone to realize their full potential, the current Poverty Reduction Strategy includes measures of student readiness and attainment, including the five-year graduation rate, which is now 87.1 per cent, almost 20 percentage points higher than in 2003-04. This is a result of 15 years of increased investments in publicly funded education, which helped Ontario become a national and international leader in student achievement, equity, and inclusiveness (CMEC 2019; Schleicher 2019).

3.02 Still, too many students in Ontario cannot access the services and supports they need. Our publicly funded education system needs further investments to give everyone a fair chance. Unfortunately, although the Ford government has repeatedly claimed it is making unprecedented investments, the truth is that the core per-pupil

funding grant for elementary and secondary education has been cut by more the \$600 million. Furthermore, the government's own documents show that the plan is to essentially freeze education spending over the next four years, which means that as costs inflate and enrolment rises, government funding will be increasingly inadequate (Ministry of Finance 2019). According to calculations by the independent Financial Accountability Office (2019b), by the end of its term, the Ford government plans to be underfunding core elementary and secondary education costs by more than \$1 billion.

- 3.03** Special education, mental health services, adult and continuing education, and services for English language learners are just some of the investments that are needed to make publicly funded education in Ontario a robust poverty-fighting service (OECTA 2020). The government should plan genuine increases in spending on publicly funded education, to give every student in Ontario viable pathways to work or post-secondary education.

4. ACCESS TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

- 4.01** Ontario has a successful and internationally respected system of post-secondary education. Over the past two decades, access to Ontario post-secondary institutions has expanded dramatically, with full-time enrolment nearly doubling (Statistics Canada 2020). Internationally, Canada ranks second among OECD countries in post-secondary educational attainment, and Ontario is tops in the country (OECD 2019; Statistics Canada 2019). Twenty-five per cent of Ontarians aged 25 to 64 have attained a college qualification, 34 per cent hold a university degree, and six per cent have a certificate or diploma from a vocational school or apprenticeship training program (Statistics Canada 2020).
- 4.02** The benefits of post-secondary education are well established. On average, 25- to 34-year-olds with post-secondary education qualifications earn 38 per cent more than their peers who do not hold such credentials, while 45- to 54-year-olds earn 70 per cent more (OECD 2019). Individuals with post-secondary qualifications also benefit from greater relative employment stability and increased access to pension plan coverage (Frenette 2019; ESDC 2015).
- 4.04** Unfortunately, Ontarians do not share equally in these advantages. Research has shown that students from low-income families are considerably less likely to enrol in

post-secondary education than are their peers from higher income categories (Deller 2019; Frenette 2007). A 2017 study found that while nearly 80 per cent of 19-year-olds from families in the top after-tax income quintile enrol in post-secondary education programs, the enrolment rate for those in the bottom income quintile is only 47 percent (Frenette 2017).

- 4.05** Access to post-secondary education should always be a public policy goal, but it can have a particular impact as part of a poverty reduction strategy. The higher wages associated with post-secondary qualifications can, over the long term, reduce the number of adults living in poverty, which in turn lessens the need for interventions associated with health and well-being. Expanding access to post-secondary education could also increase labour force participation in particular fields, such as the skilled trades, and work toward mitigating the so-called “skills mismatch.”
- 4.06** To accomplish these objectives, the government should provide additional funding in the form of targeted grants, which would ensure that students from lower-income families have more equitable access to post-secondary education. The government might also consider reinstating changes it made to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). The previous government’s decision to repackage existing financial assistance grants into one, up-front grant made it easier for students and parents to understand the funding to which they were entitled. Over time, this could have led to greater numbers of lower-income students attending, and benefiting from, post-secondary education. By cancelling the program after one year, on the basis that costs outstripped enrolment increases (Auditor General 2018), the government cut short an opportunity to reap longer-term economic and social benefits.

5. DECENT WORK AND WORKING CONDITIONS

- 5.01** The *Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act*, introduced by the previous government in 2017, was a major step forward for Ontario workers. Following a comprehensive review, including input from a variety of labour organizations, worker advocates, community groups, and business interests, the government introduced crucial new labour standards in areas such as scheduling, equal pay, and paid sick leave.
- 5.02** The changes to employment and labour relations standards were made in recognition of the changing nature of the economy and the labour market in Ontario. We have developed a low-wage, precarious economy, in which a large proportion of workers

receive wages below the cost of living, and work in part-time, temporary, or contract positions. Workers have irregular hours, limited rights, and they are unlikely to qualify for benefits, pensions, or other features of stable, full-time employment (Lewchuk et al. 2015). Recent research has even found that more than 20 per cent of highly skilled professionals, such as those in business, law, and health care, are precariously employed (Hennessy and Tranjan 2018). As the Workers' Action Centre put it in their submission to the Changing Workplaces Review, "Changes in labour market regulation and practices have realigned the distribution of risks, costs, benefits, and power between employers and employees" (Gellatly 2015).

5.03 Unfortunately, as part of its practice of dismantling any progress that had been made for Ontarians under the previous government, the Ford government moved quickly to repeal most of the hard-won worker protections. While the government claimed the move would help make Ontario "open for business," it was really a direct attack on the well-being of low-wage, precariously employed workers.

5.04 The COVID-19 pandemic has served to drive home the consequences of poor labour protections. Initially, the lack of paid sick leave had Ontarians worried and confused about how to balance public safety with their legal rights and obligations. Meanwhile, lack of income, savings, or wealth has left millions of Ontarians vulnerable to business closures and economic shocks. While the government has taken emergency measures, and has reinstated several of the provisions that were scrapped when the *Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act* was repealed, this situation has underscored the need for comprehensive, permanent laws to protect workers, their families, and all Ontarians. The government should immediately repeal Bill 47 and reinstate the employment and labour relations standards that were implemented under the previous government.

6. LABOUR RIGHTS

6.01 The Ford government has demonstrated a troubling disregard for organized labour and the collective bargaining process. This has included intervening to end or prevent strike action, making it easier for public sector organizations to hire non-union employees, and reforming arbitration processes. In June 2019, the government introduced Bill 124, the *Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act*. The legislation, which imposes a wage cap on public sector compensation increases, is a clear violation of Ontarians' constitutional rights to

engage in unrestricted collective bargaining activity, which is guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The legislation is now the subject of multiple constitutional challenges, including from OECTA.

6.02 The government's willingness to impose unconstitutional legislation that tramples workers' rights should concern all Ontarians. There is a popular misconception that unions are bad for business, but evidence from Canada and around the world shows that in reality, organized labour reduces inequality and improves economic performance (Jaumotte and Buitron 2015; Fortin et al. 2012). Furthermore, the Supreme Court of Canada has affirmed the rights to unionize (Fine 2015a), to bargain collectively (Zussman 2016), and to strike (Fine 2015b). Moving forward, the government must show due respect for workers' rights, organized labour, and the collective bargaining process.

7. MINIMUM WAGES

7.01 The concept of the minimum wage as a tool to reduce poverty is the subject of fierce debate. Specifically, there are concerns that higher wages lead to increased consumer prices and reduced employment opportunities, which hurts the economy and low-income earners overall. However, as a group of respected economists put it when Ontario's minimum wage increases were being implemented in 2017, "careful studies find that recent minimum wage increases are boosting spending power for low-income workers and reducing inequality" (Osberg et al. 2017).

7.02 The decision to increase Ontario's minimum wage in 2017 was based on evidence showing that roughly a third of Ontario's labour force was working for less than \$15 per hour. While the stereotype tends to be that these are mostly young people, or that they are working for small businesses that cannot afford to increase costs, in reality the vast majority of minimum wage workers are over the age of 20, and most work for large companies with more than 500 employees (Macdonald 2017). As Erendira Bravo, a worker and social justice organizer, put it: "A \$15 minimum wage will not afford me a life of luxury, but it will reduce the pressure on me to juggle multiple jobs, give me some much-needed breathing room and a bit more time to spend with my family. We have already waited far too long for government to end sub-poverty wages" (OFL 2017).

7.03 When the Ford government took office, the Premier and other members of Cabinet claimed improved wages and labour standards were reducing employment opportunities. However, independent analysis found no indication that the minimum wage increase was causing widespread job loss or economic damage (Crawley 2018a; Herrera 2018). Still, the government cancelled the planned increase to \$15 per hour and replaced it with a tax credit for low-income Ontarians, despite the fact that a wage increase would have made recipients better off (Crawley 2018b).

7.04 Making shortsighted decisions to satisfy chambers of commerce or other friends in the business community is no way to develop policy. The government should look at the evidence, and the impact on the lives of working people, and immediately increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour.

8. BASIC INCOME PILOT

8.01 Although there are legitimate philosophical and practical questions about its efficacy, feasibility, or adequacy, basic income is a promising public policy measure for alleviating poverty in the short term, and managing public resources over the long term (Himelfarb and Hennessy 2016). This is why the previous government implemented a groundbreaking pilot program, to study the effects of a basic income in a variety of communities, over an extended period of time.

8.02 Despite an explicit campaign promise to continue with the project, the Ford government abruptly cancelled the Ontario Basic Income Pilot. This not only denied researchers in Ontario and around the world the ability to study the program (Monsebraaten 2018b), it betrayed the trust and harmed the well-being of the people and communities who were participating in the project (Ingram 2018).

8.03 Despite the research limitations, a recent study of Ontario's program has shown the potential of a basic income for improving health and well-being. Everyone who participated in the study reported having benefitted in some way, and for a significant number, basic income proved to be "transformational, fundamentally reshaping their living standards as well as their sense of self-worth and hope for a better future." The majority reported better physical and mental health, better living conditions, and improved family relationships. And contrary to conservative skepticism that a basic income might undermine the labour market, almost three-

quarters of those who were employed six months before receiving basic income were still working while receiving basic income (Ferdosi et al. 2020).

- 8.04** The government should immediately reinstate the Basic Income Pilot, so we can fully explore the effects of this policy, and determine its potential as part of a long-term strategy to reduce poverty and inequality in Ontario.

9. SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

- 9.01** Social assistance is the primary source of income for 6.7 per cent of Ontarians, and an integral transitional benefit for many more. But low benefit rates and strict program rules mean that despite the billions of dollars spent every year, the program does little to improve the lives of most recipients. In fact, the poverty gap – the distance between the poverty line and the total benefit from Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program – has worsened over time (Tiessen 2016). For years, there have been calls to fundamentally transform the system (Zon and Granofsky 2019; Lankin and Sheikh 2012).

- 9.02** The previous government introduced modest improvements, but the Ford government quickly proposed to undo them (Ferguson and Monsebraaten 2018). Lisa MacLeod, who was Minister of Children, Community and Social Services for the Ford government at the time of the announcement, claimed the new rules would be “compassionate.” But to most Ontarians, it was clear that the real focus was eliminating more than \$1 billion in public spending. And while the government said the reforms were necessary to encourage Ontarians to enter or re-enter the labour market, advocates said the new rules would actually benefit those who worked less, and penalize those who worked more (ISARC 2018).

- 9.03** In October 2019, following outcry from advocates and municipalities, the government announced it would be reversing some of its cuts. However, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about the government’s policies moving forward (Monsebraaten 2019a; Monsebraaten 2019b). A long-term solution is urgently needed. In 2018, an open letter from nearly 100 organizations urged the government to consider five principles for social assistance reform: income adequacy; economic and social inclusion; access and dignity; reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and human rights, equity, and fairness (ISAC 2018). These are worthy goals that Catholic teachers strongly urge the government take seriously.

10. CONCLUSION

10.01 On March 23, while announcing \$200 million in social services relief in response to the outbreak of COVID-19, Premier Doug Ford said the government “will spare no expense to protect the health and safety of all Ontarians. We are doing our part to show the Ontario spirit and make sure no one gets left behind.” This is a laudable attitude, but it should not take a public health emergency to bring it about. No matter the time or circumstances, our fundamental goal as a society should be to alleviate suffering and improve quality of life for all Ontarians.

10.02 The issues raised in this submission are just some of the elements of a robust poverty reduction strategy. No doubt the government will also receive detailed suggestions about health care, affordable housing, public transportation, and food security, to name a few. We hope the government will give these recommendations genuine consideration, and use the lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis to guide longer term planning. Most importantly, the Ford government must finally abandon the misguided notion that Ontarians can do more with less.

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