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# OECTA SUBMISSION

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# ON THE ONTARIO GOVERNMENT'S PLAN TO REOPEN SCHOOLS

July 2020  
REVISED

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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.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.01** The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the development of a plan to reopen schools.
- 1.02** The Ministry of Education certainly has an important role to play in developing the school reopening plan. Even if reopening is conducted on a regional basis, the government will need to set provincial standards for health and safety that are specific to the congregated nature of schools. The government will also need to consider changes and investments related to the physical plant, as well as to curriculum, reporting, and supports for students and teachers.
- 1.03** This process should include meaningful and consistent consultation with teacher and education worker unions, including through the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety and the Continuous Learning Workgroup. This will provide ongoing opportunities for the government to engage with the perspectives of those who are actually tasked with working in schools. The government must heed the advice offered by Catholic teachers and others in the education community before decisions are made.
- 1.04** At the same time, it must be understood that it is inappropriate for the government to interfere in matters related to teachers' collective agreements, or those that might otherwise affect teachers' working conditions. While the government should certainly be aware of the myriad challenges and considerations involved in reopening schools, most of the dialogue around the details of school operations and working conditions should occur between teachers' and education workers' representatives and provincial trustee associations. In fact, on behalf of teachers and students in publicly funded English Catholic schools, OECTA has already engaged in many such discussions with the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA).
- 1.05** OECTA looks forward to continuing these discussions about how we can provide safe, inclusive, and productive learning and working environments for all students, teachers, and staff.

## **2 FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE POLICY FRAMEWORK**

- 2.01** Both the Premier and the Minister of Education have said that they will not risk or compromise the safety of Ontario’s students. The reality is that until a vaccine for COVID-19 is developed and made available to the broader population, there will be risks associated with any decision to reopen publicly funded schools. However, these risks will be compounded should the government attempt to reopen schools prematurely or if all necessary health and safety protocols are not in place prior to reopening.
- 2.02** In developing a framework for the timing and manner by which schools are to reopen, the government must exercise extreme care, not only to promote the health and safety of everyone in the school environment, but also to ensure that discussions around operational and learning decisions occur in the appropriate setting, with the appropriate stakeholders. While it will not be possible to eliminate risks entirely, certain precautions and preconditions can be developed to mitigate those risks and to ensure that any provincial guidelines are flexible and responsive to local developments.
- 2.03 Examining Other Models**  
There is no “silver bullet” policy for when or how schools should reopen. That said, the government should already have turned its mind to weighing the risks and benefits of how other jurisdictions have approached the reopening of schools.
- 2.04** In addition to implementing a host of safety protocols such as wearing masks, hand washing, temperature checks, physical distancing, and reduced class size numbers, as well as optional attendance policies, many jurisdictions globally have opted for a phased-in approach to reopening schools.
- 2.05** In Denmark, which was one of the first countries to shut down economic and social activities, students in Grades 1 to 5 returned to school as part of a first phase of the government’s plan to reopen the economy, followed by the remaining students roughly one month later (Coughlan 2020). In Norway, nursery school and Kindergarten students returned first, with primary school students returning the following weeks (Government of Norway 2020). Reversing this order, in China, high

school students were the first to return to school at the end of April, students in middle school started back in mid-May, while primary school students were the last to return, with the government citing concerns around physical distancing as the rationale for this approach (Cavanagh 2020; VanderKlippe 2020). In the Philippines, the government has announced that students will not return to schools until a vaccine is available to the public (Ratcliffe 2020).

**2.06** In Canada, we have seen a variety of approaches to reopening schools. As of June, schools in British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island have reopened in some fashion, to varying degrees.

PROVINCE	REOPENING MODEL
BC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Schools open for all grades on optional, part-time basis.</li> <li>- Five-stage approach to reopening schools (currently in stage 2)</li> <li>- In Kindergarten to Grade 5, most students will go to school on alternating days. Students Grades 6 to 12 will go to school about one day a week.</li> <li>- Provincial health and safety protocols implemented.</li> </ul>
Manitoba	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Full classroom learning remains suspended.</li> <li>- Schools/region-specific protocols.</li> <li>- Schools reopened for staff and certain programming.</li> <li>- Students are able to meet with their teachers one-on-one or in small group settings for assessment, learning recovery, or planning for the upcoming school year.</li> <li>- Students are also able to use school computers or Wi-Fi on a scheduled basis, and access counselling services.</li> </ul>
Quebec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Daycares and elementary schools outside Montreal reopened, with a maximum of 15 students per classroom and safety protocols implemented.</li> <li>- Optional attendance.</li> <li>- Working plan has been created for two scenarios: (1) Classes resume full-time for 100 per cent of elementary and high school students in September; (2) Elementary students return to class 50 per cent of the time, and high school students attend in person between a third and half of the time.</li> </ul>
PEI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In-class instruction suspended.</li> <li>- Designated schools reopened to students with priority needs (e.g., students who receive individualized support from EA and youth service workers).</li> </ul>

**2.07** When considering models for reopening schools, the government must keep top of mind the health and safety of students, teachers, and staff, while also considering how particular models should be managed, as well as timelines and clear benchmarks should the government choose to adopt a multi-stage model.

**2.08 Guidelines for a Regional Approach**

The COVID-19 virus has had an uneven impact on Ontario communities, with some areas hit harder than others (Public Health Ontario 2020). This has led a number of public health experts to advise against a provincial or one-size-fits-all approach (McQuigge 2020; D’Amore 2020). In a proposal to Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, the province’s 34 regional medical officers of health outlined a series of benchmarks, with specific potential targets for infection rates and other criteria, to be achieved prior to reopening the economy (Gray and Grant 2020; Arthur 2020). The government has, albeit belatedly, acknowledged the value of this approach and is now pursuing a regional strategy (Benzie 2020).

**2.09** As a precondition to applying this approach to the education sector, the government must ensure there is adequate testing capacity in all areas of the province. Unless and until this is the case, there is simply no way to know whether the number of new COVID-19 cases has reduced sufficiently to consider reopening schools.

**2.10** Should the government choose to adopt a regional approach to reopening publicly funded schools, it will need to establish clear, data-driven benchmarks that are regionally reflective and responsive. This could involve developing provincial guidelines on issues such as virus spread and containment, health system capacity, and incidence tracking – combined with indicators for local monitoring and adaption. At the same time, these benchmarks would need to be coupled with a robust public health infrastructure, including the capacity for testing surveillance, tracing, isolation, and quarantine.

**2.11** Taking this regional approach would enable local health authorities to monitor progress, consult with local education leaders on a consistent basis, and make recommendations that are in the best interest of public health and safety.

## **2.12 Protocols for Positive COVID-19 Tests and/or a General Spike in Identified Cases**

Any strategy for reopening schools must include provisions for the potential that someone in the school environment may exhibit COVID-19 symptoms, and/or test positive for COVID-19, or that there may be a resurgence of COVID-19 in the broader community or province.

**2.13** We have seen examples of this from around the world. In Singapore, despite several weeks of low infection rates and a ban on public gatherings, the decision to keep schools open contributed to a second wave of COVID-19 cases, which forced the government to lock down the country (Ankel 2020). A similar situation has played out in Israel, where two weeks after reopening schools, a COVID-19 outbreak erupted – including 130 cases in one school – and forced the government to re-close schools indefinitely (Estrin 2020). In South Korea, around 250 schools near the capital of Seoul were closed just a few days after they reopened, after 79 new cases were reported (Crawford et al. 2020). Closer to home, the decision of the Quebec government to reopen certain elementary schools resulted in more than 40 new COVID-19 cases within the first several weeks (Perreux 2020).

**2.14** Given this potential, a policy must be in place to deal quickly and effectively with emergent cases. From the moment a student or staff member exhibits COVID-19-related symptoms, consideration must be given to the following: initial contact tracing; medical referral; isolation procedure; communication and notification to the school community; cleaning procedures, including the requirement for specialized equipment; the threshold for re-closing schools; and the procedure for individual(s) to return to the school workplace. In addition, a standardized testing protocol must be in place to mitigate the spread of infection from asymptomatic individuals.

## **2.15 Transparent, Consistent, and Reciprocal Communications Protocols**

The COVID-19 emergency has created panic and confusion among members of the public. A recent scientific survey of OECTA members has substantiated this point, with respondents indicating their levels of stress and anxiety have increased by 50 per cent since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These feelings of anxiety would likely be exacerbated should the government choose to reopen schools prior to a vaccine being developed. In fact, 93 per cent of respondents to the OECTA survey



expressed being very (71 per cent) or somewhat (22 per cent) concerned about returning to the classroom, even on the advice of Ontario's Chief Medical Officer. Similar apprehensions exist among students and families. In British Columbia, where schools reopened with a policy of voluntary attendance, less than a third of students returned to the classroom, despite the province's low infection rate (Hunter 2020).

**2.16** Given this, the government will need to pay particular attention to communications protocols, to ensure that parents, teachers, and students have all of the necessary information and are aware of health and safety protocols. The government will also need to consider the tools it uses for communication, so as to ensure relevant stakeholder groups are able to access required information (UNESCO 2020).

**2.17** In developing its communications outreach, the government should strive to be transparent about the factors used to make decisions, and the nature of the decision-making process. Perhaps more importantly, communication needs to be clear about the actions people can and must take to protect themselves and others from COVID-19. Finally, communication cannot be one-directional. The government must establish a mechanism for ongoing evaluation, as well as a feedback loop that promotes the flow of communication.

### **3 ENSURING SCHOOL FACILITIES ARE SAFE**

**3.01** It is imperative that every possible precaution be taken to ensure that students, teachers, and staff are safe from the moment they enter onto school property. As noted, many of the specific issues will need to be determined at the local level, and the local Joint Health and Safety Committees need to be actively engaged in this process. OECTA will continue to work with OCSTA, local health authorities, and other employee groups to develop protocols specific to the education sector. In a broader sense, with respect to infrastructure, there are two key areas for consideration: physical and environmental.

#### **3.02 Physical Considerations**

From an infrastructure perspective, school facilities are not well-positioned to respond to situations like the COVID-19 emergency. Since the 1970s, the physical

construction of Ontario schools has been driven by economic and demographic considerations, rather than public health concerns (McQuigge 2020).

**3.03** The strict formula, which allocates 9.2 square metres per elementary school student and 12.1 square metres per high school student, has created dense spaces that are not easily conducive to physical distancing (Ontario 2010). Add to this, many school facilities feature enclosed classrooms, narrow hallways, and common spaces with limited functions, such as cafeterias. This will create challenges that may require modified physical layouts. For instance, in South Korea, school cafeterias were fitted with partitions to ensure separation between students (Strauss 2020). In other cases, cafeterias have been converted from single-use to multi-use areas (McQuigge 2020). In modifying physical layouts, consideration will need to be made for students with special education needs. And some programs – such as library or physical education programs – may be affected if additional space is required for classroom learning.

**3.04** Attention will also need to be paid to installing physical barriers, particularly in high-traffic areas and communal spaces, as well as to providing guides and signage to ensure that students, teachers, and staff maintain safe distances. In some cases, upgrades, renovations, or installations may be required to ensure proper hygiene facilities are available, such as washrooms or handwashing stations, as many classrooms and portables lack the access to running water necessary for regular hand washing. In other cases, some communal facilities, such as water fountains, will need to be shut down and/or removed.

**3.05 Environmental Considerations**

Health and safety committees, which include teacher and education worker union representatives, will need to work with school boards and public health authorities to implement and review protocols for regular cleaning and disinfection for all school facilities, especially for frequently touched surfaces. The requirement for regular and thorough cleaning raises questions about the need for additional staff, specialized equipment, and additional shifts required to complete these tasks, which will need to be agreed to by trustee associations and teacher and education worker representatives, with appropriate funding provided by the government.

**3.06** Ventilation is another issue that will need to be considered. It will be necessary for school boards to ensure that ventilation systems are operating properly and optimally. This will be of particular importance in cases where schools use portables, especially those not equipped with adequate ventilation systems. School boards will also need to be vigilant in fulfilling their obligation to conduct air quality assessments.

**3.07** The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) has recommended that school windows be opened to increase circulation of outside air. While at first glance this suggestion may seem helpful, it raises a number of associated issues that would need to be addressed. For example, many schools in Ontario contain windows that do not open, or open only slightly. Even where windows could be opened fully, it may not be advisable to do so, either because of cold weather or because of the significant strain open windows can put on internal ventilation systems. Ultimately, any proposed actions, such as opening windows, would need to be balanced against the competing rights of students – in this case, students who suffer from respiratory issues, such as asthma.

**3.08** The Association has and will continue to work with OCSTA and local health authorities to determine the best course of action to satisfy issues related to physical and environmental infrastructure prior to schools reopening.

#### **4 ENSURING THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND STAFF**

**4.01** While it is the responsibility of the government to determine preconditions for reopening schools, it should be left to teacher and education worker unions, trustee associations, and local public health authorities to work through all the operational issues. Local Joint Health and Safety Committees need to be actively engaged in this process, and it will be critical to align operational and logistical protocols with public health recommendations, to ensure a safe and healthy environment for students, teachers, and staff.

##### **4.02 Operational Considerations**

Chief among the operational issues to be considered by education unions, trustee associations, and public health authorities is ensuring all necessary medical

protections for everyone in the school environment. This involves a range of discussions around issues including, but not limited to, personal protective equipment, testing, and health checks. This will also involve determining accommodations and exemptions, especially for vulnerable populations (including anyone whose underlying medical conditions may put them at risk, older students who are frontline essential workers, students whose parents work in hospitals, teachers with compromised immune systems or who have greater risk factors, etc.), as well as a process to prioritize accommodations and exemptions in a timely manner.

- 4.03** Consideration will also need to be paid to students with histories of violence. In many cases, student safety plans include procedures for classroom evacuation in the event of a violent incident. However, a student who is exhibiting violent behaviours may be less likely to respect social boundaries or health and safety protocols. If masks are not faithfully or appropriately worn during an incident of violence or evacuation, students, teachers, and/or staff could be put at risk of exposure to COVID-19. As such, policies and procedures concerning students with histories of violence, as well as safety plans, may need to be reviewed and revised.
  
- 4.04** Physical distancing will also be a priority discussion between teacher and education worker unions, trustee associations, and public health authorities. Broadly speaking, physical distancing measures can be categorized in two ways: increasing separation and decreasing interaction. Although physical distancing may have different implementations for students in different grades, in different regions, it should be encouraged in all relevant areas of school property, both indoors and outdoors.
  
- 4.05** To ensure that any possible school reopening is reflective of local contexts, OECTA will work with OCSTA to determine policy and protocols on a range of issues, from transportation, to experiential learning, to extra-curricular activities, to modified scheduling/cohorting, health and safety training, and more. It may be necessary in some cases for the government to provide supplementary funding in order to hire additional staff, not only to potentially accommodate decreased class sizes, but also to carry-out new requirements such as entry/exit screening.

#### **4.06 Behavioural Considerations**

To promote health and safety, school boards will need to implement behavioural policies that address hygiene and daily practices within schools. These considerations will range from policies on wearing cloth masks when and where appropriate, to handwashing requirements, to ensuring access to adequate materials and supplies to help prevent transmission. This likely will also involve establishing practices for regular, ongoing disinfecting of high-touch surfaces, and disinfecting of shared materials, lockers, desks, etc. These behavioural protocols will need to be reinforced with visible signage and messaging to remind students, teachers, and staff of requirements and best practices.

- 4.07** The Association has been working with OCSTA on these and a number of other issues related to health and safety protocols, in consultation with public health officials. Early collaboration between teacher and education worker unions and trustee associations is needed to develop and implement all necessary measures. It will be important to maintain policy flexibility, and to work with local Joint Health and Safety Committees in order to modify approaches as needed.

### **5 STUDENT AND TEACHER WELL-BEING**

- 5.01** Although everyone is eager to get back to the classroom and resume more normal ways of teaching and learning, we must recognize that the COVID-19 emergency has been traumatic. Our lives have been upended, our loved ones have experienced health crises or economic hardships, and everyone has dealt with some level of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and grief. The experience has been particularly difficult for children, who have a limited capacity to understand the situation, and have to do so largely without the support of friends or extended family. The school closures, while necessary for public safety, have also had negative effects. Before we can focus on the curriculum, we need to ensure that we are managing the social and emotional consequences of the pandemic.

- 5.02** In addition to the impact on learning from the loss of classroom interaction with their teachers and peers, students will have lost their social hub, as well as activities and experiences that are important for their sense of accomplishment and belonging.

Some older students might have been performing duties as frontline workers. And some students will have missed out on important services, like nutrition programs, while being subjected to living situations that are uncomfortable, stressful, or even dangerous. Advocates feared a spike in child abuse cases during the pandemic, as people have been forced into their homes, but the reality has been worse – there has actually been a reduction in reports, because schools and school boards have not been able to intervene (Haines and Jones 2020; Ward 2020).

**5.03** Teachers have also faced a number of challenges during the pandemic that could have lasting effects. While trying our best to guide students and their families through the emergency distance learning program, we have also been grappling with the broader societal impacts, caring for family members who may have fallen ill or lost their jobs, managing children who are out of school, and helping friends and neighbours who need assistance. Also, as was detailed earlier, teachers are understandably anxious about the health and safety implications of returning to school. These fears will need to be alleviated if we are to do our jobs effectively and deliver a safe and smooth transition back to school.

**5.04** All of this points to a need for significant investments in services, programs, and mental health supports to help students and teachers make successful transitions back to the classroom. Even before the COVID-19 emergency, more than 12,000 children and youth were on waiting lists to access mental health services, and many were having to turn to emergency services through clinics and hospitals (CMHO 2018; MHASEF Research Team 2017). As schools reopen, the government must provide funding for school boards to hire additional professional staff, such as psychologists, social workers, and child and youth workers. Teachers should also be provided with additional professional learning supports through School Mental Health Ontario. And, as OECTA and others have been saying for many years, there should be significantly more co-ordination between the Ministry of Education and other ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, to ensure everyone has access to the comprehensive, ongoing services and supports they need.

## **6 SUPPORTING STUDENT LEARNING**

- 6.01** While students will be returning to school having had different experiences with, and reactions to, the pandemic and the school closures, they will also have had widely varying experiences with the emergency distance learning program. Research indicates that despite everyone's best efforts, a "COVID slide" will result in students being substantially behind in areas such as mathematics. There will also be more variability between students than under normal circumstances (Kuhfeld et al. 2020). The Ministry of Education has encouraged school boards to implement expanded summer learning opportunities, but we cannot expect that this will be sufficient to make up for the loss in learning some students will have experienced.
- 6.02** As schools reopen, teachers will need opportunities to assess students, formally and informally, to determine their learning needs. But the government must take responsibility for providing school boards with resources for supports to fill the 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, 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 has been amply shown to boost learning and achievement, particularly for vulnerable students (Schanzenbach 2014).
- 6.03** Catholic teachers are especially concerned about students with special education needs. Even before the pandemic, school leaders repeatedly reported that special education was one of their greatest areas of strain, with needs far outpacing the resources provided by the provincial government. For example, 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 and 77:1 in secondary (People for Education 2019). For a variety of reasons, many students with special education needs will have had particular difficulties engaging with the emergency distance learning program. As we return to schools, it will be imperative that proper funding is available to support these students.

- 6.04** We also have to recognize that in addition to the learning gaps that will exist as a result of the school closures and the emergency distance learning program, the modified learning environments that will be required when schools reopen will also affect the ability of teachers and students to adhere to curriculum expectations. If distance learning is going to be a necessary component for the time being, we have to recognize that students will continue to have varying capacities to participate and succeed. Also, whenever students and teachers are able to access school buildings, much time will be taken up establishing new routines, following cleaning and hygiene protocols, enforcing physical distancing, and so on.
- 6.05** In consultation with teachers' organizations and other education experts, the Ministry of Education will need to modify curriculum outcomes for 2020-21, and perhaps beyond, to focus on overall expectations for Kindergarten to Grade 8, and key areas of learning for Grades 9 to 12. Obviously, the government should also pause planned curriculum changes, such as the introduction of a new math curriculum, and refrain from introducing any other major initiatives or reforms. Furthermore, in consultation with teachers' organizations, the Ministry of Education will have to clearly articulate, before the school year begins, expectations around assessment and reporting.
- 6.06** Finally, it is clear that depending on the spread of COVID-19 and evolving public health advice, schools may need to be closed again after the school year has begun. As was noted earlier, a plan for school closures should be included as part of the reopening plan, and should be based in large part on advice about emergency distance learning that has already been provided to the Ministry of Education by teachers' organizations through the Continuous Learning Workgroup.

## **7 RESPECTING TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT**

- 7.01** According to Andreas Schleicher (2020), Director for Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "In this crisis, even the best education minister cannot do justice to the needs of millions of students, hundreds of thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of schools. The challenge is to build on the expertise of teachers and school leaders and enlist them in addressing the challenges."



**7.02** Unfortunately, this has not always been the approach in Ontario. Teacher and education worker unions have given plenty of input to the government regarding the school closures and emergency distance learning, but our advice has too often been disregarded or ignored. Moreover, the Minister of Education has repeatedly questioned and undermined the professionalism of Ontario’s teachers, particularly with regard to synchronous learning. The Ministry of Education’s framework for continued learning states that “school boards and educators will be expected to move fluently between in person and online delivery,” including the use of synchronous learning, but it is imperative that the government understand how dangerous and unfair it can be to force teachers and students to use platforms they may not have access to or be able to use safely and effectively.

**7.03** Our Association has identified a number of well-founded concerns around the use of synchronous learning, particularly live video or audio. For example:

- Not all students, families, or even teachers have sufficient or reliable access to the technology needed to facilitate live online learning.
- Many students and teachers have family situations, care obligations, or time constraints that prohibit them from being able to participate in synchronous learning at scheduled times.
- It can be difficult to protect both teachers’ and students’ privacy when using live video or audio.
- There is no way for teachers to prevent inappropriate situations or images from being overheard or projected.
- Sessions could be recorded and shared without appropriate permissions, which would violate teachers’ and students’ privacy rights.
- Although most platforms have enhanced security capabilities, stories abound of uninvited participants spying on or disrupting live video or audio sessions. Most teachers will not have received adequate professional development to ensure they and their students are protected at all times.
- Videoconferencing and webcasting apps and services often share data with third parties, such as Facebook, which are non-compliant with privacy legislation and school board policies. Personal information that is provided to access the platforms may be accessed by others and used for nefarious purposes.

- Partnerships with corporate technology providers, and the use of platforms owned by for-profit entities, represent a troubling incursion of privatization and commercialization into the publicly funded education system.

- 7.04** Ontario teachers are highly trained, certified professionals, who have direct knowledge and understanding of our students' needs. OECTA strongly believes that it would be in everyone's best interests to allow teachers to exercise professional judgment when it comes to decisions about whether or when to engage in synchronous learning. Any successful approach will require that teachers be "trusted and empowered to deploy appropriate delivery of distance learning, utilizing tools that are fit for the purpose and relevant to the subject, content and skills being learned, as well as to the age and stage of the students" (Doucet et al. 2020).
- 7.05** If the government plans to insist on synchronous learning as part of a blended learning scenario, it is crucial that they provide the necessary resources for it to be done properly. This includes ensuring that all students and teachers have access to technology, and providing resources for teachers to engage in professional development to be able to use synchronous learning techniques and platforms in a safe and pedagogically sound manner.
- 7.06** The government also must ensure that the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), which thanks to recent governance changes is essentially an arm of the Ministry of Education, acts responsibly when it comes to investigating or disciplining teachers for issues related to the use of synchronous learning. It is well known that in recent years, the OCT has actively sought opportunities to scrutinize teachers' behaviour, including advertising its surveillance function to the public, and openly praising those school boards that submit higher-than-average numbers of complaints. As a result, there has been a proliferation of frivolous, sometimes vexatious, complaints against teachers. Even if a teacher is eventually cleared of any wrongdoing, such an experience can have significant scarring effects on their personal well-being and professional reputation.
- 7.07** Teachers recognize the extraordinary situation everyone is in, and we want to do everything possible to help students and families navigate these difficult times. We also accept that we are responsible for creating safe, positive learning environments,

even in the virtual world. However, the government must recognize that synchronous learning, live video in particular, increases the potential for inappropriate behaviours from participants. The Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association has acknowledged this reality, and has advised school boards to exercise a greater degree of caution before submitting any complaints to the College. The government must do its part not only by encouraging respect for teachers among the public, but also by ensuring that the OCT is reasonable in its approach to oversight.

## **8 EQAO TESTING**

- 8.01** As the Ministry of Education (2013) has put it, "A teacher's professional judgment is the cornerstone of assessment and evaluation." In developing plans for the next school year and beyond, during which teachers and students will be managing a number of challenges, it is more important than ever that we do away with the unproductive large-scale tests administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), and allow teachers to use their training and skills to decide when and how to gauge student progress.
- 8.02** The negative consequences of standardized testing on students' health, well-being, learning, and performance are well established (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. Surely, as students return to school under these extraordinary circumstances, Ontarians will want to encourage as much creativity and flexibility as possible among teachers, rather than stifling them by continuing to insist on a misguided, outdated form of measurement.
- 8.03** We already know that the data obtained from province-wide standardized testing is not particularly useful. In fact, it can be actively counterproductive, as it "distorts the perception of student achievement and the quality of student learning" (OTF 2017).

And while some argue that EQAO is necessary to measure progress over time or identify areas of need within schools or school boards, this justification is invalidated when the learning environment will have changed so much, and students will be dealing with so many unfamiliar ways of doing things. Even if the data obtained from past EQAO tests was valid and robust, there will be no way to reliably compare results from the COVID-19 era to any that came before.

- 8.04** The tide was already turning against EQAO testing before this crisis arrived. The previous government appointed a set of advisors to undertake a comprehensive study of Ontario's assessment regime, and they made a slew of recommendations for reform, including phasing out EQAO testing in Grade 3 (Campbell et al. 2018). Charles Pascal, former Deputy Minister of Education and Chair of EQAO, has argued that given how far the agency had strayed from its original mandate, the government should suspend EQAO testing (CBC 2020). With the pandemic now necessitating so many changes to how schools will operate and how learning will take place, there is simply no justification for continuing to insist on the value of standardized testing. If the government is not willing to eliminate the EQAO entirely, it should at least suspend the tests for the 2020-21 school year, and fully empower teachers to use their professional judgment to conduct assessments and evaluations for, as, and of learning.

## **9 EDUCATION BUDGET**

- 9.01** With the government having not yet released the education funding formula for the 2020-21 school year, we cannot be sure of how spending might be affected by the COVID-19 emergency. However, budget documents indicate that the plan was essentially to freeze education spending over the next three years. The government must understand, in no uncertain terms, that this is simply not tenable.
- 9.02** Before the arrival of the COVID-19 emergency, OECTA and many other stakeholders were already warning of the need for investments in infrastructure and repairs, new technology, services and supports for students with special education and mental health needs, and more. The various arrangements that will be required to make schools safe and productive while we deal with the pandemic will only increase the need for funding.

**9.03** Of course, Ontarians understand the impact the pandemic has had and will have on the provincial budget. However, this cannot be an excuse for the government to freeze funding, or worse, try to extract resources from the publicly funded education system. Despite the short-term economic and fiscal pain, Ontario's long-term health and prosperity depend on our ability to provide students with safe, inclusive, and stimulating learning environments. It is crucial that the government follow through on its responsibility to provide a comprehensive response to this public health crisis, which must include properly funding publicly funded education.

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