

GRANTS FOR STUDENT NEEDS 2021-22

TO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

January 2021

ONTARIO ENGLISH
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

January 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
2.	EDUCATION FOR ALL	2
	Consultation and Collaboration.....	2
	Class Size	3
	Mental Health	5
	Special Education	6
	Online Learning	7
	Safer Schools for All.....	9
	Infrastructure and Technology	10
	Education Quality and Accountability Office	11
	Full-day Kindergarten.....	13
	Indigenous Education.....	14
	English Language Learners.....	15
	Adult and Continuing Education	16
	Professional Development.....	17
	Holding School Boards to Account	18
	Publicly Funded Catholic Education	19
3.	CONCLUSION.....	20
4.	WORKS CITED	21

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.01** The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association welcomes the opportunity to offer input for the development of the 2021-22 Grants for Student Needs.
- 1.02** In November, before then-Finance Minister Rod Phillips belatedly tabled the 2020 provincial budget, our Association urged a strong public response to the COVID-19 emergency, including substantial investments in child care and publicly funded education. We were disappointed that the government failed to heed this advice, instead releasing a fiscal plan that included no new investments in education for this year and projected an effective funding freeze over the next two years.
- 1.03** This is especially concerning because the government's actions this year have already been woefully inadequate. It was only thanks to the hard work and resolve of teachers, education workers, families, and other Ontarians that the government was forced to retreat from the \$900 million in cuts contained in the 2019-20 education budget, and even then, core-pupil funding for 2020-21 did not keep up with inflation and enrolment growth.
- 1.04** Furthermore, despite the government's repeated claims to have spent "up to \$1.3 billion" to support school reopening for the current school year, in reality the provincial government put forward only \$413 million in additional funding. Another \$381 million was provided in September by the federal government, with a second installment in January. The other \$496 million comes from the reallocation of school board reserves, meaning that it has been left up to school boards, if they are able, to decide whether to reallocate these funds from other areas. 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).
- 1.05** The consequences of the government's inaction have been significant. At the time of writing, Ontario has reported more than 7,000 school-related cases of COVID-19, affecting more than 30 per cent of publicly funded schools. Many classes and schools have had to isolate or close due to outbreaks, and two school staff have died. Though the government refused to admit that they had failed to do enough to keep

communities and schools safe, all schools were forced to move to a period of remote learning coming out of the winter break. Meanwhile, throughout the year, learning conditions for students have been negatively affected by constant school reorganizations, insufficient supports to deal with learning gaps, and situations in which teachers are delivering in-class and remote learning simultaneously. While widespread vaccination is on the horizon before next school year, the government will have to remain willing and able to make the real investments teachers and other experts have been calling for should the COVID-19 pandemic continue.

- 1.06** At the same time, as we look ahead to the post-pandemic world, it is crucial that we take the opportunity to reset and reinvest in the long-term health and prosperity of our province. Ontario's publicly funded education system is among the best in the world, but even before the arrival of COVID-19 there was much room for improvement. And despite the best efforts of teachers and families, many students will have experienced some loss of learning in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years (Gallagher-Mackay 2020). As the provincial budget and education funding formula are developed for next year, it is imperative that the Ford government prioritize publicly funded education and do what is necessary to make schools as safe, welcoming, and productive as possible.

2. EDUCATION FOR ALL

2.01 Consultation and Collaboration

The successful reform of Ontario's publicly funded education system since 2003 has been due in large part to the way evidence and experience have guided education policymaking, and the important investments that have been made in programs with well-established, long-term benefits. The co-operative professional relationship between policymakers and teachers in Ontario has been held up as a model for others to follow, providing further evidence that education systems work best when education policy is developed collaboratively (Schleicher 2018; OECD 2011).

- 2.02** As the frontline workers in the field of education, teachers possess firsthand knowledge and experience of how education policy works in the classroom, and which practices and methods are most conducive to student success. Genuine consultations with teacher unions and other education stakeholders could help to

guide decisions about education policy in a way that would minimize disruption for students and ensure positive outcomes over the long run.

2.03 Unfortunately, the government has chosen a much less constructive route. Since they came to office, the Ford government has been developing policies with little understanding of how publicly funded schools in Ontario actually work, and with little regard for the perspectives of the professionals who work in schools every day. In the case of reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, our Association has been trying since March to engage the government in constructive dialogue about how to make schools as safe as possible while meeting the needs of all students, but our suggestions and proposals have been rejected at almost every turn. In some cases, meetings have been scheduled on very short notice, with little opportunity for serious conversation. And at times, the government has made a disingenuous show of soliciting input, only calling in teachers' unions when decisions had already been made.

2.04 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). **Moving forward, it will be a far better use of everyone's time and resources for the government to engage in regular, open, and constructive dialogue with teachers and education workers, and to heed the advice of those on the frontlines of publicly funded education.**

2.05 Class Size

The benefits of smaller class sizes are well established. For example, after a thorough review of the research, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach (2014) of the US National Education Policy Center concluded, "Class size is one of the most-studied education policies, and an extremely rigorous body of research demonstrates the importance of class size in positively influencing student achievement." By contrast, no study currently exists that documents advantages for student learning that result from increasing class sizes.

- 2.06** In the most comprehensive and well known study, the Tennessee STAR project, assessment results consistently favoured those students who had been in small classes, with carryover effects lasting throughout their academic careers (Finn et al. 2001; Krueger and Whitmore 2000; Mosteller 1995). Reductions in class size have also been associated with improvements in students' psychological engagement with school, more positive reactions to teachers and peers, higher levels of interest and motivation, lower levels of boredom and anxiety, a greater sense of belonging, and more optimism and confidence (Dee and West 2011). There are also long-term socio-economic benefits associated with smaller class sizes, such as public savings in terms of lower health and welfare costs (Fredriksson, Öckert, and Oosterbeek 2011; Krueger 2003; Muennig and Woolf 2007).
- 2.07** While class size reductions are generally targeted toward primary students, these factors also point to the benefits of smaller classes for junior, intermediate, and secondary students, who are often dealing with a range of intellectual, social, and emotional challenges while struggling to develop "the skills of productive citizenry." All students need the time and attention of a dedicated teacher, which can only be guaranteed if class sizes are manageable (Wasley 2002).
- 2.08** The Ford government has pointed to jurisdictions in Canada with higher class size averages than Ontario as counterevidence to the benefits of smaller class sizes. However, it is important to note that collective agreements in British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec offset higher class size averages by ensuring additional supports/educators based on class composition. The fact is, reductions in class size since 2003 have resulted in Ontario achieving the highest four- and five-year graduation rates in the province's history, and Ontario's system of publicly funded education routinely ranks among the best in Canada and the world.
- 2.09** The Ford government has been widely criticized for their choice not to reduce class sizes in the 2020-21 school year to facilitate proper physical distancing and prevent the spread of COVID-19, something medical experts at the Hospital for Sick Children said should be a "priority strategy" for reopening schools (Ogilvie and Mendleson 2020). But Ontarians also have not forgotten that the government previously increased class sizes in Grades 4 to 12 – and sought even greater increases in class size averages for secondary students – even though this idea had been

overwhelmingly rejected in the government's public consultation (Rushowy 2020; Dhanraj 2019). These have been troubling examples of the Ford government clearly prioritizing financial savings over student well-being.

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

2.11 Mental Health

There are longstanding shortcomings in Ontario's mental health system, particularly as it pertains to children and youth. According to recent data, almost 20 per cent of students in Grades 7 to 12 in Ontario report their mental health as fair or poor, but the majority say they do not know where to turn for assistance (MHASEF Research Team 2015; Boak et al. 2017). More than 12,000 children and youth are waiting to access mental health services, many of whom are having to turn to emergency services through clinics and hospitals (CMHO 2018; MHASEF Research Team 2017).

2.12 The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified and exacerbated these issues. Studies show children have become more susceptible to poverty and food insecurity, child abuse, neglect, physical inactivity, and instances of anxiety and depression (Carpenter 2020; Pringle 2020). Parents have also expressed concerns about the amount of time young people are spending with electronic devices rather than peers – a problem the government has made worse by mandating a full day of online learning for remote classes, even for the youngest learners (Fahmy and Ross 2021; Jackson 2020; McGinn 2020).

2.13 The Ford government contends it is building a modern, comprehensive mental health and addictions system, with planned investments of \$3.8 billion over 10 years. **Catholic teachers recommend that a significant portion of these investments be used to enhance mental health services in schools.** Providing supports in schools, where children and youth already spend much of their time, can help reduce stigma, connect students to their communities, and deliver more responsive, cost-effective service. Of course, geographic and demographic needs will need to be

considered to ensure that no regions or populations are disadvantaged. For the most efficient and effective services, there should be co-ordination between the Ministry of Education and other ministries, further exploration of the community hub model, and regular consultation with the representatives of frontline teachers and education workers.

2.14 The government also has a duty to consider the mental health needs of teachers and education workers. According to research from the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2020), close to 70 per cent of teachers across the country are concerned for their own mental health and well-being, and 75 per cent say they are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their personal and professional expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The vast majority – including 99 per cent of OECTA members who took the survey – do not feel they are being supported by their Ministry of Education as they cope with these struggles.

2.15 In addition to targeting mental health resources specifically for teachers, the government can take a look at how its own behaviour has contributed to the crisis, through the failure to engage in genuine consultation with frontline workers, the pattern of last-minute decision-making, and the open antagonism with regard to synchronous learning and teachers' professional judgment. The government should also ensure that school administrators are honouring teachers' contractual rights to access sick leave for mental health issues, including by finding qualified occasional teachers to fill teacher absences.

2.16 Special Education

For some time, schools across the province have been experiencing difficulty providing for all students' special education needs. It has been reported that more than 80 per cent of school boards are spending more on special education than they are allotted by the province, and some students are being asked to stay home because their school is not able to provide appropriate services and supports on a daily basis (McQuigge 2018; Rushowy and Ferguson 2015). Only 72 per cent of rural elementary schools report having a full-time special education teacher, and the average ratio of students receiving special education support to special education teachers is 38:1 in elementary school and 77:1 in secondary school (People for Education 2019). And because school boards are reluctant to go through the

Identification, Placement, and Review Committee process, students often go far too long without their learning needs being acknowledged. They do not get the proper interventions while they are awaiting identification, and it is more difficult to build new skills or change attitudes when identification finally happens (OECTA 2020).

- 2.17** The Ford government does not have a track record of making things better. For example, they previously drastically reduced a planned, long-needed increase to the Special Incidence Portion, which provides specialized staff and materials for high needs students. They also cut the Local Priorities Fund, only replacing it with the Supports for Students Fund after a lengthy struggle by OECTA and other education unions at the bargaining table. And they have put families of children with autism through an incredible ordeal, first announcing a widely condemned move from a needs-based support system to a fixed amount, then walking back this decision but delaying implementation of the new program, leaving more than 27,000 children on the waitlist for services (Waberi 2020; Sharkie 2019). Recent news that the government is seeking outside agencies to assess children’s needs has raised more fears that the new program will be guided by bureaucratic considerations rather than clinical evidence (MacMillan 2021).
- 2.18** **Students with special education needs have faced particular challenges and anxieties during the COVID-19 pandemic, and advocates say these students have not received the supports they need for either in-class or remote learning (OHRC 2020; Trick 2020). As we look forward to a post-pandemic publicly funded education system, it is imperative that the government maintain and enhance support for these students, to successfully reintegrate them with their peers and mitigate any learning loss that will have occurred.**
- 2.19** **Online Learning**
- Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government’s decision to implement mandatory e-learning for Ontario high school students generated a significant amount of discussion. At the time, our Association and others warned that introducing mandatory e-learning would raise a number of issues with respect to student learning, access and equity, privacy, as well as how the platform would be administered (OECTA 2020; Parker 2020; Farhadi 2019).

- 2.20** The extraordinary circumstances created by COVID-19, along with the government's refusal to put in place measures to ensure schools are as safe as possible, have necessitated a greater reliance on online learning throughout the pandemic. And while Catholic teachers have done everything possible to help students and families navigate these difficult times, this experience has served to highlight and exacerbate some of the structural and pedagogical flaws with this mode of delivery.
- 2.21** For instance, in a study of online learning during the pandemic, researchers surveyed more than 1,000 families and concluded that remote learning was having a disproportionate negative impact on "students of colour from low-income households," compared to students from more affluent families. The study identified lower levels of schoolwork completion and class engagement among these students, and highlighted how online learning widens the "distance learning gap" between students from traditionally high-performing and traditionally low-performing groups (Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin, Wyatt, and Le 2020).
- 2.22** These findings reinforce pre-pandemic concerns expressed by OECTA and others, including how online learning "is producing new geographies of inequality" in which only a minority of students succeed (OECTA 2020; Farhadi 2019). Although the government frequently speculates on the possibilities of expanded online learning post-pandemic, it is worth remembering that increases to online learning correspond to hundreds of fewer hours of vital face-to-face interaction between students and teachers, interactions that allow teachers to better identify students who may need additional supports.
- 2.23** The pandemic has also laid bare ongoing and significant issues with delivery infrastructure. Reliable broadband access remains uneven across the province, with northern and rural areas facing significant gaps in service. This has been compounded by several internet outages, even in urban areas (McKay 2021). As well, many families in Ontario cannot afford high speed internet, or the technology required to access online courses (Butler 2020; CBC 2019b). Pursuing online learning without providing corresponding additional funding to ensure equitable access will have a negative impact on the student learning experience.

- 2.24** As the government begins to think about the education sector beyond the current pandemic emergency, it will be essential that students and teachers be provided with appropriate resources and supports to facilitate achievement. This includes **providing teachers who demonstrate interest with teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development opportunities related to online learning.**
- 2.25** At the same time, research has clearly established in-person instruction as the ideal and most equitable model of learning for students (Cornelius-White 2007). The Minister of Education has admitted this publicly (OHRC 2020; TVO 2020). As such, the government must not rush to expand online offerings, or extend service delivery to private entities beyond the publicly funded education system. Instead, **the government should commit to studying the pandemic experience of online learning, to identify persistent structural gaps, and then should address those gaps with adequate investments.**
- 2.26 Safer Schools for All**
Over the past year, most attention with regard to health and safety in schools has been focused on the Ford government's inadequate efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, as we look ahead to the 2021-22 school year, when widespread inoculation will hopefully have reduced the need for such measures, we must remember the significant challenges that existed before COVID-19 arrived.
- 2.27** Of particular concern is the problem of violence against teachers. In our 2017 survey of classroom teachers, 85 per cent of respondents said the incidence of violence against teachers is increasing, while 80 per cent said incidents are becoming more severe. This has repercussions for everyone in the school community. More than three-quarters of respondents said violence in schools makes teaching more difficult, and more than a quarter have had to take time away from work due to the physical or mental toll of a violent incident (OECTA 2017a).
- 2.28** Despite greater attention to this problem over the past few years, and negotiated obligations for school administrators to report incidents of violence, we are still a long way from implementing the solutions outlined in our *Safer Schools for All* platform (OECTA 2017b). Most importantly, **the government must provide resources for more child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists,**

and other professional services to help students deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs. These investments will help students manage their behaviours and achieve academic success in the short and long term, while enabling teachers and the rest of the school community to focus on making learning happen in a safe and secure environment.

2.29 Recent tragedies have also given rise to renewed attention on bullying. However, here again the government's response has been largely cosmetic. Rather than tinkering with the definition of bullying, the government should be encouraging and facilitating collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services on a proactive, multi-faceted response that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of bullying.

2.30 Infrastructure and Technology

The need for urgent and comprehensive upgrades to Ontario's publicly funded schools predates the COVID-19 emergency. In 2019, news reports revealed that the repair backlog for schools had exceeded \$16.3 billion (Rushowy 2019). By that point, according to a report by economist Hugh Mackenzie, the physical condition of schools had already deteriorated to such an extent that hundreds of schools needed to be replaced entirely (Mackenzie 2017).

2.31 While the issue of school infrastructure is not a new problem, unfortunately the current government has done little to rectify the situation. In July 2020, the Minister of Education announced \$500 million toward refurbishing schools, as part of the government's 10-year, \$13 billion commitment. However, observers were quick to note that this was \$3 billion less than what the previous government had committed to spend over the same period (Benzie 2017), and well short of what is needed to keep pace with the repair backlog. Data also show a persistent lack of funding in technology, poor or uneven internet connectivity, and insufficient access to technology-related professional development for teachers (People for Education 2019). A 2018 report by the Ontario Auditor General found that students' access to classroom technology varied widely across the province, as did the age of equipment and software.

- 2.32** The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that school facilities are not well-positioned to respond public health emergencies. Since the 1970s, the physical construction of Ontario schools has been driven by economic and demographic considerations, rather than public health concerns (McQuigge 2020). And technology has not kept pace with students' educational needs.
- 2.33** This has a detrimental impact on the learning environment. Research has clearly established the relationship between school facility conditions, student academic achievement, and teacher effectiveness (Earthman 2002). Quite simply, no one should be forced to work or learn in buildings with leaking roofs, poor ventilation, mold, and other dangers. **The government must provide immediate, stable, and sufficient annual funding for infrastructure and repairs, new technology, as well as services and supports for all students, including those with special education and mental health needs.**
- 2.34 Education Quality and Accountability Office**
Catholic teachers were pleased by the government's decision to suspend EQAO testing in Grades 3 and 6 for the 2020-21 school year, something we had been asking them to do for months. However, more recent overtures by the government to "modernize" EQAO are cause for significant concern.
- 2.35** The negative consequences of standardized testing on students' health, well-being, learning, and performance are well-known (Heissel et al. 2018; Kempf 2016; Segool et al. 2013). Looking specifically at Ontario, recent research from international education expert Andy Hargreaves (2020) found that any supposed benefits of EQAO for monitoring progress and stimulating higher expectations for achievement "have been outweighed by the harmful consequences for broad excellence, equity and well-being." He also found that teachers – the professionals who work directly with students in the classroom – were concerned about the effects of the testing not only on students' health, but also on learning and innovation.
- 2.36** To make matters worse, province-wide standardized testing does not give an accurate reflection of student ability, because it only captures a moment in time and fails to account for the range of skills and factors that affect achievement. While some argue that standardized testing is necessary to provide essential information

to improve student achievement and ensure the education system is accountable to taxpayers, the reality is that teachers already use our professional judgment to conduct assessments for, as, and of learning. We use the results of these assessments to modify our instruction and provide individual attention, as well as to complete provincial report cards (OTF 2017).

- 2.37** The tide was already turning against EQAO testing before the COVID-19 crisis arrived. The previous government appointed a set of advisors to undertake a comprehensive study of Ontario’s assessment regime. The advisors made a slew of recommendations, including phasing out the EQAO test in Grade 3 (Campbell et al. 2018). This report should have been the starting point for a wide-ranging discussion about how to move forward. Unfortunately, the Ford government appears to have discarded this advice, in favour of an ideology that views standardized testing as inherently useful. Where once the Chair of the EQAO was a part-time position, the government created a full-time job and appointed a defeated Progressive Conservative election candidate to the role. This is on top of the costly bureaucracy at the Ministry of Education that exists to deal with EQAO initiatives. The government has also expanded the mandate of the agency to conduct hastily devised, poorly considered assessments for pre-service teachers, despite the fact that the EQAO itself found that “the fundamental goal of these tests – to improve student learning – is often not met” (EQAO 2019; Alphonso 2019).
- 2.38** Teachers are assessing students for, as, and of learning every day, and communicating these results to school boards and parents. Standardized testing is not a good use of education resources. Given how far EQAO has strayed from its original mandate, Charles Pascal, a former Deputy Minister of Education and Chair of EQAO, recently argued that the government should suspend EQAO testing (CBC 2020). **If the government still believes some sort of province-wide testing is necessary, they should at least move toward a random sampling model, as is used by PISA and others.** This would produce statistically valid results at a fraction of the current costs, while reducing the level of student anxiety and allowing most teachers and students to remain focused on genuine learning activities and more meaningful classroom assessments.

2.39 Full-day Kindergarten

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

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

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

2.42 Research has shown that Ontario's FDK staff teams are uniting around the mission to support children and families (Pelletier 2014). Moreover, the current dynamic enables the teacher and ECE "to capitalize on children's individual needs and inquiries. They have the time to know their students very well and to identify problems and intervene early before a child becomes too frustrated and discouraged to try" (McCuaig 2019). Rather than disrupting this effective dynamic, the government should provide sufficient resources to ensure that a certified teacher and an ECE are present in all FDK classrooms at all times during the instructional day.

2.43 Ontario’s FDK program is a ground-breaking, world-leading initiative. The investment will continue to pay dividends long into the future for students, families, the economy, and society. As we move toward a post-pandemic system of publicly funded education, **the government must continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise.**

2.44 Indigenous Education

The 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission drew attention to a number of issues pertaining to Indigenous youth and education. While much of the focus has been on students attending on-reserve schools, it is important to note that in Ontario the majority of Indigenous students attend a provincially funded school. In fact, there are Indigenous students in almost every community: 92 per cent of elementary schools and 96 per cent of secondary schools have at least some Indigenous students (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013).

2.45 By now, most Ontarians recognize the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. In a 2019 survey, 81 per cent of elementary schools and 95 per cent of secondary schools reported having offered at least one Indigenous learning opportunity, a substantial increase from 2014 (People for Education 2019). However, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators still need support and resources to ensure they are properly reflecting Indigenous histories and knowledge in the classroom. This is why Catholic teachers and others across Ontario were so disappointed that one of the government’s first actions upon taking office was to abruptly pause planned curriculum resource writing sessions.

2.46 There are also significant resource gaps in schools with high proportions of Indigenous students compared to other schools in the province, including lower than average access to guidance teachers, teacher-librarians, and music and physical education programs (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013). **These resource gaps must be overcome if we are going to address the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.**

2.47 The previous government was making significant steps in this regard, increasing funding and collecting data on a voluntary basis in order to provide appropriate programs and supports. The new government should not turn its back on these

efforts, especially as the need will only become more urgent, given that Indigenous children are the fastest-growing child population segment in Canada (UNICEF Canada 2018). Integrating Indigenous students into their school communities and enabling them to realize their full potential will reduce marginalization and pay significant social and economic dividends over the long term (Sharpe and Arsenault 2010).

2.48 In the years prior to the current government taking office, the Indigenous Education Grant had increased substantially, in response to a nationwide call for a renewed effort toward reconciliation. But this government has shown time and again that this is not an area of priority. After having been cut in the revised Grants for Student Needs for 2018-19, the grant received only a modest increase for 2019-20. And while the government did provide an additional \$8 million for Indigenous studies programs in the 2020-21 GSN, this is far below the investment necessary to redress current gaps within the Indigenous student population. Indigenous education is also an area that has been affected by the government's failure to recommit to the Local Priorities Fund. Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is one of the most urgent and fundamental issues for Ontarians. Rather than looking for areas to trim and save costs, the government should be actively supporting progress.

2.49 English Language Learners

Currently, funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) programs is based on census data and immigration statistics. While these figures provide an estimate, they do not accurately reflect English Language Learners' needs based on actual proficiency. This problem was noted 15 years ago by the Education Equality Task Force, which also condemned the inadequacy of the duration of supports, a sentiment echoed more recently by the Auditor General of Ontario (2017).

2.50 The current funding formula also "fails to recognize the additional costs associated with higher densities of ESL needs in areas with high levels of immigration," while a lack of oversight and transparency mechanisms means some school boards might not be spending the funds on programming for students who need support (Mackenzie 2017). For instance, English Language Learners often require additional supports to acclimate to a new school and culture, especially those who have

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

2.51 The COVID-19 pandemic poses specific challenges to English Language Learners. Many of these learners require additional supports or extra assistance in order to better understand class instructions. As well, teachers often depend on nonverbal gestures to understand these students. The move to remote learning has made this more difficult; reports from Ontario and elsewhere indicate that English Language Learners are not receiving the supports they require, which has raised concerns that these learners may suffer from additional learning loss once the pandemic is over (Kim 2020; Alphonso 2020). **Investing more in English language supports, including properly trained teachers, will ensure students are able to interact with their peers, achieve academic success, and ultimately contribute in our society.**

2.52 Adult and Continuing Education

Adult and continuing education programs are funded at roughly two-thirds the level of regular day school credit programs, which has previously been calculated to result in annual underfunding of \$112 million (Mackenzie 2015). Since coming into office, the Ford government has made consistent cuts to adult and continuing education budgets, decreasing the budget by \$3 million in 2019-20, and then again by \$1.8 million in the 2020-21 budget year. At the same time, funding allocations from Special Purpose Grants are directed only toward students in the regular day school program, even though in many cases adult and continuing education programs are being delivered to new immigrants or students who have been marginalized from the regular day school credit program. As a result, adult or continuing education students who have significant needs are often dealing with large class sizes, different classes being delivered in the same room, and a lack of early intervention processes, while teachers are often employed from contract to contract, with substandard salaries, working conditions, and rights.

2.53 The COVID-19 crisis has made the situation more precarious for adult and continuing education learners, many of whom are encountering additional barriers to participating in or completing their educational goals (James and Thériault 2020).

The government should recognize that adult and continuing education is invaluable to the socio-economic well-being and social mobility of communities, especially as we emerge from the pandemic. **Funding is required so that school boards can provide the necessary supports to improve language skill assessment. At the same time, adult learners require additional and specific mental health supports to improve chances for successful completion of their respective programs.**

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

2.55 Professional Development

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

2.56 Unfortunately, the government has too often chosen to implement sweeping changes without providing teachers much-needed opportunities for professional learning. The revised elementary math curriculum provides a case-in-point. When the revised curriculum was announced, the Association and others called on the government to provide the appropriate time, resources, and supports necessary for teachers to understand and master the material (OTF 2020). Ideally, this would have involved structured, teacher-led professional development, including ongoing opportunities to meet with peers to collaborate, share classroom experiences and challenges, and refine methods over a period of at least two years (Wong 2020). Instead, the

government insisted on implementing the curriculum in the middle of a pandemic, and provided teachers with little-to-no guidance or professional learning supports.

2.57 Empirical and anecdotal research show that students thrive in environments where teaching strategies can be adapted to meet individual students' needs (Morgan 2014). It is therefore necessary that teachers be provided with teacher-led professional development opportunities on topics such as differentiated instruction, applying an equity lens to curriculum delivery, and more. This will be particularly important as the government implements policies such as destreaming (OECTA 2021).

2.58 As the government ponders any additional future changes to curriculum, **it is imperative that resources be provided for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development – the most efficient and effective form of professional learning.** This will ensure that teachers' knowledge remains relevant and up-to-date, based on the current, job-embedded experiences of our colleagues, and designed to address the needs of our students (CEA 2015; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995).

2.59 Holding School Boards to Account

The lack of direction and funding given by the government to school boards for the 2020-21 school year has resulted in wild inconsistencies in health and safety measures, programming, and learning conditions. This is unacceptable in a publicly funded education system that prides itself on equity and inclusion.

2.60 But even before the pandemic, Catholic teachers had concerns about inconsistencies and lack of accountability in school board spending. For example, our Association has for many years been raising the issue of how school boards are using Special Purpose Grants, such as the Learning Opportunities Grant or funds for English as a Second Language programs. With an overall education budget that does not match student needs, and legal pressure to balance their books, school boards are compelled to use these grants to fill gaps in funding for core programs and expenses. The Toronto District School Board receives the most attention in this regard, but Catholic teachers report similar situations in boards across the province (Queiser 2017; Brown 2013; Casey 2013).

2.61 It is imperative that new funds for mental health services, special education programs, professional services and supports, and other initiatives are spent as intended. Rather than scaling back reporting requirements in a misguided effort to reduce red tape, the government should be strengthening the process by which funds are distributed and allocated. In many cases, there is still no clear process to determine how allocations are made until after funding has been distributed. **To hold school boards to account, there should be an annual process of consultation with teacher representatives at each school board regarding locally determined expenditures, as well as prompt reporting with real-time transfers of data where possible.**

2.62 Publicly Funded Catholic Education

Publicly funded Catholic schools have made significant contributions to the overall excellence of Ontario's world-renowned education system. In addition to teaching literacy, math, science, and other skills, we are developing students' character and commitment to the common good, encouraging them to be discerning believers, creative and holistic thinkers, self-directed learners, caring family members, and responsible citizens. There are almost 650,000 students attending publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario, including many non-Catholic students whose parents have chosen the system's high standards and well-rounded methods for their children.

2.63 There is a common misconception that merging Ontario's school systems could save a significant amount of money, but history and scholarship suggests the opposite is true. Dr. John Wiens, former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, put the matter succinctly: "If it's about money, I think there is actually no evidence to show at all that anybody has saved money by [consolidating boards]" (CBC 2016). In Alberta, a study of the restructuring of the school system in the late 1990s found that the implementation costs associated with the mergers exceeded any resulting savings (Pysyk 2000). Ontario's experience with school board amalgamation in the late 1990s led to hundreds of millions of dollars in costs for transition and restructuring. Even conservative organizations like the Fraser Institute have found that amalgamating large organizations almost always results in high transition costs and limited long-term savings (Miljan and Spicer 2015).

- 2.64** At the same time, there are opportunities to make more efficient use of education resources, by using provincially funded buildings in more collaborative ways and incentivizing inter-ministerial and municipal co-operation. One potential avenue is shared facilities, specifically for co-terminus boards. In its 2014-15 Pre-Budget Consultation Summary, the previous government noted that “co-locating the schools of coterminous boards in the same facility was an idea with fairly broad support” (Ministry of Education 2014). Naturally, this would have to be done while protecting each school system’s unique framework and structures, but there are significant opportunities to make efficient use of resources while ensuring that more communities have access to important public services.
- 2.65** There are several successful examples of such arrangements in Ontario. The Humberwood Centre houses Holy Child Catholic School, Humberwood Downs public school, a branch of the Toronto Public Library, the Humberwood Community Centre, as well as the 280-space Macaulay Child Development Centre. In Brantford, St. Basil's Catholic Elementary School and Walter Gretzky Elementary School each have a wing in the 90,000-square-foot shared facility. These sorts of shared facilities can be helpful in maximizing cost efficiency, specifically in rural areas where enrolment declines have raised the specter of school closures.
- 2.66** In addition to co-location, Ontarians can also benefit from shared services agreements. A feasibility study of 11 Ontario school boards revealed that shared services in areas such as energy and transportation could produce ongoing annual savings of \$3 to 8 million per year, which would represent a 13 to 28 per cent savings on these boards’ annual total expenditures (Deloitte 2012). Ultimately, **exploring options for shared services agreements and co-locating schools is a far more effective approach than board amalgamation, not only in meeting the needs of students and communities, but also in making efficient use of school space.**

3. CONCLUSION

- 3.01** Without doubt, the economic turmoil and reduced government revenues will lead some to recommend focusing on restraining public expenditures, cutting red tape, and unleashing the private sector. But the evidence shows this would be a

shortsighted approach. It is not too late for the government to revise its plans to freeze education spending over the next two years, and to make the proactive investments that will benefit everyone in the long run.

- 3.02** Ontario's students have made incredible sacrifices for the sake of public health. Moving forward, Ontarians need to honour these contributions to the common good by ensuring that the publicly funded education system is prepared to give them every opportunity to thrive.

4. WORKS CITED

Alphonso, Caroline. (2020). "Educators worry gap may grow for disadvantaged students stuck at home." *Globe and Mail* (April 10).

Alphonso, Caroline. (2019). "Teacher math tests don't boost student scores, agency finds." *Globe and Mail* (August 29).

Alphonso, Caroline. (2017). "Ontario children gain learning benefits from full-day kindergarten: study." *Globe and Mail* (August 9).

Auditor General of Ontario. (2019). *2019 Annual Report*. Toronto: Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. Available at: <https://bit.ly/38FBajJ>

Auditor General of Ontario. (2018). *2018 Annual Report*. Toronto: Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2N3quJZ>

Auditor General of Ontario. (2017). *2017 Annual Report*. Toronto: Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3bA1FJ2>

Benzie, Robert. (2017). "Ontario Education Minister Mitzie Hunter can't say how many hundreds of schools will close." *Toronto Star* (March 7).

Boak, Angela, Hayley A. Hamilton, Edward M. Adlaf, Joanna L. Henderson, and Robert E. Mann. (2017). *The mental health and well-being of Ontario students, 1991-2017: Detailed findings from the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) (CAMH Research Document Series No. 47)*. Toronto: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

Brown, Louise. (2013). "TDSB says it spends \$103M of special \$143M grant on kids in need." *Toronto Star* (May 6).

Butler, Colin. (2021). "Pandemic making it clear Ontario's rural students are at the back of the virtual class." *CBC News* (January 11).

Campbell, Carol, Ann Lieberman, Ana Yashkina, Sharon Alexander, and Joelle Rodway. (2018a). *Research Report: Teacher Learning & Leadership Program 2017-18*. Toronto: OTF.

- Canadian Education Association (CEA). (2015). *The Facts on Education: What is Effective Teacher Professional Development?* Toronto: Canadian Education Association.
- Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2020). *Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey*. Ottawa: Canadian Teachers' Federation
- Casey, Liam. (2013). "TDSB diverting \$100 million annually from programs for underprivileged students, report says." *Toronto Star* (May 6).
- Carpenter, Elissa. (2020). "National study says 'our children are not alright' under mounting stress of pandemic." *CBC News* (September 1).
- CBC News. (2020). "EQAO is broken and the Ford government can't be trusted to fix it: former EQAO chair." *CBC News* (January 13).
- CBC News. (2016). "No big bucks to be saved by merging school divisions: expert." *CBC News* (November 18).
- Cornelius-White, Jeffery. (2007). "Learner-Centered Teacher-Student Relationships Are Effective: A Meta-Analysis." *Review of Educational Research*, no. 77: 113-43.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda, and Milbrey McLaughlin. (1995). "Policies that Support Professional Development in an Era of Reform." *Phi Delta Kappan* 76, no. 8: 597-604.
- Dee, Thomas, and Martin West. (2011). "The Non-Cognitive Returns to Class Size." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 33, no. 1: 23-46.
- Deloitte. (2012). *The Case for Shared Services in Ontario's School Board Sector: A Feasibility Study Based on Eleven School Boards*. Toronto: Deloitte & Touche LLP.
- Dhanraj, Travis. (2019a). "Government consultation shows parents overwhelmingly reject class size increase: sources." *Global News* (December 1).
- Drewes, Torben, and Tyler Meredith. (2015). "If at First You Don't Succeed: Toward an Adult Education and Training Strategy for Canada." *IRPP Study No. 54*.
- Earthman, Glen I. (2002). "School Facility Conditions and Student Achievement." *Williams Watch Series* (October).
- EQAO (2019). *Literature Review of the Empirical Evidence on the Connection Between Compulsory Teacher Competency Testing and Student Outcomes*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Fahmy, Gabrielle. (2021). "The kids may not be all right, according to Montreal study on mental health during COVID-19." *CTV News* (January 7).
- Fredriksson, Peter, Björn Öckert, and Hessel Oosterbeek. (2011). "Long-Term Effects of Class Size." *IZA Discussion Paper No. 5879*.
- Gallagher-Mackay, Kelly. (2020). "Kids are falling behind in school due to the pandemic – and it's a huge problem." *Globe and Mail* (November 8).

Gallagher-Mackay, Kelly, Annie Kidder, and Suzanne Methot. (2013). *First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education: Overcoming Gaps in Provincially Funded Schools*. Toronto: People for Education.

Galpern, Hernan, and Stephen Aguilar. (2020). "How remote learning is making educational inequities worse." *The Conversation* (December 8).

Hargreaves, Andy. (2020). "Large-scale assessments and their effects: The case of mid-stakes tests in Ontario." *Journal of Educational Change* (May 11).

Heissel, Jennifer, Emma Adam, Jennifer Doleac, David Figlio, and Monathan Meer. (2018). "Testing, Stress, and Performance: How Students Respond Physiologically to High-Stakes Testing." Northwestern Institute for Policy Research Working Paper 18-31.

Jackson, James. (2020). "Worries emerge as pandemic leads to surge in screen time." *Guelph Mercury Tribune* (December 25)

Janmohamed, Zeenat, Kerry McCuaig, Emis Akbari, Romona Gananathan, and Jennifer Watkins. (2014). *Schools at the Centre: Findings from Case Studies Exploring Seamless Early Learning in Ontario*. Toronto: Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development – Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

James, Nalita, and Virginie Thériault. (2020). "Adult education in times of the COVID-19 pandemic: Inequalities, changes, and resilience." *Studies in the Education of Adults*, vol. 52, issue 2: 129-33.

Kempf, Arlo. (2016). *The Pedagogy of Standardized Testing: The Radical Impacts of Standardization in the US and Canada*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Kim, Juliana. (2020). "With Remote Learning, a 12-Year-Old Knows Her English Is Slipping Away." *New York Times* (December 29).

Krueger, Alan, and Diane Whitmore. (2000). "The Effect of Attending a Small Class in the Early Grades on College-Test Taking and Middle School Test Results: Evidence from Project STAR." *National Bureau of Economic Research No. 7656*.

Krueger, Alan. (2003). "Economic Considerations and Class Size." *The Economic Journal* 113, no. 485: F34-64.

MacMillan, Sarah. (2021). "Families worry new Ontario Autism Program won't be truly needs-based." *CBC News* (January 6).

Mackenzie, Hugh. (2017). *Ontario's deteriorating schools: the fix is not in*. Toronto: The Campaign for Public Education. Available at: <https://bit.ly/38DVx0s>

Mackenzie, Hugh. (2015). *Harris-era Hangovers: Toronto School Trustees' Inherited Funding Shortfall*. Toronto: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Ontario Office.

McGinn, Dave. (2020). "All that excess screen time parents were told not to worry about at the start of COVID-19? It's time to worry." *Globe and Mail* (October 29).

- McKay, Julia. (2021). "Internet outages affect online classes in Ontario." *The Bellville Intelligencer* (January 5).
- McQuigge, Michelle. (2018). "Ontario students with special needs increasingly asked to stay home: report." *The Globe and Mail* (June 2018).
- MHASEF Research Team. (2017). *The Mental Health of Children and Youth in Ontario: 2017 Scorecard*. Toronto: Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences.
- MHASEF Research Team. (2015). *The Mental Health of Children and Youth in Ontario: A Baseline Scorecard*. Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences.
- Miljan, Lydia, and Zachery Spicer. (2015). *Municipal Amalgamation in Ontario*. Vancouver: Fraser Institute.
- Ministry of Education. (2014). *Consultation Summary: School Board Efficiencies and Modernization*. Toronto: Ministry of Education.
- Morgan, Hani. (2014). "Maximizing Student Success with Differentiated Learning." *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 87:1, 34-38.
- Mosteller, Frederick. (1995). "The Tennessee study of class size in the early school grades." *The Future of Children* 5, no. 2: 113-127.
- Muennig, Peter, and Steven H. Woolf. (2007). "Health and Economic Benefits of Reducing the Number of Students per Classroom in US Primary Schools." *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 11: 2020-2027.
- Murray, T. Scott, and Richard Shillington. (2011). *From Poverty to Prosperity: Literacy's Impact on Canada's Economic Success*. Ottawa: Canadian Literacy and Learning Network.
- Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). (2017). *2017 Annual Report: Setting the Standard for Great Teaching*. Toronto: OCT.
- Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA). (2021). *OECTA Position Paper on Destreaming*. Toronto: OECTA.
- OECTA. (2020). *OECTA Submission to the Ontario Human Rights Commission Right to Read Inquiry*. Toronto: OECTA.
- OECTA. (2017a). *Workplace Violence and Harassment Against Teachers: Results of a Comprehensive Members Survey*. Toronto: OECTA.
- OECTA. (2017b). *Safer Schools for All: Addressing Violence and Harassment Against Teachers*. Toronto: OECTA.
- Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC). (2020). *Letter to the Minister of Education, school leaders on respecting the rights of students with disabilities*. Toronto: Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF). (2020). *A Measured Response to Implementation: Feedback on the proposed revised mathematics curriculum (Grades 1-8)*. Toronto: OTF.

OTF. (2017). *More than Dots on a Chart: Setting a New Course for Assessment in Ontario*. Toronto: OTF.

Pascal, Charles. (2009). *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario – Report to the Premier by the Special Advisory on Early Learning*. Toronto: Ministry of Education.

Parker, Lana. (2020). "Mandatory e-learning is a problem for Ontario high schools." *The Conversation* (March 3).

Pelletier, Janette, and James Corter. (2019). "A longitudinal comparison of learning outcomes in full-day and half-day kindergarten." *The Journal of Educational Research* (January 3).

Pelletier, Janette. (2014). "Ontario's Full-Day Kindergarten: A Bold Public Policy Initiative." *Public Sector Digest* (June).

People for Education. (2019). *2019 Annual report on schools: What makes a school?* Toronto: People for Education.

Pringle, Josh. (2020). "Ottawa public school teachers burnt out, some students report declining mental health since school began: Survey." *CTV News* (October 28).

Pysyk, David. (2000). *Restructuring Alberta School Systems (PhD Thesis)*. Edmonton: University of Alberta.

Queiser, Sharma. (2017). *Missing Opportunities: How Budget Policies Continue to Leave Behind Low-Income Students*. Toronto: Social Planning Toronto.

Rushowy, Kristin. (2020). "'Virtually no' support for larger class sizes, according to reports the Ford government has refused to release." *Toronto Star* (February 26).

Rushowy, Kristin. (2019). "Repair backlog in Ontario schools hits \$16.3 billion." *Toronto Star* (November 6).

Rushowy, Kristin, and Rob Ferguson. (2015). "Special ed cuts to hit most Ontario boards." *Toronto Star* (March 12).

Schanzenbach, Diane Whitmore. (2014). *Does Class Size Matter?* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.

Segool, Natasha, John Carlson, Anisa Goforth, Nathan von der Embse, Justin Barterian. (2013). "Heightened test anxiety among young children: elementary school students' anxious responses to high-stakes testing." *Psychology and Schools* 50, no. 5: 489-499.

Sharkey, Jackie. (2019) "Families of children with autism under 'severe stress': Report." *CBC News* (June 2019).

Sharpe, Andrew, and Jean-Francois Arsenault. (2010). *Investing in Aboriginal Education in Canada: An Economic Perspective*. Ottawa: Centre for the Study of Living Standards.

Tranjan, Ricardo. (2020). *Ontario's "nearly \$900 million" for safe schools is actually much less*. Toronto: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Ontario Office.

Trick, Sarah. (2020). "The government's school-reopening plan ignores kids with disabilities, say critics." *TVO* (September 2).

TVO. (2020). "Is Ontario's Back-to-School Plan Enough?" *TVO* (September 8).

Waberi, Osobe. (2021). "Ontario government's autism program not enough, families and critics say." *Canadian Press* (August 7).

Wallace, Kenyon. (2020). "Ontario trumpeted its \$1.3-billion back-to-school plan. But a closer analysis shows it's all about muddy math." *Toronto Star* (October 4).

Wong, Jessica. (2020). "New math curriculum an added challenge for Ontario elementary schools this fall." *CBC News* (August 20).