

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

TO THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE

February 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.

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.01** The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input for the development of the 2021 provincial budget.
- 1.02** Since the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic one year ago, our Association has taken every opportunity to urge the Ford government to deliver a strong public response, one which protects all Ontarians over the long term from the negative effects of health emergencies, natural disasters, and the whims of the market. We have called on the government to consider the social and economic benefits of investments in education, health, and social services, and to adopt a more collaborative approach, by engaging in genuine dialogue with stakeholders before making decisions. Sadly, the Ford government has refused to heed this advice.
- 1.03** If it was not clear enough from the Ford government's first two years in office, during which they regularly had to retreat from poor policy decisions, the pandemic has laid bare the folly of developing and implementing public policies with insufficient planning, consultation, and investment. In the case of publicly funded education, the government has routinely ignored and denigrated the expertise of the education community, and has refused to put in place the measures necessary to make schools as safe as possible.
- 1.04** 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. Schools across Ontario were forced to move to temporary remote learning coming out of the winter break, and with the government's extended delays in implementing widespread asymptomatic testing, we still do not understand fully the extent to which COVID-19 is spreading within our schools.
- 1.05** All the while, the Ford government has continued its tendency to mislead Ontarians about the nature of their investments. Most recently, questions have been raised about the promised hiring of new staff (Dhanraj 2021). And despite the government's repeated claims to have spent "up to \$1.6 billion" to support school reopening for the current school year, in reality the provincial government put forward only around \$400 million in additional funding. Another \$762 million was

provided by the federal government. 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). Add to this the fiscal plan released in November, which included no new investments in education and projected an effective funding freeze over the next two years.

- 1.06** Amid the turmoil of COVID-19, now is not the time for the government to fall back on its preoccupation with cutting expenditures. The moment demands forward-thinking leadership. New Minister of Finance Peter Bethlenfalvy has said he understands that this is no time for drastic austerity, but nor is it time for timid half-measures. The development of the 2021 provincial budget provides the government an opportunity to set a new tone, to look ahead to a post-pandemic era, and to do more to reinvest in the health and prosperity of our province and our people, now and in the future.

2. QUALITY PUBLICLY FUNDED EDUCATION FOR ALL

- 2.01** It was only through 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 to core per-pupil funding and programs for vulnerable students that were contained in the 2019-20 education budget. The extraordinary situation we now find ourselves in as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the need for immediate, substantial investments to make our schools as safe, inclusive, and productive as possible. We need to ensure all students have the learning and mental health supports they need, in up-to-date schools that strive for equity and inclusivity. Unfortunately, the Ford government has remained committed to their goal of spending as little as they think they can get away with on publicly funded education.
- 2.02** Rather than continuing this counterproductive trend, we should be building on our solid foundations, and asking whether current levels of investment are sufficient to create quality working and learning conditions that will fully meet students’ diverse

needs. **Rather than freezing education funding, the government needs to substantially reinvest in publicly funded education, to ensure all students have the opportunity to realize their full potential.**

2.03 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).

2.04 As 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.

2.05 Unfortunately, the government has chosen a much less constructive route. Not only has the government rejected the expertise of the education community by refusing to engage in genuine consultation, but also it has ignored the recommendations of its own Ministry of Education staff. News reports have revealed that as Ontario's schools were preparing to reopen, staff from the Ministry of Education drafted a memo highlighting key safety measures. However, internal emails show that in many cases these safety proposals "were either abandoned or dialed back" (Mendleson 2021). Minister of Education Stephen Lecce made further misrepresentations when he announced that all schools would reopen again in February, claiming that Ontario's local medical officers of health had endorsed the plan when, in reality, they had never seen it (LaFleche 2021).

2.06 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.**

2.07 Mental Health

There are longstanding shortcomings in Ontario’s mental health system, particularly as it pertains to children and youth. Data show that 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).

2.08 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).

2.09 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.** 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. Providing more mental health supports in schools, where children and youth spend much of their time, can help to reduce stigma, connect students to their communities, and deliver more responsive, cost-effective service, leading to better health outcomes and improved academic performance. In keeping with the

government's professed commitment to equity, particular attention should be paid to addressing the mental health needs of racialized students.

- 2.10** As part of the consideration of student mental health, the government should take this opportunity to rethink its enthusiasm for Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing. 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). 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." 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.
- 2.11** Standardized testing is simply not a good use of education resources. Teachers are conducting assessments for learning, as learning, and of learning every day, and communicating these results to school boards and parents (Ministry of Education 2010). 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.
- 2.12** 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.

2.13 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).

2.14 Furthermore, because school boards can be slow 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). Students and families also experience extensive wait times for school board therapists, psychologists, case workers, and other professionals, meaning that even when students' needs are identified, they are not receiving timely support.

2.15 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). Following the recent re-launch of their autism program, the Ford government is once again facing significant backlash from parents who argue that, despite the government's claims, the program is not needs-based, as it contains age requirements and limits on how much each child can receive (D'Mello 2021). **Catholic teachers urge the government to immediately implement and properly fund a truly needs-based autism**

program, to ensure publicly funded schools can provide the necessary resources and supports for students with autism.

2.16 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, we must remember the significant challenges that existed before COVID-19 arrived.

2.17 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).

2.18 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 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.

2.19 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.

2.20 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).

2.21 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.

2.22 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.**

2.23 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 (Cleveland 2021; 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). Recent research highlights that while Kindergarten generally has positive impacts on the development of all children, particular benefits are seen in immigrant families, lower-income families, and families in which English was not the first language (Cleveland 2021).

- 2.24** 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.
- 2.25** 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 (Cleveland 2021; 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.
- 2.26** 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 2018). 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.
- 2.27** 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.**

2.28 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).

2.29 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.

2.30 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.**

2.31 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.

2.32 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).

2.33 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.

2.34 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 learning supports, including properly trained teachers and other professional services, will ensure students are able to interact with their peers, achieve academic success, and ultimately contribute in our society.**

2.35 Adult and Continuing Education

Based on funding outlined in the Pupil Foundation Grant, 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.

2.36 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.**

2.37 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.

2.38 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. Thousands of teachers have taken advantage of opportunities over the past few years to upgrade and refine our skills in math and technology (OCT 2017). The government has recently moved to implement a math test for incoming teachers, but a more fruitful method would be to ensure that teachers have the resources and supports necessary to deliver math content in the classroom.

2.39 Empirical and anecdotal research show that students thrive in environments where teaching strategies can be adapted to meet individual students' needs (Morgan 2014). **Especially given the changes that are being made to curriculum, and the renewed commitment to equity in schools, it is imperative that more 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 is 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).

2.40 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.

- 2.41** 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).
- 2.42** 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.
- 2.43** 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.
- 2.44** 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. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

3.01 A Strong Public Response

Over the past year, through no fault of their own, millions of Ontarians have lost work, had their hours or wages cut, or been forced to make difficult choices due to health concerns or family care responsibilities. Women have been disproportionately affected, with their labour force participation rate falling to its lowest level in 30 years (Dessanti 2020). Important emergency measures have been implemented at both the federal and provincial levels, but the situation should prompt a thorough re-examination of Ontario's social policy framework, and a rethinking among the Ford government about the role of public programs and services in promoting health and prosperity for all Ontarians.

3.02 While nobody would have wished for or anticipated the suffering caused by the COVID-19 emergency, the social and economic policies that have left Ontarians vulnerable were not arrived at by accident. As the Ontario Federation of Labour (2020) has noted, the deregulation of health and safety standards, the rollback of workers' rights and protections, the erosion of progressive taxation, the retrenchment of welfare state programs, the privatization and underfunding of public services, and the disregard of equity-seeking groups – much of which the Ford government has participated in – have all led us to this point.

3.03 While the Ford government took some initial steps to address past mistakes, facilitating a just recovery from the COVID-19 emergency and a better Ontario moving forward will require permanently strengthening our labour laws and making sustained investments in public services. This must include legislating paid sick days. The decision of the Ford government in 2018 to remove the two days of paid sick leave instituted by the previous government has had a negative impact on workers across the province, many of whom are forced to make impossible decisions between

going to work sick and not being able to feed their families. COVID-19 has exacerbated this dynamic. A recent study from Peel Region found that of roughly 8,000 workers who later tested positive, a quarter of them went to work while showing symptoms of COVID-19 (Crombie and Brown 2021). **The government should immediately legislate paid sick leave for Ontario workers, not to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the short term, but also to protect communities and respect the dignity and rights of workers over the long run.**

3.04 Thus far, Ontarians have seen little evidence that the Ford government is up to the task of producing a strong public response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Financial Accountability Office (FAO) recently crunched the numbers and found that the federal government is financing a whopping 97 per cent of Ontario’s COVID-19 recovery efforts. While some of this is attributable to the fact that the federal government is responsible for expensive income-replacement programs like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and its successors, this is still a glaring imbalance considering that the provincial government is responsible for high cost areas such as health care, education, and social assistance.

3.05 Worse is that although the Ford government set aside \$17 billion in emergency response funding for the 2020-21 fiscal year, the FAO found that as of September almost \$7 billion of this remained unspent. As of the end of December, the figure of unspent dollars was still \$6.4 billion, a greater sum than any other province according to a report by David Macdonald of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2021). Former Finance Minister Rod Phillips previously said the money would be allocated “as needed,” but as the pandemic drags on Ontarians are increasingly wondering what the government is waiting for.

3.06 Early Childhood Education and Care

Research confirms the importance the early years in a child’s life in the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Cleveland 2021). And it has long been known that affordable, accessible, high quality early childhood education and care increases equity in outcomes at school and creates a strong foundation for lifelong learning (McCuaig, Bertrand, and Shanker 2012). It also improves labour force participation, particularly among women, which helps to boost household incomes and reduce poverty. According to one recent analysis, every public dollar spent expanding

enrolment in early childhood education and care yields close to six dollars in economic benefits (Alexander et al. 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a stark reminder of the consequences of a lack of publicly funded, licenced child care, and renewed impetus to build a more robust public system as soon as possible (CCN 2020).

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

reducing administrative burdens (Ministry of Education 2020b). Although we recognize the government's ideological opposition, Catholic teachers continue to call on the government to commit to an affordable, high quality, publicly funded, and universally accessible system of child care – the most efficient, effective, and equitable option for all Ontarians.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.01** Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we already had a long way to go to build an Ontario that works for everyone. With the arrival of this public health emergency having exposed and exacerbated the shortcomings of our social and economic structures, the government should be bold and proactive, investing in public programs and services that will benefit everyone in the long run.
- 4.02** Ontarians have been willing to cut the government some slack for their response to the pandemic thus far. But patience with confusing protocols and communications, and investments in public programs and services that are clearly insufficient, is beginning to wear thin. Too often, the Ford government has relied on federal government bailouts and individual responsibility rather than showing leadership. Moving forward, we cannot allow the bar to be lowered in terms of how we expect the government to put public resources to work for the benefit of all Ontarians. And we certainly cannot allow the government to shift the focus toward tackling the budget deficit and dismantling the public sector.
- 4.03** The Ford government's pattern of haphazard decision-making, and their continued focus on financial savings, are an insult to everyone who has worked so hard and made such enormous sacrifices over the past year. The 2021 budget is a yet another chance for the government to step up, take responsibility for mitigating the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and do more to build a healthy, fair, and prosperous province for the future.

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