

GRANTS FOR STUDENT NEEDS 2024 - 25

TO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

October 2023

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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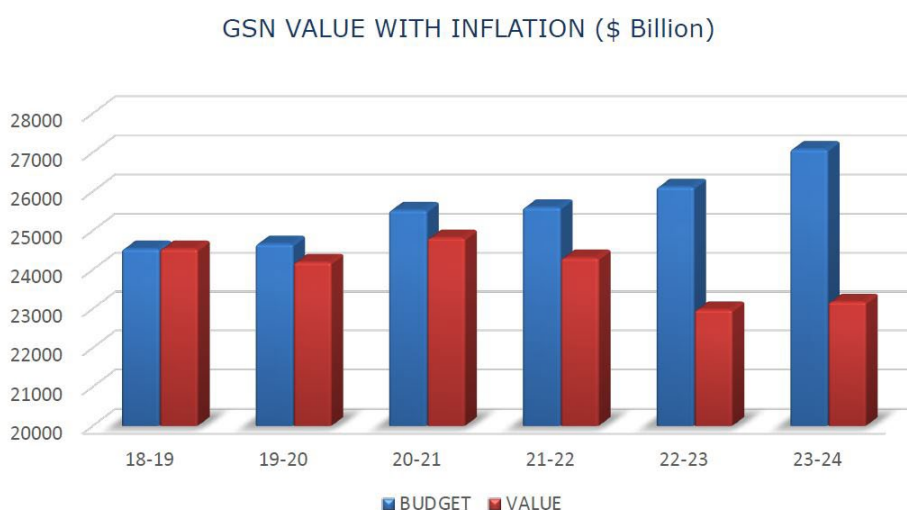
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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.01** The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to offer input, on behalf of 45,000 teachers working in Ontario's publicly funded Catholic schools, as the government develops the 2024-25 Grants for Student Needs (GSN).
- 1.02** Publicly funded education in Ontario finds itself at a crossroads. The current provincial government inherited a world-class system five years ago – made possible by the teachers, education workers, and staff in Ontario schools who strive every day to best meet the diverse needs of the students they serve.
- 1.03** However, since taking office in 2018, the government has systematically underfunded the education system, siphoning money out of the classroom, while shuffling in unrelated programs and tax credits to artificially inflate the education budget (Rushowy 2023; DiMatteo 2021). The result is that core funding has not kept pace with inflation, producing a real-dollar cut.
- 1.04** While the government continues its disingenuous public relations strategy of claiming "historic investment," the numbers paint a very different picture.
- 1.05** At the release of last year's GSNs the government lauded a \$698 million, or 2.7 per cent "historic" increase in funding. What the government failed to mention is that, to arrive at this increase, they quietly altered the calculation, decreasing the base investment from the previous year by removing \$303 million in one-time COVID-19 learning recovery funding. This allowed them to artificially inflate – in fact, to almost double – their claimed increase for 2023-24 (Ministry of Education 2023;

Ministry of Education 2022). When the numbers are calculated in a more fulsome and accurate way, the 2023-24 GSN investment amounts to a 1.4 per cent increase – or roughly one-third of what would be needed to match projected inflation (Statistics Canada 2023).

1.06 Even if one disregards the government’s mathematical sleight-of-hand, the funding figures are still far less than meets the eye. The government’s insistence on advertising GSN increases in nominal terms masks the continued erosion of the *value* of these funds, which has decreased significantly since 2018 as inflation has risen to near-40-year high (Armstrong 2023).



1.07 As the chart above describes, the inflation-adjusted, real-dollar increase in GSN investment for 2023-24 is 0.87 per cent, a far cry from the government’s claims. In fact, the funding gap for this current school year stands at almost \$4 billion.

1.08 It takes considerable effort to unpack the government’s ‘spin.’ And doing so threatens to miss a broader point: the government’s accounting tricks have real costs for students, teachers, education workers, and families. The reality – on the ground, in classrooms across Ontario – is that teachers and education workers are

being asked to do more with less, and students are being left without access to the vital resources and supports that they need and deserve.

- 1.09** While cuts and chronic underfunding negatively impact all students, they continue to disproportionately affect students from vulnerable and equity-deserving populations, including those with special education needs; social, emotional, and mental health concerns; English as a second language learners; students from Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities; and students from families among lower socio-economic groups. The Ford government's ill-conceived policies – from mandatory online learning to rushed curriculum overhauls – have widened these inequalities and exacerbated disparities between students from traditionally high-performing and traditionally low-performing groups (Teotonio 2023; Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin et al. 2020).
- 1.10** The government has a choice: it can continue to systematically underfund education, and erode the quality of Ontario's world-class publicly funded education system. Or, the government can choose a different path: it can finally admit, and act upon the truism that properly investing in education is an investment in the future – that *every* student deserves to be supported and to learn in a safe and modern school.
- 1.11** As the provincial budget and education funding formula are developed for next year, it is imperative that the government prioritize publicly funded education and do what is necessary to provide students with the resources and supports they need in order to thrive and succeed.

2. SUPPORTING EVERY STUDENT; INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

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 2010).

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 and meaningful consultations with teacher and education workers 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 too often been willing to dismiss the recommendations and expertise of educators, and has opted to rush through policy implementation without due consideration for the resources, supports, and time that educators need in order to effectively integrate curriculum changes. From COVID-19 health and safety protocols, to de-streaming, to math curriculum updates, to the implementation of diagnostic tools that violate collective agreements, over the past several years the government has missed the opportunity to collaborate meaningfully with education stakeholders.

- 2.04** Ontario’s teachers are trained, certified professionals with expertise, experience, and professional skills in writing and delivering curriculum, managing classrooms, and evaluating student progress. Teachers have a practical understanding of how schools operate and what is needed for students to learn and grow.
- 2.05** International research has shown that a collaborative, professional relationship between governments and teachers’ and educators’ organizations is a key ingredient in successful education systems. It is still not too late for the Ford government to change their approach, to avoid future mismanagement and to leverage the experience and expertise of qualified educators, to ensure Ontario schools have the resources students need to recover, and to thrive and grow (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.**

2.06 Mental Health

It has become far too common in recent years to talk about a crisis of children’s mental health. Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health issues among school-aged children. According to a study conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), between March and June 2021, involving 2,225 students in Grades 7 to 12 in Ontario, 59 per cent report that the pandemic has made them feel depressed about the future, and 39 per cent note their mental health has worsened. Distressingly, almost 18 per cent of students surveyed indicated that “they seriously contemplated suicide in the past year” (Boak, Elton-Marshall, and Hamilton 2022).

- 2.07** Although students have returned to in-person learning, evidence still points to a crisis-level situation. School Mental Health Ontario reports that, as of 2023, one-in-three Ontario parents have had a child miss school as a result of anxiety. In 2019, according to data from Statistics Canada, 73 per cent of children aged 12 to 17 described their mental health as “very good” or “excellent.” A follow-up study in 2022 found that this number had decreased by 12 per cent (Statistics Canada 2020).
- 2.08** In addition, research from Toronto Public Health, published in 2023, determined a 29 per cent increase in emergency room visits related to self-harm among children and youth – with young women being disproportionately represented (Toronto Public Health 2023).
- 2.09** In light of this overwhelming evidence, one would imagine that a concerted and comprehensive effort would be made by the government to address and redress the crisis of children’s mental health. What one finds instead, is a system strained to the breaking-point, with a severe lack of resources and supports available to students in need.
- 2.10** A 2023 report from People for Education illustrates the distressing nature of the current situation. According to the study, only nine per cent of schools have regularly scheduled access to a mental health/addiction specialist or nurse, and 46 per cent report no access at all. With respect to psychologists, 28 per cent of Ontario schools report having no access to this critical resource, either in-person or virtually – a figure that has almost doubled since 2011. Overall, 95 per cent of schools in Ontario report needing “some” or “more” support for students’ mental health and well-being (People for Education 2023).

- 2.11** Examining the situation from the student-level, one finds that although all students are experiencing mental health issues, they are not always experiencing these issues equally or in the same ways. Research shows that families who were already vulnerable prior to the pandemic – for example, those from equity-deserving groups or those with lower household income and parental education rates – have been “disproportionately impacted by economic hardship as a result of the pandemic, such as job loss and food insecurity” (SickKids 2021). These consequences have been accompanied by higher rates of child abuse, neglect, physical inactivity, and instances of anxiety and depression (Carpenter 2020; Pringle 2020). **The government must acknowledge the relationship between mental health and equitable student outcomes. All mental health interventions should be culturally responsive and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of all students, and especially those from equity-deserving groups.**
- 2.12** Parents and teachers have also expressed concerns about the amount of time young people are spending with electronic devices rather than peers. Researchers from SickKids found that “increased time on screens had a wide-ranging impact on the mental health of children and youth” (Fahmy 2021; McGinn 2020; SickKids 2021). The Ford government has only made this problem worse by expanding online learning, and promoting school boards’ adoption of the failed hybrid model.
- 2.13** Given the evidence presented above, it is clear that the government has not done nearly enough to address the mental health crisis facing school-aged children in Ontario. The 2023-24 GSNs allocated \$130.4 million to the Mental Health and Well-being Grant. This represents a 4.6 per cent increase over last year, well short of what is needed to properly address this critical issue.

2.14 Further, the Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) Allocation, Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount (DSENA) Allocation, and Behaviour Expertise Amount (BEA) Allocation all increased at rates below inflation. In the case of the Special Incidence Portion (SIP), the 2023-24 GSN documents indicate an increase of 12 per cent (Ministry of Education 2023). Although this would appear a significant increase, it is important to note that this funding is based on historical averages and not on system need – thus, especially in smaller school boards, there could be significant funding shortages in situations where there has been an increase of students requiring this funding line. In addition, part of the increase is attributable to a calculation change designed to “relieve school boards of administrative work” related to claims submission.

2.15 It remains as critical as ever, that the government make real, and substantial investments into student mental health resources and supports. Catholic teachers recommend that **the government immediately and dramatically enhance investments into mental health services in schools, and expand school-based resources, supports, and services. This should include funding to support ongoing mental health-related professional development opportunities for educators, as well as the hiring of additional mental health professionals, including social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, child and youth workers, and school mental health workers.**

2.16 Following from the pandemic, there is still a need for the government to **invest in proactive and comprehensive mental health assessment of students.** Previously, researchers have used data from the Canadian Health Measures Survey to determine a “baseline” of mental health fitness, which has been used to

demonstrate gaps or declines in children’s mental fitness (Tremblay et al. 2010). In Canada, proactive mental health assessment in schools is not a standard practice; however, examples do exist, such as the Guidelines for Fitness Assessment in Manitoba Schools.

- 2.17** Such assessments, in addition to providing baseline data, can be helpful in subsequently developing tools or determining the specific types of mental health resources and supports that students need. Such an approach could be especially beneficial for students in Ontario, given the ongoing mental health and well-being consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2.18** Following from this, **the government must act aggressively, and deploy mental health and well-being teams in every school in Ontario.**
- 2.19** 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. **Annual funding for Student Mental Health Ontario must be increased in a manner that reflects sustainability and long-term needs.**
- 2.20** Of course, geographic and demographic needs will need to be considered to ensure that no regions, communities, 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.**

2.21 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 (CTF 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. The vast majority – including 99 per cent of OECTA members who completed the survey – do not feel they are being supported by the Ministry of Education as they cope with these struggles.

2.22 In addition to **targeting mental health resources specifically for teachers and education workers, the government must ensure that school administrators are honouring teachers' contractual rights to access sick leave for mental health issues, including investigating the reasons for, and redressing, the shortage of qualified occasional teachers.**

2.23 Special Education

In the *2024-25 Education Funding Consultation Guide*, the government indicates its intent to "improve the SIP and SEA allocations," and notes that this is "an important opportunity to transform the way funding is allocated and used and to ensure that supports on the ground are more closely aligned with student needs and our goals for student achievement through a modern process that is accountable and transparent" (Ministry of Education 2023a).

2.24 The Association hopes to take the government at its word – because, at present, special education funding remains a glaring weakness in Ontario's publicly funded education system, as it continues to insufficiently address student need, opting instead for a one-size-fits all formula approach.

- 2.25** The 2023-24 GSN documents highlight a 4.7 per cent increase over last year's funding. However, once again, this increase is smoke and mirrors – largely the product of shuffling monies around, changing the calculation, and basing funding on projections.
- 2.26** More to the point, the increase is still a “drop in the bucket” of what is needed. Currently, the funding formula assigns a total of 1.73 support staff per 1,000 elementary school students and 2.21 per 1,000 secondary school students, dedicated to support students who need special education programs, services, and/or equipment (Ministry of Education 2023).
- 2.27** This is a woefully inadequate ratio, which produces significant shortages in supports. As education economist Ricardo Tranjan describes, “In 2020, there was one speech specialist for every 2,370 students, roughly 0.2 specialists per school. There were even fewer professionals providing psychological services [including special education assessments]: there was just one for every 2,580 students” (Tranjan 2022).
- 2.28** There is also a geographic component to these issues. 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 schools and 77:1 in secondary schools (People for Education 2019).
- 2.29** Across the province, because school boards are reluctant to go through the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) process, students often go far too long without their learning needs being acknowledged. Given the frequent

disruptions to in-person learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the backlog of students waiting to begin the IPRC process has increased. Students 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). As such, additional resources will be required to ensure all students are able to begin the IPRC process in a timely manner.

2.30 If the Ford government is to address this issue comprehensively, it will need to improve upon past performance. And if the government is sincere about reforming SIP and SEA allocations to better respond to student need, there are several factors to keep in mind.

2.31 A move to needs-based funding for SIP and SEA allocations would potentially result in something similar to the Intensive Support Amount (ISA) grants, which previously required that students be assessed by teachers and applications be made to access additional monies, which would then be freed up for school boards.

2.32 Although the ISA grants provided needs-based funding, the process involved several shortfalls that would need to be addressed and corrected. For instance, this model would need to consider who does the assessments. Previously, ISA grants required teachers to write and submit grant applications. This takes considerable time, and many teachers were strongly encouraged by their administrators to complete grant applications at the expense of being able to interact with, and best support, the students they serve.

2.33 If the government moves toward a needs-based model, funding should be made available for external staff – who are qualified special education teachers – to

conduct assessments. Any alteration to special education funding should not create additional duties for classroom teachers or take away from their ability to support students in their care.

2.34 A transition to needs-based funding should also not replace base funding for special education. Instead, additional funding should be provided in a “base-plus” model. Without this, the government risks widening equity gaps between schools and communities.

2.35 On the issue of special education, it would be remiss not to mention the government’s shambolic handling of the autism file. The government has 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 – at the time leaving more than 27,000 children on the waitlist for services (MacMillan 2021; Waberi 2020; Sharkey 2019). In March 2021, the government promised there would be fewer than 8,000 children on the waitlist for needs-based autism programs by the end of that year. Fast-forward to October 2023, the list now stands at more than 60,000 children, with an average of 7,000 more added each year (Yazdani 2023).

2.36 It is imperative that the government **enhance support for students with special education needs, to successfully reintegrate them with their peers and mitigate any learning loss that has occurred.**

2.37 Class Size

The benefits of smaller class sizes are well established. Almost a decade ago, 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.

2.38 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).

2.39 Reductions in class size have 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).

2.40 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).

- 2.41** The same principles apply to online classes, which are currently staffed at a student-teacher ratio of 30:1. In a study of online learning for students from Kindergarten to Grade 12, researchers from the University of Hong Kong determined that for online classes that require collaboration, 15 students was the preferable average (Zhang, Liu, and Lin 2018). The researchers also concluded, in a separate study, that student success was maximized when the number of students in an online course did not exceed the in-person class size averages (Noonoo 2020).
- 2.42** 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.
- 2.43** **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 size averages in Ontario's publicly funded schools.**

2.44 Safe and Modern Schools

2.45 Safer Schools for All

“Almost nine-in-ten teachers (89 per cent) indicate that they have experienced or witnessed violence or harassment in their schools” (OECTA 2017). The preceding quotation comes from an OECTA survey report released in 2017. In the six years following this publication, incidents of violence and harassment in schools have only grown more frequent and severe – and to-date, the government has done nothing of substance to address this critical issue.

2.46 Seemingly each week, news stories are published that describe the shocking details of violence and harassment experienced by teachers and education workers – which range from verbal threats to physical assault (Mehrabi 2023; Ceolin 2023).

2.47 This anecdotal evidence is supported by data. A 2023 study by the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) found that “two-thirds of members say the severity of violent incidents has increased and 72 per cent say the number of incidents has increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic” (ETFO 2023). Similarly, a study from University of Ottawa researchers published in 2021 found that, of 4,000 Ontario education workers surveyed, 89 per cent of respondents had “experienced a threat, attempt, or act of physical violence from one or more sources (students, parents, colleagues, administrators)” (Bruckert, Santor, and Mario 2021).

2.48 School boards have reported similar findings. For instance, in October 2022, the Thames Valley District School Board reported 900 incidents of school-based violence (Rivers 2022). And over the course of the 2022-23 school year, more than

4,000 incidents of violence were reported at schools within the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (Brown 2023).

- 2.49** It would be a mistake to characterize this as an “education-specific” issue – our schools reflect broader social trends, and evidence points to a rise in threats and acts of violence across Canada in recent years (Statistics Canada 2023a). However, it is incumbent upon the government to address the issue of school violence and to do whatever is necessary to ensure a safe learning environment for students, teachers, education workers, and staff. This requires honest assessment and proactive investment.
- 2.50** The issue of violence in schools is complex and challenging. There is no simple answer. Addressing this matter requires a multifaceted, comprehensive, and coordinated response. Despite greater media attention being paid to this problem, and although education unions have worked hard to negotiate contractual obligations requiring school administrators to report incidents of violence, we are still a long way from implementing the solutions outlined in our Association’s *Safer Schools for All* platform (OECTA 2017a).
- 2.51** The lasting consequences that the COVID-19 pandemic had on student mental health has been well established (St. George et al. 2021; SickKids 2021). And during school closures, some vulnerable students and staff did not have regular access to the mental health supports they require.
- 2.52** But this is only *part* of the comprehensive action plan required. An act of violence is often a cry for help. It has, as its basis, a multitude of intertwining factors – everything from inadequate access to mental health resources, to large class sizes,

to a lack of special education supports, to the defunding of before- and after-school programming, and more, plays a role. However, there is a consistent theme to each of these, which has contributed to the rise in violence and harassment: chronic underfunding of publicly funded education (Eizadirad 2023; Rushowy 2023; Teotonio 2023).

- 2.53** As such, it is **imperative that the government provide resources and supports for more frontline, school-based child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and other professional services to help students and education workers deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs, in some cases attributable to pandemic-related causes.**
- 2.54** It is also necessary for the government to **provide educators and school staff with comprehensive trauma-informed training. To proactively support students or staff who are in crisis, a whole-school approach must be developed and must include follow-up actions to prevent recurrence. This would better enable all staff in the school building to recognize a potential situation, and respond and address it accordingly.**
- 2.55** These investments will help students manage their behaviours and realize academic success in the short and long term, while also enabling teachers, education workers, and the rest of the school community to focus on student learning and success, in a safe and secure environment. **To ensure sustained, comprehensive, and inclusive supports the government should encourage and facilitate collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social**

Services on the development of a proactive, multifaceted response that addresses the needs of both victims and perpetrators of school violence.

2.56 Infrastructure and Technology

The need for urgent and comprehensive upgrades to Ontario's publicly funded schools has now been evident for many years. In 2016, the school repair backlog was estimated to be \$15 billion (Rushowy 2019). Today, the repair backlog is estimated to exceed \$17 billion (Thompson 2023). Even by late 2017, experts felt that the physical condition of schools has deteriorated to such an extent that hundreds of schools need to be replaced entirely (Mackenzie 2017).

2.57 While the issue of school infrastructure is not a new problem, unfortunately the current government has done little to rectify the situation. In 2022, the Minister of Education announced \$14 billion over 10 years dedicated to building and repairing schools (Ontario Newsroom 2022). However, it is worth noting that this was \$2 billion less than what the previous government had committed to spend over the same period (Benzie 2017). Add to this, that the government quietly cut an additional \$1 billion in school repair funding (PressProgress 2020), and it becomes clear this government has not demonstrated a sincere commitment to ensuring safe and modern schools for students.

2.58 Since the 1970s, the physical construction of Ontario schools has been driven by economic and demographic considerations, rather than public health concerns (McQuigge 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that school facilities are not well-positioned to respond to public health emergencies, with small, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate, dated, and substandard ventilation systems, where such systems exist.

- 2.59** The pandemic also highlighted the significant issue of poor air quality within school facilities. **It is critical for the government to make the necessary investments to ensure that all schools have ventilation systems that meet the health and safety standards set by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers.** To ensure that this process is transparent, the government must also institute a provincial standard for air quality measurements in schools, with publicly available metrics to indicate whether standards are being met.
- 2.60** Out-of-date and poorly maintained facilities, and technology that has not kept pace with students' educational needs, have an immediate and 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.**
- 2.61** Although the government has stated a commitment to school building projects, these must remain public enterprises. **It is not appropriate nor beneficial for the government to entertain private-public partnerships (PPP) as a method to promote school construction.** This form of creeping privatization has no place in the development of public infrastructure, such as schools.

2.62 Data also show a persistent lack of funding in technology, poor or uneven internet connectivity in schools, 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.

2.63 To that end, and in an effort to promote skilled trades, the government announced that starting in 2024, secondary students will be required to earn a technology education credit in order to graduate (Rushowy 2023a). While the Association supports technology education and the skilled trades, it was extremely troubling to hear the minister, in response to a reporter’s question, muse that the private sector could prove a useful source from which to draw instructors to deliver these courses (DeClerq 2023). To be clear, **qualified technology teachers are the only appropriate individuals to deliver these courses. If the government is looking to expand course offerings in these areas, it must hire additional qualified teachers to meet that demand and address the growing issue of teacher recruitment and retention.**

2.64 Addressing Equity in Education

Catholic teachers have always supported efforts to eliminate racism, discrimination, and all systemic barriers in our schools, and we will continue to advocate for action, offering our perspectives on how to best promote equity in education, including combatting anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, and supporting and protecting the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and staff. With respect to anti-Black racism, some of these ideas are expanded upon in Association publications, such as our *Submission to the Ontario Human Rights Commission on Anti-Black Racism in Education* (2023).

- 2.65** We recognize and acknowledge the many, varied, and systemic ways that discrimination and racism manifest and is reproduced in all our social institutions, including publicly funded education. And we understand the consequences such harms have on students, teachers, education workers, and families in the short and long terms.
- 2.66** Unfortunately, too often, the government has opted for a performative approach to this critical issue, rather than taking concrete steps, with proper investments and resources, to redress inequities faced by a variety of equity-deserving communities.
- 2.67** For instance, while the government has acknowledged the ongoing consequences of anti-Black racism – including conduct by officials in several school boards (Teotonio 2023a) – the government’s actions and implementation leaves much to be desired.
- 2.68** The situation around destreaming offers a case-in-point. By pursuing destreaming without providing additional supports for students, smaller class sizes so that teachers can provide greater individual attention and differentiated instruction, revamped curricula, implementation training for educators, or meaningful collaboration with educators, the government’s current approach limits success (Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education 2021).
- 2.69** According to survey research by People for Education, only 30 per cent of principals in Ontario schools indicate that the government has provided sufficient support to successfully implement destreaming policy (People for Education 2022). Several factors have contributed to the inadequacy of the government’s approach.

- 2.70** First, the government has not committed stable, long-term funding dedicated to the sustainability of destreaming efforts. In the 2023-24 GSN documents, the government once again provided inadequate funding, spread across a range of categories, including the Learning Opportunities Grant, literacy and math funding, student success, tutoring allocations, and early math intervention.
- 2.71** While, on paper, the Learning Opportunity Grant (LOG) received a 9.3 per cent increase in the 2022-23 GSNs, a closer inspection reveals that the majority of this increase is a result of a shell game – moving funds for Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) programs, previously contained in Priorities and Partnership Funding, into the LOG, as well as incorporating a \$5 million Summer Learning Program into the grant that was already accounted for elsewhere.
- 2.72** An additional issue that threatens the success of destreaming pertains to teacher training. The Association, and others, have repeatedly highlighted the centrality of teacher-led professional development opportunities, resources, release time, and other supports to ensure that educators can provide the best possible learning environment for all students (Follwell and Andrey 2021; Ontario Teachers’ Federation 2021; Pichette, Deller, and Colyar 2020).
- 2.73** Despite this, the government’s rollout of the destreamed Grade 9 math curriculum provided teachers only three months to prepare to deliver this entirely new curriculum. The result, observers note, is that teachers were attempting to complete professional development training while simultaneously rolling out the new curriculum (People for Education 2022). As one principal described: “There’s no runway to properly execute this” (Alphonso 2022).

- 2.74** Throughout the discussion of policy implementation, the government has still not grasped sufficiently that destreaming alone will not eradicate the causes of disadvantage and inequity. Time and again, the Association has made clear that destreaming should be part of a broader discourse on equity and inclusion, including wide-ranging educational reforms including lowering class sizes and addressing class composition (Follwell and Andrey 2021; Fogliato 2017; Jakubowski et al. 2016; OECD 2010).
- 2.75** For instance, it is evident that **additional investment is necessary to allow school boards to hire additional resource teachers, educational assistants, special education supports, social workers, psychologists, guidance teachers, school nurses, and culturally responsive counsellors, to assist families and students from Black, racialized, and Indigenous communities, as well as 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and those living in low-income communities or from other equity-deserving groups.**
- 2.76** There is also a clear need for **investment in mandatory ongoing training and professional development for all administrators, school board trustees, teachers, education workers, and teacher candidates, on a range of equity-related topics, including microaggressions.**
- 2.77** There is also a need for a **more dedicated and substantive approach to disaggregated, demographic-based data collection. Any effort by school boards to collect equity-related data must involve a standardized approach, consider cultural relevance and responsiveness and trauma-informed principles, include all employees and their positions, respect**

privacy, and achieve the highest standards of data collection integrity – results must also be made available in an accessible form.

2.78 The government must also **commit to working collaboratively with education affiliates on any policy and program implementation, including curriculum writing.**

2.79 Learning in a Digital Age

Online and Hybrid Learning

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government’s decision to implement mandatory online learning for Ontario high school students generated a significant amount of controversy. At the time, our Association and other education experts warned that introducing mandatory e-learning would raise a number of issues with respect to student learning, access, equity, and privacy, as well as how the platform would be administered (OECTA 2020a; Parker 2020; Farhadi 2019). Studies throughout the pandemic confirmed these concerns (Galperin and Aguilar 2020; Galperin, Wyatt, and Le 2020; OECTA 2020; Farhadi 2019; Jackson 2020).

2.80 It remains true that expanding online learning and privatizing aspects of Ontario’s publicly funded education system will lead students to lose out on vital interactions with teachers, education workers, and other students. Inequalities would increase, and learning gaps would widen, especially among students with special education needs, Indigenous students, and those from vulnerable and equity-deserving communities (Maimaiti et al. 2021).

2.81 In discussing online learning, the government must also consider its current level of data integrity, on which programming and funding decisions are premised. For

instance, offerings are based upon the assumption that 22.5 per cent of students take online courses. However, these data remain unverified and are potentially misleading. By arbitrarily applying a 22.5 per cent usage assumption across the province, the government does not take regional variations into account; thus, funding is equalized rather than targeted to high-use regions – this overcompensates for school boards in some areas, while underserving others.

2.82 More problematic is that this percentage assumption was raised from 15 per cent, last year. The result is that the number of secondary classroom teachers decreased from 39.95 per 1,000 average daily enrolment (ADE) to 39.54 per 1,000 ADE. We once again ask the government to “show their work” on how this percentage is generated, and how it compares to actual use.

2.83 In addition to being lazy policymaking, this approach creates knock-on effects for funding, and potentially disadvantages students in certain school boards. Funding for online courses is predicated on the assumed percentage use, per ADE; however, in situations where usage may be higher, no additional funding is provided to account for the discrepancy. In these cases, school boards are forced to find funding from other areas to make up the difference, and might be forced to reduce or cancel programs and services for students as a result.

2.84 *Generative AI*

There is an emerging issue that the government must proactively address: the role of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the classroom. The Association is keenly aware of the proliferation of AI, and the opportunities and significant concerns it brings – including the inappropriate use by some students.

2.85 Catholic teachers know their students best; however, the speed with which AI is developing presents an unprecedented challenge for teachers and education workers. While, at first glance, AI software may provide support in developing materials such as assessments or lesson plans, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has raised concerns that AI-generated materials can echo and perpetuate biases, spread dis- and misinformation, and can negatively disrupt labour markets – especially in high-skills fields (OECD 2023).

2.86 It is the Ministry of Education’s responsibility to develop regulations, provide dedicated funding for professional development, and adapt or develop curriculum – in collaboration with teachers – to incorporate critical approaches about appropriate use of AI in the classroom.

2.87 In developing such policies and regulations, the ministry must meaningfully consult with frontline teachers, to ensure that their classroom expertise is leveraged to foster the best possible learning environment for students. To this point, the Association was disappointed to recently learn of a government-funded study, led by a private sector education technology company, that explores the integration of generative AI into publicly funded education, with the aim of making recommendations to the government.

2.88 If publicly funded education is to properly address the challenges posed by generative AI, and appropriately harness its use, teachers must be at the centre of this discussion – involved in everything from policy development, to curriculum writing, to professional development opportunities, and more. Many of the emerging issues are the result of private sector encroachment

into publicly funded education; **it is neither acceptable nor beneficial to turn to the private sector for solutions to public services.**

2.89 *Equitable Access*

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).

2.90 While the government has made numerous announcements regarding their intent to improve internet access in northern and remote regions – and while it is true that some additional funding has been provided – many families in these areas still struggle with reliable internet access and stability (CBC 2022). This is particularly acute for students who live on Indigenous reservations, where news stories have described students being forced to use fax machines to submit work, in the absence of reliable broadband access (Buell 2021).

2.91 As well, many families in Ontario cannot *afford* high speed internet, or the technology required to access online courses (Butler 2021; CBC 2019). Pursuing online learning without providing corresponding additional funding to ensure equitable access will have a negative impact on the student learning experience. In the government’s seemingly relentless pursuit of expanding online learning, too often they have failed to take into account the social, cultural, economic, and geographic factors that impact a student’s ability to engage with, and achieve success, in an online learning environment.

2.92 No student should be forced to take courses online. Nevertheless, the government must **provide predictable and ongoing funding to ensure that every student**

who needs it has access to their own electronic device, and must ensure that all families have equitable access to broadband internet. In addition, any educator required to deliver instruction remotely must be issued the technology and/or devices required for the task by their school board.

- 2.93** As well, students and teachers must 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.**
- 2.94** Amidst discussion of online learning, we must bear in mind a clear fact: research has established in-person instruction as the ideal and most equitable model of learning for students (Cornelius-White 2007). In-person learning provides the best environment to realize student success, promoting greater well-being, academic achievement, and fostering a life-long love of learning. Among its many benefits, in-person learning enables teachers and education workers to provide the individual attention and holistic social, emotional, and academic supports to help students realize their full potential (CMHO 2022).
- 2.95** The Minister of Education has admitted this publicly on numerous occasions (OHRC 2020; TVO 2020). In 2022, when the government introduced Bill 28, using legislation to impose a contract on Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) education workers, the Minister of Education grounded the bill’s rationale almost entirely on the paramount need of students to be in school – in fact, the bill’s name was the *Keeping Students in Class Act* (Legislative Assembly of Ontario 2022).

2.96 Given this, the government must **cease the expansion of online learning, as well as the extension of service delivery to third party entities beyond the publicly funded education system.** Any **courses that are delivered in an online format must be delivered by certified teachers, within the publicly funded education system, and must not be hosted or delivered by any third-party and/or private organization.** The government must also **commit to in-person learning by providing the necessary investments into classroom resources and supports in order to allow students to thrive, academically and socially.**

2.97 Education Quality and Accountability Office

The recent release of Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized test results in sparked a media frenzy, with local publications either lauding or deriding the results of their local communities, depending on scores. Depending on location, Ontarians were met with headlines such as “Niagara school board students well above provincial EQAO results;” “EQAO results show Grand Erie made some gains, still below provincial average;” “Local Owen Sound students achieving below provincial averages in EQAO results” (Redmond 2023; Ruby 2023; Cowan 2023).

2.98 While such headlines serve to drive newspaper readership, they conceal longstanding and broad concerns, which call into question the efficacy of standardized testing more generally. 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).

- 2.99** 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 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). This aggregate report card data is available to the Ministry of Education.
- 2.100** There is also significant concern with the test’s inequity, especially as it relates to equity-deserving populations. In a comprehensive study of the Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing preparation and administration, Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad, a professor in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University, found in his doctoral thesis that EQAO test questions marginalize racialized students and students from lower socio-economic groups. Eizadirad concludes that EQAO test construction is “culturally and racially biased as it promotes a Eurocentric curriculum and way of life privileging white students and those from higher socio-economic status” (Eizadirad 2018).
- 2.101** The tide has been turning against EQAO testing for a number of years. 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.

2.102 Unfortunately, the Ford government 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).

2.103 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 the Programme for International Student Assessment (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.

2.104 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).

- 2.105** 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 Kindergarten and Grade 1 classes.
- 2.106** 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.
- 2.107** Research has shown that Ontario's FDK staff teams are united 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.

2.108 With the proper support, the investment in FDK will continue to pay dividends long into the future for students, families, the economy, and society. **To best serve students and to set them up for long-term success, within the publicly funded education system and after, the government must continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise.**

2.109 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).

2.110 Reports point to some progress being made in recent years toward implementing Indigenous education strategies and programs in Ontario schools. For instance, in 2012-13, only 34 per cent of elementary and secondary schools reported having professional development opportunities for school staff on Indigenous education. By 2022-23, this figure had risen to 76 per cent in elementary and 82 per cent in

secondary schools. In addition, between 2012 and 2022, the proportion of schools offering Indigenous languages programs increased from four to 13 per cent in elementary schools, and from 11 to 20 per cent in secondary schools (People for Education 2023a).

- 2.111** Nevertheless, there remain 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 (Cimellaro 2023; 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.**
- 2.112** Looking specifically at funding allocations for the Indigenous Education Grant, although investment has increased over the past several years, it is still well short of what is required and – in some cases – calculation changes have created disparities in funding disbursement.
- 2.113** Overall, funding to the 2023-24 Indigenous Education Grant increased by 14 per cent, following a 2022-23 increase of 24.6 per cent – although this still lags behind what funding *would* be for this grant, had the current government not made drastic cuts when it first came into office.
- 2.114** New in the 2023-24 GSNs was a “First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies Allocation,” which provides \$645.64 per student enrolled, with prorating conditions at particular enrolment levels.

2.115 Anticipating that enrollment estimate revisions would produce net-funding-losses in certain situations, the government has included a One-time Realignment Mitigation Fund. This contingency funding is necessary – for instance, despite the increase to the overall grant, the Sudbury Catholic District School Board incurred a \$200,000 decrease in funding due to estimate revisions. **It is critical that this realignment funding is not temporary or time limited. This realignment contingency funding must be made part of the annual Indigenous Education Grant. More broadly, where there are mitigating funds, additional monies must be made available.**

2.116 In addition to investments in resources and supports, **teachers and education workers will require ongoing professional development to facilitate curriculum delivery, as well as to promote familiarity and comfort in providing instruction on important, but potentially sensitive topics.** As the advocacy group People for Education has explained, “Indigenous ways of learning are part of that diversity and cannot be integrated if teacher professional development is inconsistent and there is limited time for collaborative planning” (People for Education 2016).

2.117 The government must also follow through on its repeated stated commitments to redress learning gaps and improve outcomes among Indigenous students. To this end, it was certainly unhelpful when – in the spring of 2022 – the government made an unwarranted last-minute decision to substantially modify or remove sixteen Indigenous-related expectations in Ontario’s new science and technology curriculum for Grades 1 to 8 (McInnes 2022). This decision was even more baffling given that the government spent months consulting with Indigenous stakeholders to develop the curriculum materials (Alphonso 2022a).

2.118 The government cannot and should not turn its back on these efforts, especially as the need to address Indigenous education, and the education of Indigenous students, will only become more urgent, given that Indigenous children are the fastest-growing child population segment in Canada (UNICEF Canada 2018). It has been well established that 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).

2.119 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.

2.120 Unfortunately, the government has too often chosen to implement sweeping changes without providing teachers much-needed opportunities for professional learning. The new language curriculum for Grades 1 to 8, and a new de-streamed language curriculum in Grade 9 provides a case-in-point.

2.121 The announcement was made in late June, leaving teachers without the time, resources, and supports necessary to understand and master the new material, before the start of next school year. And while Catholic teachers have always supported making regular curriculum updates, and have voiced our support of destreaming in an effort to eliminate racism, discrimination, and all systemic barriers, what the government implemented was underfunded, oversimplified, and rushed – an approach that is demonstrably counterproductive to achieving student success.

- 2.122** Ideally, curriculum updates and implementation involve 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).
- 2.123** The Association has offered to provide its expertise to ensure the government's efforts to update and implement curricula are accompanied by appropriate teacher-led professional development opportunities, resources, and other supports that provide the best possible learning environment for all students. It has been as disheartening and frustrating for Catholic teachers to be asked by the government to provide recommendations on curriculum updates – only to have our expertise roundly ignored.
- 2.124** 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.
- 2.125** 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).

2.126 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 that has been echoed by the Auditor General of Ontario (2017).

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

2.128 Many English Language Learners require additional supports or extra assistance in order to better understand class instructions, and were particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports from Ontario and elsewhere indicate that English Language Learners are not receiving the supports they require, and are suffering from additional learning loss as a result of pandemic disruption (Kim 2020; Alphonso 2020). **Smaller class sizes and 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.

2.129 Adult and Continuing Education

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.

2.130 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 repeatedly cut the adult and continuing education budgets. This reduction was particularly drastic in the 2022-23 school year, which saw not just an inflationary cut, but a nominal-dollar cut of from the previous year (Ministry of Education 2023).

2.131 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.

2.132 Research demonstrates that, despite the many benefits of adult and continuing education learners re-engaging with publicly funded education, there are impacts on learners' mental health, especially for those transitioning into a formal learning environment after a potentially lengthy absence (Waller et al. 2018). The government must realize that its consistent cuts to adult and continuing education programs have a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of these learners.

2.133 The government should recognize that adult and continuing education is invaluable to the socio-economic well-being and social mobility of communities. **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.**

2.134 Holding School Boards to Account

The *2024-25 Education Funding Consultation Guide* includes, as one of its two stated priorities, the goal of "strengthening accountability and improving transparency" (Ministry of Education 2023). Perhaps nowhere is this more important than with respect to school boards.

2.135 Catholic teachers have long expressed our 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.

2.136 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.

2.137 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.

2.138 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 roughly 600,000 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.

2.139 There remains 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).

2.140 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).

2.141 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.

2.142 The government has made overtures toward this, in recent consultation solicitors on school disposition and schools on shared sites. The Association has offered its analysis and recommendations for both topics in recent submissions (OECTA 2023a; OECTA 2023b).

2.143 With respect to shared facilities, specifically for co-terminus boards, as noted in our submission to government, any decision to undertake such arrangement would have to be done while protecting each school system’s unique framework and structures, and upholding the rights outlined in Section 93 of the *Constitution Act, 1867*. With those rights protected and maintained, there exists significant opportunities to make efficient use of resources while ensuring that more communities have access to important public services.

2.144 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 The 2024-25 *Education Funding Consultation Guide* poses a question: “What opportunities exist to better communicate to taxpayers how GSN funding is allocated to school boards?” (Ministry of Education 2023). That this is one of only two key areas for consideration included in the document is telling – and speaks to this government’s misguided priorities.

3.02 It is not a matter of needing to better communicate GSN funding to the public. The problem is the lack of funding itself.

- 3.03** It is worth remembering that one of this government's first exercises was the dubious decision to solicit a report by management consultants Ernst & Young, to review expenditures. The report suggested that the government consider "renewed funding models for major programs," noting "Governments around the world are moving towards alternate arrangements for funding, including tying funding to the achievement of outcomes, and providing funding to individuals, who can then choose their service providers through a form of market activity and discipline" (Ernst & Young 2018). This approach to public services – which prioritizes cuts masquerading as "efficiencies" – was wrongheaded then, and remains so today.
- 3.04** The reality is plain, since coming to office in 2018, this government has found ways – sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly – to cut education funding, siphoning money out of the classroom and into the hands of private entities. This has strained our publicly funded education system, despite the best efforts of teachers and education workers.
- 3.05** The government would do well to remember that Ontario's publicly funded education system is world class, thanks to its teachers, education workers, students, parents, and supporting communities. It is past time for the Ford government to recognize this, and to work toward strengthening our publicly funded school system with the necessary investments that benefit all Ontarians now and in the future.
- 3.06** The development of the education funding formula for the 2024-25 school year presents the government with an opportunity to do the right thing – to make the investments in the programs, resources, and supports that Ontario's students need

and deserve. Our students are the future – our schools need real investment, and they need it now.

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