



2025-26

# CORE EDUCATION FUNDING

Submission to the  
Ministry of Education

November 2024

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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## INTRODUCTION

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 its 2025-26 Core Education Funding (formerly Grants for Student Needs).

The introduction to this year's *2025-26 Education Funding Engagement Guide* states it clearly that, "through Core Education Funding, the government continues to focus on going back-to-basics and preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow" (Ministry of Education 2024).


This sentence is worth unpacking, as it reveals a philosophy of education from the Ford Conservative government that is both narrow and shortsighted – one that has devastating consequences for students, teachers, and our school communities.

Catholic teachers have long supported the critical role that publicly funded education plays in preparing students for a variety of potential future careers. However, we must always remember that the overarching goal of publicly funded education should be to prepare students with a broad range of values and competencies that will enable them to successfully adapt throughout their lives.

Accomplishing this goal requires robust government investment in a broad range of resources and supports to ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

Sadly, since taking office in 2018, the Ford Conservative 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 (Steiner 2024; Rushowy 2023; DiMatteo 2021). The result is that core classroom funding has not kept pace with inflation, producing a real-dollar cut to program delivery for students.

While the government's 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. As well, following the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers are reporting that students who traditionally did not require additional supports are facing gaps and learning challenges and are not able to receive the supports that they need.



All the while, the expertise of frontline classroom teachers, education workers, and their representatives has been ignored; instead, private corporations have become a primary source of input on curriculum development – and are the main beneficiaries of an education system that has been steered toward privatization and profit maximization.

Nearly 30 years after a former Conservative Minister of Education promised to “invent a crisis in education,” we once again find ourselves at a crossroads.

The Ford Conservative government can continue to erode the quality of Ontario’s world-class publicly funded education system. Or, the government can choose a different path: it can finally recognize and act upon the truism that properly funding education is an investment in the future – and that *every* student deserves to be supported and to learn in a safe and modern school. It is time for the Ford Conservative government to make the right choice.

In the submission that follows, Catholic teachers will address some of the themes proposed in the government’s engagement guide, and will also put forward recommendations on a variety of other areas that would address and work toward strengthening Ontario’s publicly funded education system. Although the government continues to ignore input from frontline workers, we continue to offer insight from our experiences and expertise, with the intent of supporting our students and rebuilding world-class education in Ontario.

## **CORE EDUCATION FUNDING REFORM**

Last year represented a significant change in core education funding; not in terms of the funding amount itself – as the government continued its annual trend of making inflationary cuts – but rather in *how* education funding is presented.

Prior to last year, the Grants for Student Needs (GSNs) consisted of 18 grants and 77 funding allocations. However, as part of the government’s rebranding exercise, the document’s title became Core Education Funding, and is now comprised of six funding “pillars” and 28 allocations.

The government claims this was done to make education funding simpler and easier to understand by the public – a worthwhile objective. Unfortunately, the reality is that the government has produced a document that makes it far more difficult – and in some cases impossible – to track funding, which ultimately undermines the government’s stated goals for accountability.

For instance, core per-student funding that traditionally had been presented in one easy-to-read table has been broken apart, with different sections in different places of the document – forcing readers to reconstruct the tables in order to make apples-to-apples comparisons and understand the totality of classroom funding.

At the same time, several funding “envelopes” (that is, obligations for school boards to spend funds on a particular item) have been eliminated, removing a key feature of school board accountability. And finally, in a number of places, the government has simply stopped including funding amounts for specific program components, making it impossible to determine what is *actually* being provided.

The cynical interpretation of these changes is that it allows the government to quietly cut funding, while avoiding scrutiny. For instance, funding that had previously been required to be spent on school libraries and library staff has had the enveloping removed and has been folded into a broader Learning Resources Fund. By eliminating any accountability for school boards to direct funding as intended, the Ontario Library Association is anticipating that there will be a significant and geographically inequitable decrease in the number of teacher-librarians, as schools are forced to redirect funding to maintain accounting compliance (Chaudhary 2024).

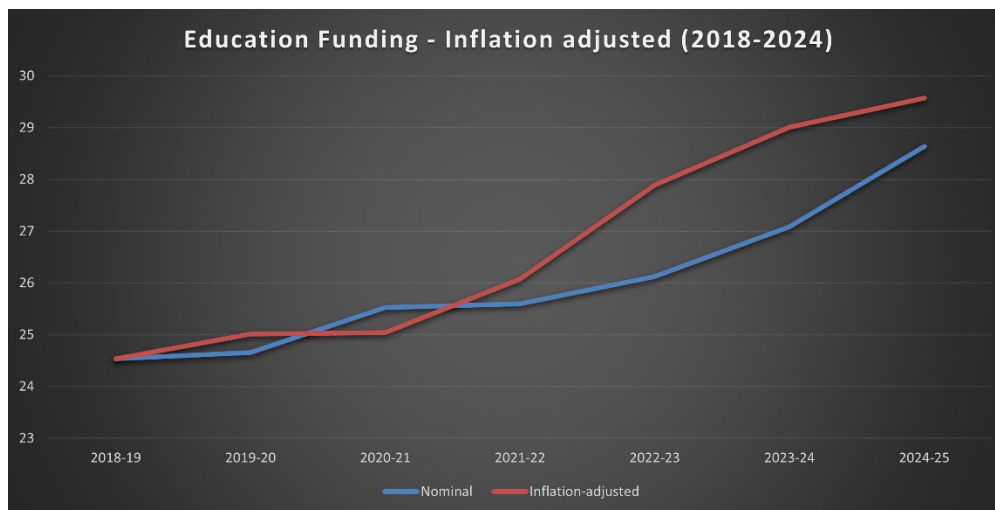
Far from improving transparency or simplicity, the rebranding of Core Education Funding seems designed to make it *more* difficult to know where and how monies are being directed and spent.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reinstate and expand the use of funding envelopes, to ensure that school boards are spending money as intended.</li></ul>             |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reinstate line-item funding amounts for all components and sub-components in the Core Education Funding document.</li></ul>           |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Return to the practice of presenting the totality of classroom funding and staffing amounts in one table for each division.</li></ul> |

## **EDUCATION (UNDER)FUNDING**

For the sixth straight year since taking office in 2018, the Ford Conservative government framed their 2024-25 education funding announcement as an “historic investment.” And for the sixth straight year, when you strip away the non-classroom items and account for inflation, the government has continued to make deep cuts.

For the 2024-25 school year, Core Education Funding was projected to be \$28.6 billion, which is a 2.7 per cent nominal increase over the previous year. However, when you compare this funding to what the prior Liberal government had invested in the 2018-19 GSNs, and adjust for inflation, the reality is that in 2024-25 the Ford government underfunded education by \$860 million.



It is worth reiterating that, even in a hypothetical world where the government addressed the \$860 million shortfall, this would still do nothing more than *maintain* funding at the rate of inflation since 2018. In reality, given the diversity and complexity of students’ needs, and as many still grapple with learning loss as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the *actual* funding amount that would be required to provide students the necessary resources and supports likely far exceeds inflation.

The situation is not likely to improve – the recent Fall Economic Statement released by the government includes projected education spending as well as projected inflation. When those figures are compared using 2024 as a baseline, it indicates that by 2026 there will be a further \$200 million inflationary shortfall in education spending (Ministry of Finance 2024).

Taking a more granular look at per-student funding for 2024-25, we can refer to several tables from different sections of the Core Education Funding document to reproduce a reliable year-over-year funding comparison.

Using the most recent publicly available enrolment data from the Ministry of Education (2022-23 school year), and examining classroom funding per Average Daily Enrolment (ADE), we are able to gain a

better sense of the Ford Conservative government’s deep inflationary cuts across all divisions of the publicly funded education system – for last year and compared to 2018:

| Division            | ADE \$     | Nominal % | vs. 2023 | vs. 2018 | Impact          |
|---------------------|------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| Kindergarten        | \$6,890.62 | 2.1%      | \$55     | \$750    | \$192.8m        |
| Primary             | \$6,173    | 1.2%      | \$100    | \$704    | \$296.7m        |
| Junior/Intermediate | \$5,144.59 | 1.2%      | \$84     | \$713    | \$521.2m        |
| Secondary           | \$6,047.38 | 0.9%      | \$117    | \$1,112  | \$718.4m        |
|                     |            |           |          |          | <b>-\$1.73b</b> |

In every respect, students and teachers have once again been forced to do more with less, as funding continues to fall well short of inflation. This extends right down to pencils and paper – where schools in Ontario are receiving less than \$1 per day, per student, for classroom supplies.

|  | Elementary    | Secondary     |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| <b>Textbooks and learning materials<br/>(per student, per day)</b> | <b>\$0.36</b> | <b>\$0.49</b> |
| <b>Classroom supplies<br/>(per student, per day)</b>               | <b>\$0.44</b> | <b>\$1.00</b> |

While the Ford government continues to make inflationary cuts to per-pupil funding, they have also quietly been cutting the number of funded classroom teaching positions since 2018.

By using enrollment projections for 2024-25 from the Ministry of Education, we are able to calculate the impact staffing cuts have, specifically on classroom teachers. The table below presents the number of funded classroom teachers per ADE (classroom teachers, specialist teachers, preparation and planning time teachers, online learning teachers, and programming teachers). Using this, we can determine the total number of classroom teaching positions for 2024-25, and compare that against what those numbers *would* be, if the Ford government had simply maintained staffing at 2018 levels.



| Division     | Projected school board ADE, 2024-25 | Total # of classroom teachers per 1,000 ADE (2018-19) | Total # of classroom teachers per 1,000 ADE (2024-25) | Difference 2018 vs. 2024 | Change in # of classroom teaching positions 2018-19 vs. 2024-25 |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------|---|
| FDK          | 256,348                             | 46.77   | 46.77   | -                        | -   |
| Grades 1-3   | 424,923                             | 60.18   | 60.18   | -                        | -   |
| Grades 4-8   | 732,667                             | 50.11   | 48.78   | -1.33                    | -974  |
| Grades 9-12  | 641,096                             | 58.78   | 54.74   | -4.04                    | -2,590  |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>2,055,034</b>                    | <b>215.84</b>   | <b>210.47</b>   | <b>-5.37</b>             | <b>-3,564</b>   |

As the table makes clear, since 2018 the Ford Conservative government has quietly – and shamefully – cut more than 3,500 classroom teaching positions from publicly funded schools in Ontario. Ricardo Tranjan from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has looked at the data from a system-wide staffing perspective, and found that more than 5,000 classroom positions have been cut by the Ford government since 2018 (Tranjan 2024).

It is astonishing to think that, in the face of chronic underfunding in education and other public services, the Ford government would spend \$3.2 billion dollars from public coffers (Benzie 2024) to send \$200 cheques to millionaires and billionaires, as a cynical ploy to curry favour ahead of a likely early provincial election.

All of this is disappointing, but not surprising for a government that has demonstrated some of the worst fiscal responsibility imaginable – as the government continues to rank second-last of all provinces for “fiscal effort,” which is defined as the effort a government puts into raising “own-source revenue” – and is calculated as a percentage of each province’s total provincial Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Robinson 2023).

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase per-student funding beyond the rate of annual inflation.</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consult meaningfully with teachers’ unions and increase the funded number of classroom teachers per 1,000 ADE beyond 2018 levels.</li> </ul> |

- Commit to improving “fiscal effort” to a rate matching the Canadian provincial average, with the additional revenue going to properly fund public services in Ontario.

## **INVESTING IN THE FUTURE**

Our students are the future – and our schools need real investment, and they need it now. As the Conference Board of Canada has calculated, every dollar invested in publicly funded education yields \$1.30 in total economic benefits to Ontario – and at the same time, the inverse holds true for each dollar *cut* from publicly funded education (Conference Board of Canada 2019).

Socially and economically, properly funding education is one of the smartest investments we can make in Ontario’s future. In doing so, it is critical that we set students up for success.

### ***Class Size***

The benefits of smaller class sizes are well established. Research shows that reductions in class size are 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 (Bouguen, Grenet, and Gurgand 2017).

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). 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).

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 from 2003 to 2019 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 ranked among the best in Canada and the world. This serves to highlight the costs of the government’s ideologically-driven decision in 2019 to raise class sizes in grades 4 to 12.

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.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Commit to lowering class size averages in Ontario’s publicly funded schools.</li></ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work meaningfully with teachers’ unions to understand – and factor in – the role of class composition when determining class sizes.</li></ul> |

***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; Pelletier and Corter 2019). It is imperative that the government continue to respect and support the functioning of the teacher/ECE teams that lay at the heart of this program’s success.

At the same time, to build upon the benefits of the FDK program, the government must address several outstanding issues, such as reducing the number of large and/or split Kindergarten and Grade 1 classes. In addition, the government must reassess provisions that allow a certain percentage of FDK classes within a school board to exceed the class size limit of 29 students.

This has become a significant issue in several areas, including the Halton Catholic District School Board, which this year will see nine per cent of FDK classes exceed the limit – impacting the learning environment and creating challenges for classroom management (Cilliers 2024). This hurts our youngest learners and the start to their education journey.

However, with the proper support, the investment in FDK will continue to pay dividends long into the future for students, families, the economy, and society.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise.</li></ul> |

- Work meaningfully with teachers' unions and commit to eliminating the exceptions that allow a certain percentage of FDK classes within a school board to exceed the class size limit of 29 students.
- Improve the funded number of FDK teachers per 1,000 ADE, to ensure that our youngest learners are not forced into large and/or split Kindergarten and Grade 1 classes.

## **SUPPORTING EVERY STUDENT**

Every student, regardless of their individual needs, should have access to the resources they need in order to thrive.

Whether it is additional assistance with reading or math, special education, mental health, and more, the Ford Conservative government must reverse course to prioritize increasing the broad suite of supports that students rely on to learn, grow, and achieve.

### ***Mental Health and Well-being***

It is disappointing that the *2025-26 Education Funding Engagement Guide* has no section dedicated to mental health and well-being, nor makes any comment about mental health being a priority for this government.

Unfortunately, the government's transition from the GSNs to Core Education Funding has made it more difficult to understand specifically how mental health funding is distributed. Whereas previously, the GSNs outlined specific amounts dedicated to each of the Mental Health Workers Staff, Student Mental Health, and Mental Health Leaders components, the Core Education Funding document collapses these elements, simply providing a global total of \$87.2 million, without detailing the specific breakdowns. Irrespective of the breakdown, it is clear that this funding amount does not address student mental health needs.

The government has still not acknowledged or acted upon the recommendation from Catholic teachers to invest in proactive and comprehensive mental health assessment of students, and to determine a "baseline" of mental health fitness.

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided, everyday teachers see the impact that the pandemic is still having on all students – as well as themselves. According to a 2022–23 survey of

more than 10,000 Ontario students in grades 7 to 12, more than half (51 per cent) reported moderate-to-serious psychological distress – a figure double that of the previous decade’s rate (CAMH 2022). Nevertheless, Ontario schools remain woefully under-resourced. According to a 2023 report from People for Education, 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).

It is important to note 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).

As well, funding allocations such as the Special Incidence Portion (SIP), continue to be 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. To this point, geographic and demographic needs must be considered to ensure that no regions, communities, or populations are disadvantaged.

Just as the government must address the epidemic of *student* mental health issues, so too must they fulfil their 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.

**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, psychotherapists, guidance teachers, child and youth workers, and school mental health workers. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in proactive and comprehensive mental health assessment of students – and act with speed to deploy mental health and well-being teams in every school in Ontario.</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>       |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase annual funding for Student Mental Health Ontario in a manner that reflects sustainability and long-term needs.</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-ordinate with other ministries to explore the community hub model, and consult meaningfully and regularly with the representatives of frontline teachers and education workers.</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>                                  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Return to providing detailed breakdowns of funding at the component level.</li> </ul>   |

**Special Education**

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.

In the 2024-25 Core Education Funding document, the government lauded itself for providing \$3.49 billion in its Special Education Fund, a 2.3 per cent increase over the previous year. However, it must be noted that this still represents an inflationary cut of \$20 million over last year – and a \$130 million shortfall compared to what the Liberals were investing in 2018.

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 2024a).



This is a woefully inadequate ratio, which produces significant shortages in supports. Based on funding allocations and enrolment projections, this amounts to roughly 0.6 speech-language pathologists per elementary school.

Looking at psychologists, People for Education's 2019 survey of principals found that almost 30 percent of schools in Ontario reported having no access to a psychologist – a figure that increases when geography is taken into account (People for Education 2019).

At the same time, it is important to note that Ontario's special education program was never designed to deliver mental health services. Increasingly, psychologists are being required to provide these supports, in addition to the psychoeducational support that has been their traditional responsibility. This speaks to a clear need to conduct an assessment of Ontario's special education, and to ensure that the investment in supports and resources – including human resources – are sufficient to meet students' diverse and evolving needs.

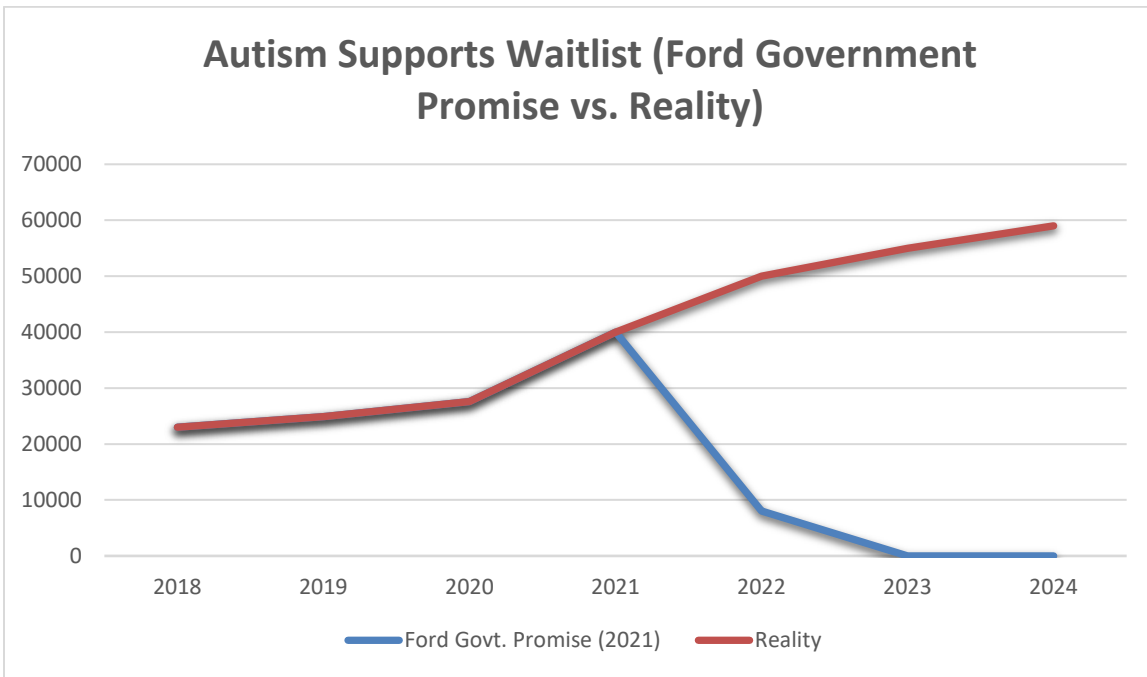
If the Ford government is to address this issue comprehensively, it will need to improve upon past performance. This should include a movement to a needs-based funding model, rather than the ineffective and inefficient one-size-fits-all approach the government currently employs.

However, 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.

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 September 2024, the list now stands at almost 60,000 children (Jones 2024).

### Autism Supports Waitlist (Ford Government Promise vs. Reality)



Beyond issues with the waitlist, there remains a significant gap in the availability of services offered in schools. This, in turn, often drives families to seek external supports from expensive privatized providers – which creates equity issues between families who can and cannot afford these services. All of this serves to reinforce the ineffectiveness of taking a “one-size-fits-all” approach to special education, rather than providing sufficient funding to ensure that students get the specialized supports *they* need.

Returning to the *2025-26 Education Funding Engagement Guide*, the section on special education includes the following prompt: “Is there a way to allocate the Special Education Fund (or portions of this fund) more effectively and/or efficiently, *without creating the need for new provincial funding or increasing administrative burden*” (*emphasis added*) (Ministry of Education 2024).

Quite simply, there is no substantive way to improve supports and resources for students with special education needs without dramatically increasing funding. The government must immediately disabuse itself of the notion that teachers can do more with less to help the neediest of our students.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dramatically increase funding to the Special Education Fund.</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with teachers’ unions to revise and increase the ratio of professional and paraprofessional supports for students with special education needs per 1,000 ADE.</li> </ul> |



- Work with teachers' unions to develop a framework for a "needs-based-plus" system of special education funding.
- Return transparency and accountability to special education funding by clearly outlining funding amounts and the sub-component level.

## ***Learning in a Digital Age***

### *Online Learning*

It must be stated plainly that any attempt to expand online learning and privatize 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).

There are also significant disparities in academic programming between courses offered in-person and online. For instance, at the secondary level, there are reports that several school boards are advertising the elimination of exams for online credit courses, in an effort to drive enrolment. However, we must be clear that doing so dilutes the credit integrity of those online courses and impacts student learning.

It is concerning that in the 2024-25 Core Education Funding document, the credit load per student for online learning was increased from 0.225 to 0.35. As discussed previously, this will result in a decrease of the overall number of secondary classroom teachers. We once again ask the government to "show their work" on how the percentage used as the basis for per pupil credit load is generated, and how it compares to *actual* use.

### *Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)*

There is an emerging issue that the government must proactively address: the role of generative AI in the classroom. 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 Cooperation and Development (OECD) has raised concerns that AI-generated materials can echo and perpetuate biases, spread dis- and misinformation, and negatively disrupt labour markets – especially in high-skills fields (OECD 2024).

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 any discussions – 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. In fact, exposing children to profit motive as a driver jeopardizes safety, privacy, and security. The impact of simpler but significant technologies like social media has already created serious and real concerns for parents, teachers, and children.

### *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. As well, many families in Ontario cannot afford high speed internet, or the technology required to access online courses (Mundie 2021; Draaisma 2019). In the government’s seemingly relentless pursuit of expanding online learning, 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. The government must recognize that not all children live in areas that enjoy reliable and consistent access.

We must remember at all times that in-person learning is unquestionably the best and most equitable form of learning. That said, for those students who are interested in online learning, students and teachers must be provided with appropriate resources and supports to facilitate achievement.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide dedicated funding for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development for online learning, as well as adapt or develop curriculum – in collaboration with teachers – to incorporate critical approaches about appropriate use of AI in the classroom.</li></ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 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.</li></ul> |

- Cease the expansion of online learning, as well as the extension of service delivery to third party entities beyond the publicly funded education system – and commit to in-person learning by providing the necessary investments into classroom resources and supports to allow students to thrive, academically and socially.
- Ensure that 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.

### ***Ensuring All Learners are Supported***

#### *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.

Shamefully, 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).

As of 2022, 13 per cent of elementary schools and 20 per cent of secondary schools offer Indigenous languages programs. As well, nearly a quarter of elementary schools and one-in-five secondary schools still report having no professional development offered to teachers regarding Indigenous education (People for Education 2023).

It is clear that, 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.

Unfortunately, the government's transition to Core Education Funding has made it more difficult to track and understand funding for Indigenous education, as sub-components have been removed from the Indigenous Education Grant, and are now spread across different sections of the funding document, some of which do not include specific funding allotments. This is a betrayal of the government's so-called commitment to improving the education experience for Ontario's Indigenous learners.



The government must act now. 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).

### *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.

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).

Another factor that impacts the learning experience of English language learners, as well as adult and continuing education learners, is a critical lack of infrastructure. With immigration increases in recent years, there has been an increase in demand for education programs at all levels (Ministry of Finance 2024a). However, there has not been a corresponding investment to insure these learners have the necessary infrastructure to ensure an adequate learning environment.

### *Adult and Continuing Education*

Adult and continuing education programs continue to be funded at a fraction of the level of regular day school credit programs. Looking at per-student funding, in 2023-24 the government provided \$3,661 per continuing education ADE, whereas funding for regular day school credit program amounted to \$13,584 per student.

This funding disparity creates significant issues for learners. 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.

At the same time, the lack of special purpose funding means that in schools where alternative education programs for traditional-aged students run concurrently with adult and continuing education programs, support services such as guidance and special education are forced to be spread across both programs – leaving all students without proper access to critical resources.

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.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dramatically increase funding for Indigenous education, English Language Learners, and Adult and Continuing Education.</li></ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide 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 they relate to Indigenous education.</li></ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allocate dedicated funding for school boards to provide the necessary supports to improve language skill assessment. At the same time, Indigenous, English language, and adult learners require additional and specific trauma-informed mental health supports to improve chances for successful completion of their respective programs.</li></ul> |

## **SAFE AND MODERN SCHOOLS**

### ***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 seven years following this report, incidents of violence and harassment in schools have only grown more frequent and severe – and to-date, despite education stakeholders and opposition parties demanding action, the government has done nothing of substance to address this critical issue (CBC 2024).

The issue of violence in schools is complex and challenging. There is no simple answer. Addressing this matter requires a multifaceted, comprehensive, and co-ordinated 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 originally outlined in our Association’s *Safer Schools for All* platform (OECTA 2017a). It is disconcerting that there is an expectation by some that educators must bargain for safe schools at negotiating tables, because the government refuses to adequately address the safety of children and schools.

The lasting consequences that the COVID-19 pandemic had on student mental health have been well established (St. George et al. 2021; SickKids 2021). And by no means is this 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 (Green 2024). 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.

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 (Bond and McAllister 2024). There are a number of actions the Ford Conservative government can – and must – take immediately in order to begin to address the issue of school violence.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide teachers and school staff with comprehensive trauma-informed training.</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work meaningfully with education unions and other key stakeholders to proactively support students or staff who are in crisis, by developing a whole-school approach to addressing incidents of violence, which includes follow-up actions to prevent recurrence.</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with education stakeholders to develop sector-specific regulation for education under the <i>Occupational Health and Safety Act</i>.</li> </ul>  |

## ***Infrastructure***

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 (Balintec 2024).

At a recent Estimates Committee meeting, the Minister of Education was asked repeatedly by an opposition MPP for the specific amount of the current repair backlog – the Minister refused to answer (Hansard 2024). Instead, the government has repeatedly highlighted its desire to build new schools and, in fact, is forcing school boards to redirect already-insufficient funds to erect advertising signs on school buildings as part of the government's shameless self-promotion (Pinkerton and Duggal 2024).

The government is also fond of pointing to its \$1.4 billion investment in school repairs funding for 2024-25 (Ministry of Education 2024). However, at this rate it would take more than 12 years to address the *current* backlog, to say nothing of any additional repair requirements that emerge over the next decade. Students and teachers should not be forced to learn and work in an unsafe environment with leaking roofs and crumbling infrastructure (Lavoie 2024).

In the government's zeal to build new schools, there have been no assurances that school buildings will be fully accessible and comply with all relevant legislation. In June 2023, Rich Donovan, Chair of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Alliance, released a scathing report, concluding that Ontario has reached a "crisis state" and that the Ford government has failed its obligation to make Ontario accessible. The report also says it is a "near certainty" that the Ford government will miss its legally mandated target of ensuring accessibility by 2025 (Donovan 2023).

More broadly, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time to reassess the province's approach to school construction. Since the 1970s, the physical construction of Ontario schools has been driven by economic and demographic considerations, and has entirely ignored 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. Without meaningful action, Ontario will once again find itself completely unprepared in the event of a future pandemic.

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| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide immediate, stable, and sufficient annual funding for infrastructure and repairs sufficient to eliminate the current repair backlog within the next three years.</li></ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide immediate funding to upgrade all school facilities such that they meet accessibility standards and legal requirements.</li></ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 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.</li></ul>                        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure that any efforts to build new schools do not involve private-public partnerships (PPP) as a method to promote school construction, as this form of creeping privatization has no place in the development of public infrastructure.</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Must ensure that any construction of new school facilities is fully accessible and complies with all relevant accessibility legislation.</li></ul>   |

## **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)*.

We recognize and acknowledge the many, varied, and systemic ways that discrimination and racism manifest and are 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.

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.

The situation around destreaming offers a case-in-point. The Association strongly supported destreaming efforts, but insisted that the government commit stable long-term funding to ensure that students and teachers had the necessary resources and supports to maximize success.



Shamefully, the government has taken the opposite approach. 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 approach inhibits success (Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education 2021).

Most outrageous of all, when the 2024-25 Core Education Funding was released, it was discovered that the government had reduced destreaming funding from – an already insufficient – \$103.69 million to \$3 million (Ministry of Education 2024). This represents a 97 per cent funding cut. This is utterly disgraceful for a government who drapes itself in talking points about the importance of equity.

The Ford Conservative government must immediately reverse course, and make good on its stated commitment to eradicate anti-Black racism, and all other forms of racism and discrimination, from Ontario’s publicly funded education system.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>   |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide immediate investment 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, students with disabilities, and those living in low-income communities or from other equity-deserving groups.</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Invest 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.</li></ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adopt 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.</li></ul>            |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Commit to working collaboratively with education affiliates on any policy and program implementation, including curriculum writing.</li></ul>   |

## **STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY**

### ***Holding School Boards to Account***

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.

The government is not taking measures to improve the situation. For instance, the removal of a number of funding envelopes will only serve to make it more difficult to know that funding is flowing to its intended purpose – students will suffer if critical resources are redirected elsewhere by school boards in an effort to maintain accounting principles. At the same time, the recent direction from the government for school boards to redirect funding to pay for government advertising on schools will only make this situation worse.

It is imperative that new funds for mental health services, special education programs, professional services and supports, and other initiatives are spent as intended.

There is also a need to address the information pipeline that exists between school boards, the government, and education unions. For instance, why is school board data, such as sick leave, not proactively published and shared with education unions? Improving this data-sharing exercise would be of benefit to all stakeholders in the education sector, and would also potentially facilitate a more expeditious central collective bargaining process.

### ***Education Quality and Accountability Office***

It is time for the government to admit a hard truth: 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.

There is also significant concern with the test’s biases, 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 found 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 socioeconomic status” (Eizadirad 2018).

What is worse, the government has used socio-economic disparities highlighted by EQAO testing to blame schools and teachers, rather than as a motivating factor to address economic inequity in various communities.


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.

| <b>CATHOLIC TEACHERS RECOMMEND THAT THE GOVERNMENT...</b>  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Should develop 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.</li></ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Should disband EQAO testing, and redirect funds to classroom resources and supports. 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.</li></ul> |

## **REBUILDING AND SUSTAINING WORLD-CLASS PUBLICLY FUNDED EDUCATION**

### ***Consultation and Collaboration***

International research has shown that a collaborative, professional relationship between governments and teachers’ and educators’ organizations is a key ingredient in successful education systems.



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. Failing to engage and respect frontline workers in any workplace is an ineffective approach that achieves less, and wastes time that workers cannot afford.

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. 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.

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.

### ***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 remain apprised of what is current and effective in our classrooms. Unfortunately, the government has too often chosen to implement sweeping changes without providing teachers much-needed opportunities for professional learning.

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). 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.

### **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 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.

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).


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. It is important to remember that any decision to undertake such an arrangement would need to protect each school system's unique framework and structures, and upholds the rights outlined in Section 93 of the *Constitution Act, 1867*.

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).

### **CONCLUSION**

The opening line of the *2025-26 Education Funding Engagement Guide* states that "The government is committed to delivering a world-class education system" (Ministry of Education 2024).

It is worth reminding the Ford government that they *inherited* a world-class system six years ago and have seemingly worked to undermine it every day since. The government would also do well to



remember that teachers, education workers, students, parents, and school communities are the foundation for the success of publicly funded education in Ontario.

Governing is about making choices. It is regrettable that, instead of being *partners* in education, the Ford Conservative government has too often chosen an adversarial approach – vilifying teachers and education workers, while underfunding and undermining the system. This is neither helpful nor sustainable.

Students deserve better. Teachers and education workers deserve better. Parents and all Ontarians deserve better.

The development of the education funding formula for the 2025-26 school year presents the government with an opportunity to finally make the investments in the programs, resources, and supports that Ontario's students need and deserve.

*This* choice belongs to the government. However, if the Ford Conservative government continues to pursue its misguided ideological priorities that place profit over people, and mortgage Ontario's future for students, teachers, and communities, then the voters of this province may exercise *their* right to go to a ballot box and make a different choice.

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