

2026-27

PRE-BUDGET BRIEF

To The Standing
Committee on Finance
and Economic Affairs

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: PUBLIC SERVICES, PUBLIC GOOD

The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input as part of the Ontario government's 2026-27 pre-budget consultation process.

On behalf of our 45,000 members, who teach Kindergarten to Grade 12 in publicly funded Catholic schools across Ontario, we offer this submission to share the perspectives of frontline teachers and to outline practical, evidence-based recommendations that will support students, families, teachers and education workers, and communities across the province.

Ontario is at a pivotal moment. Families continue to face rising costs of living. Chaos reigns south of the border. All the while, the public systems that Ontarians rely upon – including education, health care, and social services – are strained to the breaking point.

In such moments of precarity, we must remember that strong public services are essential not only for individual well-being, but for economic stability, social cohesion, and long-term prosperity.

Catholic teachers recognize that governments face complex choices. Budgets must balance competing demands, respond to economic uncertainty, and plan for the future. At the same time, the choices made in each budget send a clear signal about priorities – and those choices have real consequences for Ontarians.

Catholic teachers see the consequences of this every day: in our classrooms; in our communities; in our conversations with students and parents.

The goal of this submission is to contribute constructively to the development of a provincial budget that reflects the priorities shared by a majority of Ontarians: student success; safe, modern, and inclusive learning environments; and sustainable public services.

There are a number of areas where targeted investments and thoughtful policy decisions can make a meaningful difference, particularly in publicly funded education and the broader

social infrastructure that supports learning.

Education as a Public Good

Publicly funded education is one of Ontario's most valuable shared assets. It prepares young people for civic life, employment, and further learning. It supports social mobility. It strengthens communities. And it plays a critical role in addressing inequalities.

Catholic teachers are tremendously proud of the work done in Ontario's publicly funded schools. But that success was not accidental. It was built through sustained and stable investment, respect for professional expertise, and a shared understanding that education is a public good.

Challenges and Opportunities

Unfortunately, in recent years, teachers and education workers have seen growing and unsustainable pressures across the education system.

Teachers are being asked to do more with fewer resources. Class sizes have increased. Access to mental health supports and special education services has not kept pace with need or the cost of inflation. Aging infrastructure requires urgent attention. And broader social challenges – including housing insecurity, food insecurity, and the lingering impacts of the pandemic – are increasingly visible in classrooms across the province.

These challenges affect everyone. They affect students' ability to learn. They affect teachers and education workers' ability to support students effectively. They affect families and communities across Ontario.

Addressing them requires partnership, meaningful collaboration, transparency, long-term planning, and a willingness from the government to make the investments necessary to restore Ontario's world-class publicly funded education system.

Progress is possible if the political will exists. Ontario has the fiscal capacity, institutional knowledge, and public support needed to strengthen education and public services. What

is required is a renewed commitment to meaningful collaboration – a willingness to listen to frontline workers, engage stakeholders early, and align funding with actual system needs.

Throughout the sections that follow, we outline key issues and recommendations related to:

- Respect for workers and public services
- Proper and sustainable education funding
- Student mental health and special education
- Safe and modern schools
- Equity and inclusion
- Broader social and economic supports that directly affect learning

Our recommendations are grounded in research, data, and professional experience. They are also guided by a firm belief that strong public systems benefit everyone.

Budgets – like students – are about more than numbers. They are about values, priorities, and the kind of province we want to build and protect together.

Catholic teachers remain committed, and we urge the government to work with us collaboratively to ensure that Ontario's publicly funded education system – and the public services that support it – are strong, inclusive, and sustainable for generations to come.

RESPECTING THE EDUCATION WORKFORCE

The Foundation of World-class Publicly Funded Education

A strong publicly funded education system depends on the workers who deliver it.

Teachers, education workers, mental health professionals, and school leaders support student learning, well-being, and safety every day. Their work is grounded in professional expertise and a shared commitment to allow every student to thrive and succeed. Research consistently shows that education systems with stable, supported workforces deliver better outcomes for students and school communities (OECD 2018).

When education is properly funded and when teachers and education workers are respected, supported, and meaningfully engaged in decision-making, schools are better able to respond to student needs. When they are not, pressures accumulate – affecting classrooms, school climate, and student success. The reality is that chronic underfunding has put Ontario’s publicly funded education system – along with students and staff – under increasing strain.

Schools are serving students with more complex academic, social, and mental health needs than in previous years, while staffing levels and access to specialized supports have not kept pace. Surveys of Ontario schools consistently point to a significant lack of mental health professionals, including psychologists and social workers, to meet students’ needs (CAMH 2025; People for Education 2024; Mojtehedzadeh 2023).

These gaps place additional demands on classroom teachers, who are often asked to manage increasingly complex situations without adequate supports.

At the same time, teachers and education workers report growing concerns related to class complexity, behavioural challenges, and violence in schools (OECTA 2025; Mallory et al. 2025; OECTA 2017; OECTA 2017a). These issues are often linked to unmet student needs, insufficient access to specialized supports, and broader social pressures affecting families and communities (People for Education 2023).

Over time, these interrelated factors contribute to workload pressures, burnout, and exacerbate challenges with recruitment and retention.

Teachers who are supported – through access to professional learning, mental health resources, and adequate preparation and planning time – are better positioned to create stable, inclusive, and responsive learning environments. The opposite is also true: chronic stress and burnout reduce system capacity and negatively affect the school climate (OECD 2020).

Trust and Meaningful Professional Collaboration

Trust between government and education stakeholders is foundational to creating effective education policy – and student learning. Teachers are frontline professionals who have practical knowledge about how policies play out in classrooms and schools. Research shows that when teachers' expertise is meaningfully incorporated into policy development – early and transparently – outcomes improve, and implementation is more effective (Ellis and Conyard 2025; Watkins 2022; OECD 2018).

Conversely, when policies are developed without adequate or meaningful consultation, teachers and education workers are often left to manage unintended consequences with limited resources. This undermines confidence, weakens implementation, and erodes trust. The situation surrounding Bill 33, the *Supporting Children and Students Act*, provides a recent example. The legislation altered the governance structure of publicly funded education in Ontario, by dramatically expanding provincial oversight over school boards and diminishing the role of democratically elected school board trustees.

Legislation that alters the structure, oversight, or functioning of publicly funded education systems has far-reaching implications for students, teachers, education workers, families, and communities – it should be developed collaboratively with those who have direct, day-to-day experience in schools.

The government's failure to engage frontline teachers and their representatives undermines trust, weakens policy outcomes, and increases the risk of unintended consequences during implementation. Sustainable and effective education governance depends on transparency, good faith dialogue, and respect for the expertise of education workers.

Collaboration should be viewed not as a barrier to reform, but as a prerequisite for success.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Engage in early and sustained consultation on all matters related to education policy, including program design, curriculum development and updates, funding, and beyond.

- Maintain ongoing dialogue about emerging issues, such as technology and artificial intelligence in education.
- Respect collective agreements, the free and fair collective bargaining process, and established labour relations frameworks.

FUNDING THAT MATCHES REALITY: INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Funding decisions shape what is possible in classrooms and schools. When education investment reflects real costs and real needs, schools can plan effectively, staffing is stable, and students receive timely supports – including increased one-on-one interactions with their teachers. When funding falls behind inflation, enrolment growth, or rising complexity, pressures mount.

Catholic teachers are deeply concerned that, despite government claims of “historic investment,” current funding patterns have not kept pace with economic inflation or the realities facing publicly funded schools.

Real Education Funding

Education funding is often discussed in nominal terms. However, what matters most for schools, to best support student success, is “purchasing power” – or “real” dollar investment.

When funding increases do not keep pace with inflation, the real value of education dollars declines. This means boards and schools must absorb rising costs for staffing, utilities, transportation, supplies, and services – without corresponding increases in capacity (FAO 2024).

Analysis shows that, over time, education funding has not consistently kept pace with inflation. The result is a gradual erosion of resources available for students at the school level.

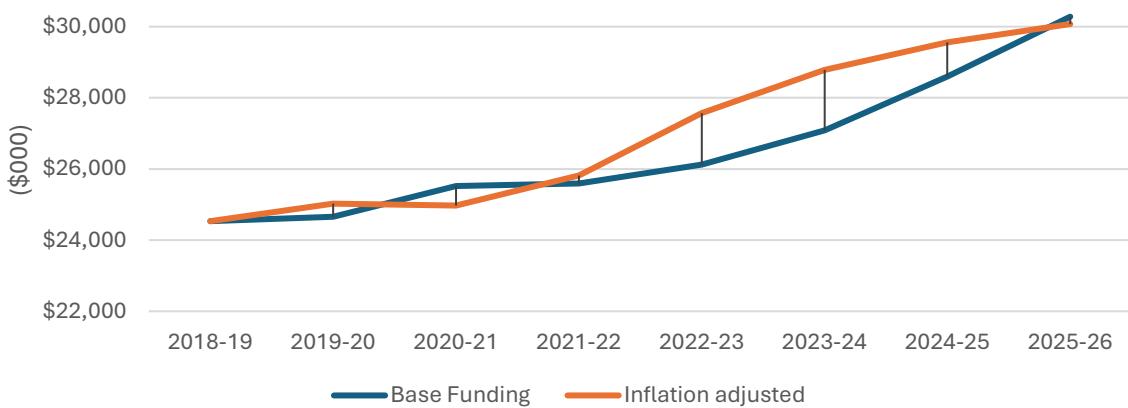
Education Funding, Base vs. Real, 2018-2026



As the chart demonstrates, since the government came to office in 2018, there has been a zero real-dollar increase in education funding. This is despite a global pandemic that had devastating effects on student mental health and academic needs – and teachers' mental health and well-being; crumbling school infrastructure; a recruitment and retention crisis; and more.

Viewed another way, according to the government's own numbers the cumulative inflationary gap in overall education funding has cost the system almost \$4 billion.

Education Funding Gap (Base vs. Inflation-adjusted)



Unfortunately, the situation is not likely to improve. As part of the Fall Economic Statement, the government is projecting to essentially freeze nominal-dollar investment in education through to 2028 (Ontario 2025). The result will be billions of dollars in additional inflationary shortfall.

Item (\$ Billions)	Actual 2024-25	Current Outlook 2025-26	Medium-term Outlook 2026-27	Medium-term Outlook 2027-28
	38.3	41.0	41.1	41.3
Programs – Education				

Per-student Funding and Enrolment Pressures

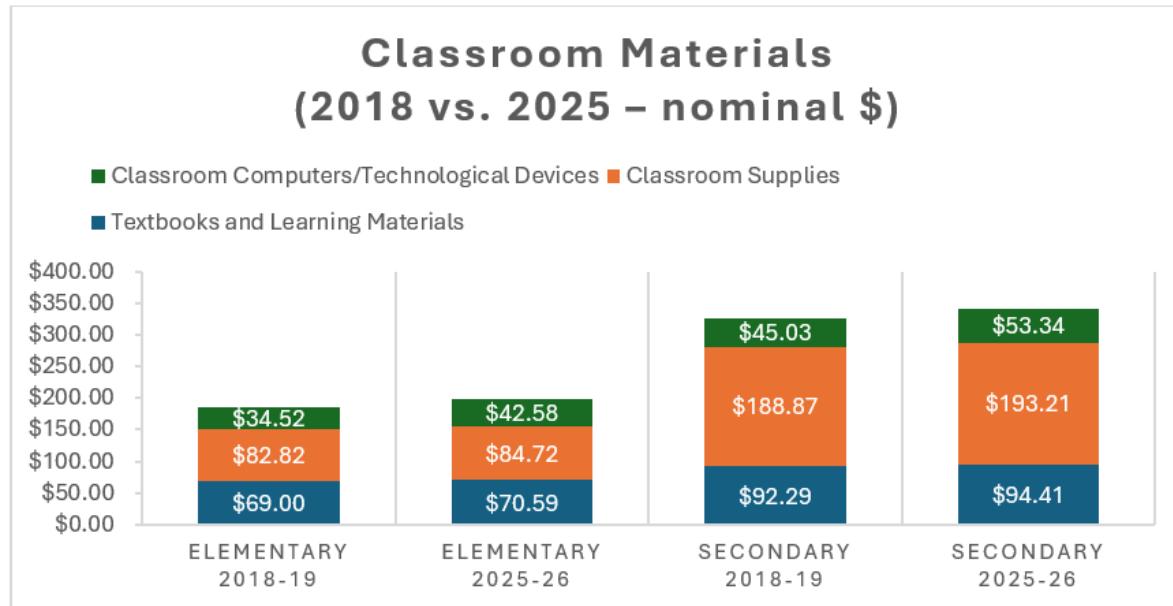
To better understand changes in education funding for 2025–26, it is necessary to look beyond headline budget figures. Using publicly available enrolment data from the Ministry of Education and examining classroom funding on a per-student basis, a clearer picture emerges of how funding has changed year over year.

When classroom funding is analyzed per student – based on Average Daily Enrolment (ADE) – it becomes evident that funding has not kept pace with inflation. This approach provides a more accurate measure of real funding levels and helps explain the growing pressures experienced in classrooms across Ontario.

Division	ADE \$	vs. 2024	vs. 2018	Impact
Kindergarten	\$7,619.60	\$728.98	-\$168.41	-\$42.4 m
Grades 1 to 3	\$6,898.2	\$725.20	-\$112.31	-\$47.3 m
Grades 4 to 8	\$5,744.10	\$599.51	-\$227.48	-\$170 m
Grades 9 to 12	\$6,767.43	\$720.05	-\$531.68	-\$341.5 m
				-601.2m

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. In fact, students in publicly funded schools in Ontario receive an

average of \$0.62 per student per day – a figure that has remained largely unchanged in nominal terms since 2018.



At a time when student needs are becoming more complex, Ontario schools are experiencing a decline in funded teaching positions. This disconnect is placing additional strain on classrooms and limiting the system's ability to respond effectively to growing demands.

Using the Ministry of Education's own 2025–26 enrolment projections, it is possible to assess the impact of staffing reductions on classroom teachers. By examining the number of funded classroom teaching positions per ADE outlined in the Core Education Funding Technical Paper – including classroom, specialist, preparation and planning, online learning, and programming teachers – a clearer picture emerges (Ministry of Education 2025). This analysis shows how current staffing levels compare with those that would exist had teaching positions simply been maintained at 2018 levels.

Division	Projected school board ADE, 2025-26	Total # of classroom teachers per 1,000 ADE (2018-19)	Total # of classroom teachers per 1,000 ADE (2025-26)	Difference 2018-19 vs. 2025-26	Change in # of classroom teaching positions, 2018-29 vs. 2025-26
Kindergarten	251,883	46.77	46.77	-	-
Grades 1 to 3	420,977	60.18	60.18	-	-
Grades 4 to 8	747,154	50.11	48.78	-1.33	-994
Grades 9 to 12	642,222	58.75	55.02	-3.76	-2,415
TOTAL	2,062,237	215.84	210.75	-5.09	-3,409

As the table makes clear, since 2018 the government has cut almost 3,500 funded classroom teaching positions from 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 since 2018 (Tranjan 2024).

The Financial Accountability Office (FAO) has consistently highlighted the importance of aligning funding commitments with realistic cost assumptions and long-term planning, and the FAO, the Association, and others have repeatedly called on the government to envelope funds to ensure they are spent as intended (OECTA 2024; FAO 2024).

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Commit to a CPI-plus-enrolment based-funding correction for the 2026–27 Core Education Funding model.
- Consult meaningfully with teachers' unions and increase the funded number of classroom teachers per 1,000 ADE beyond 2018 levels.

Transparency and Public Confidence

Transparency in education funding builds trust. Teachers and education workers, families, and the public should be able to understand how education dollars are allocated, how funding decisions are made, and should have assurances that funding is spent as intended.

Clear, accessible reporting supports accountability and informed dialogue.

Transparent funding decisions are not only good governance, they are essential to maintaining confidence in the government's oversight of publicly funded education.

Despite government assurances that the move from the *Grants for Student Needs* to *Core Education Funding* would improve transparency in how education funding is reported, the opposite has occurred. What were previously seventy-seven detailed allocation categories have been consolidated into six broad funds, and line-item reporting has been eliminated. As a result, it is now more difficult for teachers, school boards, and the public to understand how education funding is allocated and used.

In addition, the removal of specific funding envelopes, such as Library Services, means that school boards are no longer required to direct funding toward clearly defined purposes. This reduces accountability and increases the risk that critical student supports will be deprioritized when budgets are under pressure.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Reinstate and strengthen targeted education funding envelopes, in consultation with teacher and education worker unions, to improve transparency, accountability, and consistency in how education funding is allocated and used.

Privatization: The Costly Alternative

When publicly funded education and public services are underfunded or overstretched, pressure grows to turn to private alternatives.

Privatization is often framed as a way to increase efficiency or reduce wait times. However, evidence consistently shows that privatization does not eliminate demand or reduce costs over the long term. Instead, it redistributes services in ways that increase inequity, fragment systems, and weaken public accountability (Ahmad et al. 2022).

In education, the impacts of privatization are already visible. When publicly funded supports are insufficient, families are increasingly pushed to seek private assessments, tutoring, or mental health services.

Access to these services often depends on income and geography, creating inequalities for students and families, and undermining the principle of equitable access that underpins publicly funded education (People for Education 2023). Over time, this two-tiered structure erodes confidence in the publicly funded system and places additional pressure on schools serving the most vulnerable communities.

Maintaining education and related services as a public good is not only a matter of equity – it is fiscally prudent. Research shows that well-funded public systems are more cost-effective over time than fragmented or privatized models, which often carry higher administrative costs and weaker co-ordination (Longhurst 2023; OECD 2018).

At the same time, it also provides one of the best returns on investment. According to the Conference Board of Canada, 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 schools (Conference Board of Canada 2019).

Protecting and strengthening publicly funded education requires sustained investment and deliberate policy choices that prioritize collective benefit over short-term or market-based solutions.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Immediately cease any efforts toward privatization and commit to properly funding public services in Ontario, while respecting workers and the expertise of frontline staff.

CLASSROOMS THAT WORK: LEARNING CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS

Why Learning Conditions Matter

Student success does not occur in isolation. It is shaped by the conditions in which teaching and learning take place. Class size, class complexity, access to early learning, and the availability of timely supports all influence students' ability to engage, learn, and thrive.

Research consistently demonstrates that when learning conditions are supportive and appropriately resourced, outcomes improve – particularly for students who face systemic barriers or who require additional supports (Andrews et al. 2021; OECD 2018). Teachers and education workers understand this intuitively. They see how learning conditions affect student attention, behaviour, well-being, and achievement every day.

Class Size and Complexity

Class size remains a critical factor in effective teaching and learning, and 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).

At a practical level, smaller class sizes allow teachers to provide more individualized attention, identify learning needs earlier, and build stronger relationships with students. This is especially important in the early years and in classrooms with diverse learning needs (Wang and Calvano 2022; OECD 2018).

However, class size alone does not tell the full story. Class complexity – including the number of students with special education needs, multi-language learners, students experiencing mental health challenges, and students requiring behavioural supports – has a significant impact on classroom dynamics and instructional effectiveness (People for Education 2024a).

Teachers increasingly report that classes are more complex than in previous years, yet staffing and supports have not consistently kept pace with this reality (CTF 2025). When class complexity is not adequately considered in staffing and funding decisions, both students and teachers are placed under strain.

Effective policy must account for both how many students are in a classroom and what supports those students require.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Commit to lowering class size averages in Ontario's publicly funded schools.
- Work meaningfully with teachers' unions to understand – and factor in – the role of class complexity when determining class sizes.

The Importance of Early Learning and Full-day Kindergarten

Early learning is one of the most critical and effective points of intervention in the education system. Research shows that high-quality, publicly funded early learning programs, such as Ontario's Full-day Kindergarten (FDK) program, support cognitive development, social-emotional skills, and long-term educational outcomes, while also reducing the need for more intensive interventions later on (Pelletier and Corter 2019; Alphonso 2017; OECD 2017; Janmohamed et al. 2014).

Ontario's FDK program has been widely recognized for its positive impact on student learning and development, particularly for children from lower-income households (Vanderlee et al. 2012). The success of FDK underscores the importance of:

- Developmentally appropriate class sizes
- Qualified educators working in collaborative teams
- Adequate in-class and system-level supports

To build on 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.

Protecting and strengthening early learning programs is both an educational and a fiscal imperative.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Continue to support and strengthen the FDK program, so it can honour its original promise.
- 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.

Learning Recovery and Early Intervention

Students enter classrooms with diverse strengths, experiences, and needs. Following years of disruption, teachers report increased variability in student readiness, learning gaps, and social-emotional development. Early identification and intervention are essential to supporting students before challenges become entrenched (OECD 2020).

However, early intervention requires capacity. When supports such as reading specialists, special education teachers, and mental health professionals are limited, intervention is delayed. This often results in greater long-term costs and more intensive needs later in a student's educational pathway (EPI 2021).

Investing in early intervention is not remedial spending – it is preventative, evidence-based policy.

SUPPORTING WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Student Well-being as a Foundation for Learning

Student well-being and student learning are inseparable. Mental health, emotional regulation, and a sense of belonging all play a critical role in students' ability to engage in

learning, build relationships, and achieve their potential. It is clear from evidence that students who feel safe, supported, and connected at school demonstrate stronger academic outcomes and improved long-term well-being (WHO 2025; DePaoli and McCombs 2023; OECD and EI 2022).

Ontario's publicly funded schools are increasingly being asked to respond to complex mental health needs that extend beyond traditional educational mandates. While schools play an important role in early identification and support, they cannot – and should not – be expected to replace adequately funded health and social service systems.

Rising Mental Health Needs in Ontario Schools

Teachers across Ontario report a significant increase in student mental health challenges in recent years (CAMH 2024; Lavoie 2023; Boak et al. 2022).

As a reflection of broader society, schools are seeing higher levels of anxiety, depression, trauma-related behaviours, and social disengagement among students of all ages. Ontario principals report that mental health supports remain inconsistent, with many schools lacking regular access to psychologists, social workers, or child and youth workers (People for Education 2024; People for Education 2023).

The impacts are particularly pronounced for students from Indigenous and equity-deserving communities, disabled students, and those experiencing poverty, housing instability, or food insecurity. Without timely intervention, unmet mental health needs can escalate, affecting attendance, achievement, and long-term outcomes (SickKids 2021; OECD 2020).

The Role of Schools – and Access to School-based Mental Health Professionals

Schools are often the most consistent point of contact for children and youth, and teachers play an essential role in recognizing early signs of distress, creating supportive classroom environments, and connecting students with appropriate services.

However, we must be clear about the limits of what schools can do alone. Teachers are not clinicians, and are not able to provide trauma-informed mental health supports to each child who requires them. As such, access to qualified mental health professionals in schools is essential. Unfortunately, that access remains drastically uneven across Ontario.

When external mental health and community services are under-resourced, it places additional and undue pressures on teachers and education workers (Pressley et al. 2025; People for Education 2023).

While the government often points to additional mental health funding, many schools still report limited or intermittent access to psychologists, social workers, and other regulated professionals. Wait times for assessments and ongoing supports remain a concern, particularly in high-needs communities and rural or remote areas (People for Education 2024; SickKids 2021).

Evidence shows that consistent, properly funded, school-based mental health supports improve student outcomes and reduce the need for more intensive interventions later on (OECD 2019). Sustainable funding models must prioritize access to professionals, not short-term approaches or stopgap measures.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- 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 teachers and education workers, 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.

- 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.
- Increase annual funding for Student Mental Health Ontario in a manner that reflects sustainability and long-term needs.

The Impact on Teachers and School Communities

We must always remember that student mental health challenges also affect teachers and other school staff. Teachers report increased emotional labour, stress, and concern for student safety and well-being (CTF 2020). Without adequate supports, this contributes to burnout and reduced system capacity over time, exacerbating the recruitment and retention crisis.

Supporting student mental health therefore requires attention to teacher and education worker well-being. Stable staffing, access to professional supports, and realistic workload expectations are essential to sustaining safe and supportive school environments.

A Co-ordinated and Cross-ministry Approach

Student mental health does not exist in isolation from broader social systems. Housing instability, poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to publicly funded health care all affect student well-being and are reflected in classrooms. Addressing mental health needs effectively requires coordination across education, health, children's services, and community supports (CAMH 2025a; CMHO 2025).

Fragmented approaches place unnecessary strain on schools and families. A co-ordinated strategy improves outcomes and uses public resources more efficiently.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Co-ordinate with other ministries to explore the community hub model, located within publicly funded schools, and consult meaningfully and regularly with the representatives of frontline teachers and education workers.

- 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.
- Return to providing detailed breakdowns of funding at the component level.

STRENGTHENING SPECIAL EDUCATION ACROSS ONTARIO

Ontario schools are serving a growing number of students who require special education supports. Teachers and education workers report increased prevalence of complex student needs, including autism spectrum disorder, mental health challenges, learning disabilities, and overlapping social and emotional needs.

Long-term trends show a significant rise in students needing specialized supports – such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) – increasing from 12 per cent in 2006 to more than 17 per cent in the 2024-25 school year (Shurr et al. 2024).

At the same time, access to timely assessments and interventions remains inconsistent across regions and school boards (People for Education 2024).

Delays in assessment and support do not eliminate need – they compound it. Students who do not receive early interventions often require more intensive and costly supports later in their educational pathway (OECD 2019).

While the government often highlights that special education funding includes both per-student and needs-based components, Catholic teachers, advocates, and families continue to raise concerns about whether funding levels reflect the real cost of delivering the necessary resources and supports (OECTA 2025; FAO 2025).

When funding does not properly or fully align with need, schools and school boards face difficult decisions about staffing, program availability, and service delivery. Teachers are often forced into balancing competing demands in classrooms without sufficient specialized supports, affecting both students with identified needs and their peers.

A sustainable approach to special education funding must be:

- Responsive to changing student demographics and needs
- Transparent and predictable
- Sufficient to support early and ongoing intervention

Access to Timely Assessments and Services

Timely access to psychoeducational assessments and professional services is critical. Yet many families experience long wait times for publicly funded assessments and supports – sometimes measured in years.

As a result, families with financial means increasingly turn to private assessments to secure services or accommodations for their children (People for Education 2023). This creates a two-tiered system in which access to support is shaped by income rather than need.

From a public policy perspective, this trend undermines equity and places additional pressures on teachers and schools, which must reconcile privately obtained assessments with limited publicly funded resources.

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 required to provide these supports, in addition to the psychoeducational support that has been their traditional responsibility.

This speaks to a clear need to reassess Ontario's special education program, and to ensure that the investment in supports and resources – including human resources – are sufficient to meet students' diverse and evolving needs.

The Need for Qualified Professionals

Special education teachers, educational assistants, psychologists, speech-language pathologists, social workers, and other professionals play essential roles in supporting students. However, staffing shortages and workload pressures limit the system's ability to

deliver consistent, high-quality support (OECD 2018).

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 2025).

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 per cent of schools in Ontario reported having no access to a psychologist – a figure that increases when geography is taken into account, and has only worsened in the intervening years (People for Education 2019).

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Dramatically increase funding to the Special Education Fund.
- 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.
- 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.

Autism Services and System Co-ordination

Students on the autism spectrum require consistent, co-ordinated supports across education, health, and community services.

Fragmentation between systems creates gaps that are felt most acutely by families, teachers, and education workers. When supports outside of school are limited or inconsistent, pressure increases on schools to fill those gaps – often without appropriate

resources or training (OECD 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 2025, the list now stands at more than 60,000 children (Yazdani 2025).

A co-ordinated, cross-ministry approach to autism services would improve outcomes for students while reducing strain on individual systems. At the same time, it would reduce the need for families to seek external supports from expensive privatized providers – which creates equity issues between families who can and cannot afford these services.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Establish a formal cross-ministry autism services framework, jointly led by the ministries of Education, Health, and Children, Community, and Social Services, with shared accountability for outcomes and timelines.
- Increase publicly funded access to assessments, therapies, and interventions, reducing reliance on private providers and addressing inequities faced by families who cannot afford out-of-pocket costs.

Equity and Intersectionality

Special education cannot be separated from broader equity considerations. Disabled students who are also Indigenous and/or equity-deserving, as well as newcomers and those living in poverty, face compounded barriers to accessing timely and appropriate supports (Varsik and Gorochovskij 2023).

Research shows that systemic inequities can influence identification, placement, and disciplinary outcomes, underscoring the need for culturally responsive and anti-oppressive approaches to special education (LDAO 2025). Thus, equity must be built into special education policy, funding, and practice – not addressed only after disparities emerge.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Expand the use of disaggregated, identity-based data (collected and used responsibly) to identify disparities in identification, placement, access to supports, and disciplinary outcomes – and link this data to clear accountability measures.
- Invest in culturally responsive and anti-oppressive professional learning for teachers and support staff involved in special education, developed in partnership with communities and experts with lived experience.
- Review identification and placement practices to ensure they do not perpetuate systemic bias, and ensure that equity considerations are built into policy design from the outset.

EQUITY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND BELONGING IN SCHOOLS

Addressing Systemic Racism and Discrimination

Ontario's publicly funded education system has an obligation to ensure that every student – regardless of race, identity, ability, income, or background – has equitable access to learning, opportunity, and support.

This obligation is grounded in human rights law, education policy, and evidence demonstrating that inclusive systems deliver better outcomes for students and society as a whole (OECD 2019; OHRC 2018).

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.

Unfortunately, systemic racism continues to shape educational experiences and outcomes in Ontario for many students. Research and data consistently show disparities in achievement, discipline, streaming, and access to supports for Indigenous and equity-deserving students

(OHRC 2025; OECTA 2025; OECTA 2023; OECD, 2019). These disparities are not the result of individual failure, but of systemic barriers embedded within institutions.

Administrators, teachers, and education workers play an essential role in addressing these inequities, but they cannot do so alone. Systemic change requires clear policy direction, sustained funding, culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, and transparent data collection and reporting. Anti-racism commitments must move beyond performative statements of intent and political point scoring, to measurable actions and outcomes.

Lessons from Destreaming and System Change

Ontario's destreaming initiative offers important lessons about equity-focused reform. The goal of destreaming – reducing systemic barriers and improving outcomes for marginalized students – is supported by the Association and others (OECTA 2021).

However, as Catholic teachers and advocates have consistently emphasized, successful implementation requires adequate staffing, professional learning, smaller class sizes, and additional supports. Without these investments, the burden of system change falls disproportionately on classroom teachers and students (People for Education 2023; Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education 2021).

Equity-driven reforms must be resourced at the same scale as their ambition. Unfortunately, the opposite has been true in Ontario – 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 – a 97 per cent funding cut (Ministry of Education 2024).

Indigenous Education and Reconciliation

Education plays a central role in reconciliation. Catholic teachers are committed to advancing Indigenous education and have continued to call on the government to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

The government must act now. Progress requires sustained partnership with Indigenous communities, stable funding, and accountability for implementation. At the same time,

teachers and education workers require access to appropriate resources and professional learning to support this work effectively and respectfully (Cimellaro 2023; OECD 2019; Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013).

2SLGBTQIA+ Inclusion and Student Safety

Schools must be safe and affirming spaces for all students. 2SLGBTQIA+ students continue to experience higher rates of bullying, discrimination, and mental health challenges compared to their peers (Peter et al. 2021). Inclusive policies, supportive school climates, and access to trusted adults significantly reduce these risks and improve student well-being.

Teachers play a critical role in fostering inclusive environments, but they require clear policy support, age-appropriate curriculum guidance, and protection from politicization of their professional responsibilities. Inclusion is not ideology – it is student safety, and our moral and legal responsibility.

Accessibility and Inclusive Design

Students and educators with disabilities require learning environments that support full participation. Barriers in physical design, transportation, or infrastructure undermine equity and contravene human rights obligations (OHRC 2018).

Accessibility upgrades should not be treated as optional or deferred improvements. They must be integrated into capital planning and funding decisions from the outset. And as the 2023 Donavan Report made clear, the government has fallen well short of its self-imposed targets for making Ontario an accessible province.

There are approximately three million Ontarians, aged 15 or older, currently living with one or more disability – representing one of the largest population categories in the province (Donovan 2023). Catholic teachers urge action from the government, so that all Ontarians with disabilities enjoy equal rights and opportunities, and freedom from discrimination – including students.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- 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 Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities, as well as 2SLGBTQIA+ students, disabled students, and those living in low-income communities or from other equity-deserving groups.
- 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.
- Commit to working collaboratively with education affiliates on any policy and program implementation, including curriculum writing.
- Provide immediate funding to upgrade all school facilities, so that they meet the legal requirements for accessibility standards and environmental considerations.

Data, Accountability, and Transparency

Disaggregated data – collected and used responsibly – is essential for identifying disparities, measuring progress, and holding systems accountable. Without data, inequities remain hidden and unaddressed (OHRC 2018). At the same time, data collection must be paired with meaningful action. Transparency without follow-through undermines trust and confidence in public institutions.

More broadly, we must remember that commitments alone are not sufficient. Equity work requires time, training, staffing, and sustained resources. When these are lacking, teachers and education workers are asked to carry responsibility without capacity, increasing workload and frustration while limiting impact.

Equity must be embedded in funding models, staffing decisions, curriculum development, and system planning – not treated as an add-on or short-term initiative. 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.

The Minister of Education's recent announcement that two advisors will be appointed to review EQAO provides an opportunity to assess the relevance of standardized testing, to disband EQAO testing, and redirect funds to classroom resources and supports.

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.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- 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

<p>privacy, and achieve the highest standards of data collection integrity – results must also be made available in an accessible form.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.

LEARNING IN A CHANGING WORLD: TECHNOLOGY, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI), AND ACCESS

Technology as a Tool, Not a Substitute

Technology plays an important role in modern education. When used thoughtfully, it can enhance learning, support accessibility, and expand opportunities for students. However, technology is a tool to support – not replace – high-quality, in-person education.

Research demonstrates that strong relationships between students and teachers, structured learning environments, and direct interaction remain the most effective foundations for student learning, particularly for younger students and those with additional learning needs (Emslander et al. 2025; Darling-Hammond et al. 2019; Wright et al. 2024).

Education policy must therefore prioritize technology that supports teaching and learning, rather than policies that treat technology as a cost-saving substitute for in-person instruction.

In-person Learning as Foundational

Ontario’s experience of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced a clear lesson: in-person learning is the most effective and equitable form of learning.

While remote learning provided continuity during exceptional circumstances, evidence shows that prolonged reliance on online instruction disproportionately affects disabled students, students from low-income households, English language learners, and younger students (People for Education 2023; OECD 2021).

In-person classes provide more than academic instruction. They offer:

- Stable routines and relationships
- Access to specialized supports
- Social development and peer connection
- Safe, supervised environments

Technology policy should be designed to complement, not erode, these core functions of publicly funded education.

Online learning may be appropriate in limited, well-defined circumstances; however, expanding mandatory or default online learning raises serious concerns. Online learning environments often result in lower completion rates and weaker outcomes for many students, particularly those who require additional support or structure (Bird et al. 2022; OECD 2021). Without strong safeguards, increased reliance on online learning risks deepening inequities and disengagement.

Digital Equity and Access

Access to technology is not evenly distributed – students' ability to benefit from digital tools depends on access to reliable internet, appropriate devices, and supportive learning environments. Data continues to show gaps in access, particularly for students in low-income households, rural and remote communities, and some newcomer families (People for Education 2023).

Digital equity requires reliable broadband infrastructure, up-to-date devices maintained through public funding, and technical support for students and families.

Technology policies must be designed with equity as a central consideration, not an afterthought. Without targeted investment, technology initiatives risk reinforcing existing inequities.

At the same time, the personal data of students and teachers must be protected. The increased use of digital platforms and AI tools raises questions about who collects student

data, how it is used, and who profits from it. Publicly funded education systems have a responsibility to ensure that student information is safeguarded and not exploited for commercial purposes (OECD 2024a).

Clear provincial standards are needed to govern data collection, storage, and use in education technology. These standards should prioritize transparency, informed consent, and public oversight.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- 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.

Generative AI in Education

AI is rapidly emerging as a powerful force in education. However, it raises significant concerns related to data privacy, bias, academic integrity, and the deprofessionalization of teachers and education workers (OECTA 2025a; OECD 2024).

The Association strongly objects to any attempt to integrate AI into publicly funded education without robust consultation with teacher representatives and careful consideration to ensure appropriate legal and pedagogical guardrails in place.

While there is an emerging body of research that highlights the student-focused dangers of AI, there are a number of potential impacts on teachers and education workers that must be addressed – ranging from issues of supervision to surveillance and privacy to job security to vendor compliance 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.

Supporting Teachers in a Digital Environment

Understandably, much of the discussion around digital technology in education focuses on students. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that educators require support to navigate a rapidly changing digital landscape.

As part of this, teachers must have reliable access to an employer-provided electronic device to carry out their professional responsibilities effectively. Professional development, clear policy guidance, and time to adapt instructional practices are essential. Without these supports, technology initiatives risk increasing workload and stress while delivering limited educational benefit (OECTA 2025; OECD 2021).

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Provide dedicated funding for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development for online learning, as well as adapt or develop curriculum – in collaboration with teachers.
- Ensure all teachers have reliable access to an employer-provided electronic device to carry out their professional responsibilities.
- 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.

SAFE AND MODERN SCHOOLS

Physical safety and emotional well-being are foundational to student success. Research consistently shows that safe and healthy school conditions are associated with stronger

engagement, improved attendance, and better academic outcomes (Podiya et al. 2025; WHO 2020; Pulimeno et al. 2020).

Catholic teachers have a long history of promoting safe and inclusive learning environments. However, over the past number of years teachers and education workers have reported with greater frequency that existing supports and infrastructure are not keeping pace with growing needs and emerging risks.

Safer Schools for All

It has been almost a decade since OECTA released its comprehensive study of violence and harassment against teachers in schools. At that time, "Almost nine-in-ten teachers (89 per cent) indicated that they have experienced or witnessed violence or harassment in their schools" (OECTA 2017). Sadly, the situation has only grown worse since then.

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 teachers and education workers must bargain for safe schools at negotiating tables, because the government refuses to adequately address the safety of children and schools.

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 government can – and must – take

immediately in order to begin to address the issue of school violence.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Provide resources and supports for more frontline, school-based child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and other professional services to help students – with the support of education workers – address their social, emotional, and behavioural needs, in some cases attributable to pandemic-related causes.
- Provide teachers and school staff with comprehensive trauma-informed training.
- 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.
- 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.

School Infrastructure, Air Quality, and the Repair Backlog

Ontario's school infrastructure faces significant challenges. Many school buildings are aging and require substantial investment to address deferred maintenance, accessibility upgrades, and modernization.

Independent analysis has identified a repair backlog that exceeds \$17 billion, and that would require more than \$31 billion over 10 years to maintain school buildings in a state of good repair. This situation reflects years of underinvestment and rising costs (Balintec 2024; FAO 2024).

As part of this process, it must be noted that many Ontario school buildings were constructed decades ago and do not fully meet current accessibility standards, creating physical and environmental barriers for disabled students and those who require accommodations (FAO 2024; OECTA 2020; OHRC 2018).

Upgrading schools to be fully accessible – including entrances, washrooms, learning spaces, and transportation infrastructure – is essential to fulfilling Ontario’s human rights obligations and ensuring that all students can participate equitably in publicly funded education (*Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act 2005*; OHRC 2018).

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic also underscored the importance of ventilation and indoor air quality in schools.

Good ventilation reduces the transmission of airborne illnesses and supports overall health and cognitive functioning (WHO 2021a). While the government points to several investments that have been made to improve ventilation systems, teachers report ongoing concerns about aging HVAC infrastructure and inconsistent implementation across school boards (FAO 2024).

Public health considerations must remain central to infrastructure planning. Investments in ventilation and air quality provide long-term benefits beyond the pandemic-generated response.

Climate Resilience and Environmental Responsibility

Schools are increasingly affected by climate-related risks, including extreme heat, flooding, and poor air quality (Wong 2024).

Climate-resilient infrastructure protects students and staff while reducing long-term operating costs. Investments in energy efficiency, sustainable building design, and green infrastructure also support Ontario’s broader climate goals (OECD 2024).

Through publicly funded schools, the government can take a leadership role in climate responsibility – but only if it is willing to make the necessary and proper investments.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Provide immediate, stable, and sufficient annual funding for infrastructure and repairs sufficient to eliminate the current repair backlog within the next three years.

- 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.
- 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.
- Ensure that any construction of new school facilities is fully accessible and complies with all relevant accessibility legislation, and environmental standards and best practices.
- Immediately accept and act upon the recommendations in the *Independent 4th Review of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*.
- Convene a cabinet sub-committee to oversee the fulfillment of AODA compliance requirements.
- Take all measures necessary, including financial investment, to immediately achieve AODA compliance.

BEYOND THE SCHOOL WALLS: SOCIAL CONDITIONS THAT SHAPE LEARNING

Students do not arrive as blank slates, and learning does not begin and end at the school door.

Students' ability to maximize their learning experience is shaped by the conditions in which they live – including housing stability, food security, access to health care, family income, and early childhood experiences. Research shows that social and economic conditions outside of school have a profound impact on educational outcomes (Sanz 2024; Hutton and Allen 2023; UNICEF 2021; Le Menestrel and Duncan 2019).

Catholic teachers see these realities daily. When students' basic needs are unmet, learning becomes more difficult, regardless of the quality of instruction. As such, addressing these conditions is not separate from education policy – it is integral to it.

Effective support for students requires co-ordination across education, health, housing, child care, social services, and labour policy. Fragmented approaches place unrealistic expectations on schools and teachers, while failing to address root causes (UNICEF 2021).

A whole-of-government approach improves outcomes, strengthens efficiency, and ensures public resources are used effectively.

Early Childhood Education and Care

Access to high-quality, affordable, publicly funded child care supports children, families – and the publicly funded education system and economy more broadly (Cleveland 2021; Alexander et al. 2017).

Early childhood education plays a critical role in cognitive, social, and emotional development, while also supporting parental workforce participation and family stability (OECD 2017). When families lack access to reliable child care, children may enter school with uneven preparation, increasing pressure on early grades.

Ontario's uneven progress in expanding child care capacity – first in the delays in signing on to the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program, and then in meeting its obligations – must be improved. The government must invest in its child care workforce and publicly funded child care accessibility.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Honour its commitments under the CWELCC and commit to an immediate phase-in of fully-publicly funded child care, co-ordinated with the creation of licensed child care spaces sufficient to meet demand.
- Address recruitment and retention issues through measures such as providing a living wage to early childhood educators.
- Cease providing public funding to for-profit child care centres, and ensure all funding is dedicated to publicly funded, not-for-profit child care centres.

Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Learning

Poverty remains one of the strongest predictors of educational outcomes. Students experiencing poverty are more likely to face food insecurity, housing instability, and barriers to participation in school activities. These conditions are associated with increased stress, lower attendance, and reduced academic engagement (APA 2024; UNICEF 2021; OECD

2019; Ferguson et al. 2007).

School nutrition programs have been shown to improve attendance, concentration, and overall well-being, particularly for students in low-income communities (WHO 2020). However, access to such programs remains inconsistent across Ontario.

Ensuring that students have their basic needs met is both an equity issue and an educational imperative.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Develop and sustainably fund universal school nutrition programs across Ontario, ensuring consistent access to healthy meals for all students regardless of geography or income. Stable provincial funding should be paired with clear standards and accountability to support student well-being, learning, and equity.

Housing Stability and Student Well-being

Stable housing is foundational to student success. Students who experience housing insecurity or homelessness face higher rates of school disruption, absenteeism, and mental health challenges (Muhammad 2025; Kliche and Annen 2025; APA 2024). Frequent moving and housing uncertainty interrupt learning and strain school-based supports.

Educators often serve as the first point of contact for students experiencing housing instability, yet schools lack the resources to address housing needs directly. Cross-ministry co-ordination and sustained investment in affordable housing are essential to supporting students and families.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Work collaboratively and meaningfully with all levels of government to address the supply issues as part of the housing crisis immediately reverse its decision to eliminate rent control and commit to strengthening protections for renters, especially those from lower-income families.

Strengthening the Social Safety Net

The continued inadequacy of Ontario's social safety net demands immediate attention. Ontarians desperately need a prompt and thorough re-examination of the province's social policy framework and the role of programs and services in promoting health and prosperity.

When income supports fail to keep pace with the cost of living, families experience increased stress and insecurity, which directly affects children's readiness to learn (Ferguson et al. 2007). Similarly, inadequate disability supports place additional pressures on families and schools, particularly when services are fragmented or delayed.

Currently, an individual on Ontario Works (OW) receives a maximum of \$733 per month for basic needs and shelter, while a single person on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) can receive up to \$1,408 per month for basic needs and shelter – with ODSP rates *only recently indexed to inflation* rather than increased meaningfully for many years.

A central structural weakness with these programs is that the average monthly cost of living in Ontario far exceeds what either program provides. Even conservative estimates show typical living expenses (including rent, food, utilities, and transportation) for a single adult in Ontario are around \$2,100 to \$3,100 or more per month, depending on location and individual circumstances.

This means that an OW recipient is approximately \$1,400 to \$2,400 below a basic cost-of-living estimate each month, while an ODSP recipient is roughly \$700 to \$1,700 short. This gap between social assistance and actual costs of living is unacceptable.

At the same time, under both OW and ODSP, individuals who attempt to supplement their assistance through paid work face significant benefit reductions once employment earnings exceed the modest threshold of \$1,000. This claw-back significantly weakens any financial incentive for a recipient to increase hours or accept additional employment. In essence, this structure traps recipients in an ongoing cycle of income insecurity rather than supporting meaningful labour force participation. (FAO 2025a; Income Security Advocacy Centre 2024).

As outlined in the Association's submission to the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services, as part of the government's review of the provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy: public investment in income security and disability services reduces long-term costs by preventing crisis intervention and supporting participation in education and employment. It is also the equitable and moral course of action (OECTA 2025).

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Improve employment standards, ensuring better and more affordable access to education and training, redressing economic and employment inequities, and bolstering the province's social safety net.
- Double the rates for OW and ODSP.
- Revisit the premature cancellation of the Basic Income Pilot.

Employment Equity and Decent Work

Parents' working conditions affect students' learning capacity. Families experiencing precarious employment, low wages, or inadequate workplace protections often face greater stress and instability, and evidence suggests that children's educational outcomes improve when families have access to secure, well-paid work and predictable schedules (IWH 2025).

Within this, we must confront rampant inequality with aggressive and progressive government policy. And while we should strive to improve the lives and compensation of all workers, it is necessary to acknowledge persistent and historical factors that impact different workers in different ways.

Women, racialized workers, Indigenous Peoples, and other equity-deserving groups, continue to confront disproportionate disadvantages in society and the economy. According to the Ontario Equal Pay Coalition, the gender pay gap is, on average, 32 per cent, and has remained stagnant for nearly three decades (OEPC 2024).

This gap widens further for women of different identities. Indigenous and Black women experience a pay gap of roughly 42 per cent. Put differently, Indigenous and Black women must work an additional 153 days to earn what a man makes in one year, on average.

Similar barriers are faced by transgender women. A seminal study in 2018 found that more than 20 per cent of transgender women had suffered significant employment setbacks in the past three years, including unjustified terminations, unfair disciplinary procedures, persistent harassment, and unpaid wages (James et al. 2018).

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Immediately re-engage a review of Ontario workplaces, and adopt the necessary changes to labour legislation that would remove structural barriers to participation and ensure equity in all Ontario workplaces.
- Establish an equal pay for equal work provision; and institute a transparent employment pay law as part of a strategy to reduce the pay gaps suffered by women, racialized, and other equity-deserving groups, as well as Indigenous Peoples.
- Update Ontario's Employment Standards Act, to make it easier to unionize, as a sure way to improve wages and working conditions
- Legislate 10 permanent, employer-provided, paid sick leave days for all Ontario workers.

Climate Change and Community Resilience

Climate change increasingly affects students' lives and learning. Extreme weather events, poor air quality, and climate-related displacement disrupt schooling and disproportionately affect vulnerable communities (World Bank 2024).

Schools often serve as community hubs during emergencies, further underscoring the need for resilient social and physical infrastructure. Addressing climate change through public investment supports both educational continuity and long-term social stability.

A strong, progressive climate change action plan, focusing on leveraging green technology to de-carbonize Ontario will require significant investment, and changes to the province's economic and labour systems. But, if implemented with a forward vision, a green Ontario, with a green economy, has added benefits beyond environmental concerns.

CATHOLIC TEACHERS URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Invest in new or emerging, low-emission technologies and clean economy initiatives, such as renewable energy programs like wind and solar.
- Develop and properly invest in a climate change action plan that prioritizes transitioning to a low-carbon economy, while creating good jobs, with the necessary job training supports for workers in transition.

CONCLUSION: INVESTING IN PEOPLE, STRENGTHENING AND PROTECTING ONTARIO

The development of Ontario's 2026-27 budget comes at a pivotal moment.

Across the province, families and communities are navigating economic uncertainty, rising costs, and increasing pressure on public services. The choices the government makes today will echo into the future.

Choosing to properly invest in publicly funded education and the broader public services that support Ontarians is a practical decision with measurable returns – for students, for families, and for Ontario's economic and social future.

Budgets do more than allocate dollars; they reveal priorities. The 2026-27 budget presents a clear opportunity to align government investment with real costs, real needs, and long-term public benefit.

Ultimately, investing in education is an investment in Ontario itself. By strengthening public institutions, supporting the people who deliver them, and working collaboratively toward shared goals, Ontario can build a more equitable, resilient, and prosperous province – one where every student has the opportunity to succeed, and where publicly funded education continues to serve as a cornerstone of the public good.

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