



Submission on Bill 36, Progress on the Plan to Build Act

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation was founded in 1919. OSSTF/FEESO represents Educators in all four publicly funded school boards as well as in six universities; over 60,000 public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, instructors, psychologists, secretaries, student services supports, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, and many other educational workers.

The 2022-23 Grants for Student Needs (GSNs) are not sufficient to address the needs of students. The government continues to short-change Ontario's students, with the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (FAO) projecting annual shortfalls in education funding totalling \$6.0 billion through 2027-28. This continued underfunding and underspending in this sector and others has already led to a \$2.1 billion surplus in 2021-22 as well as a forecasted budget surplus in future years, reaching \$8.5 billion by 2027-28. The government continues to remove funding from postsecondary education (-\$289 million) and education (-\$284 million) programs. At the same time, the government continues underspending on education (\$134 million) and postsecondary education (\$124 million). This is funding that could have been used to provide valuable supports to the students who need them most, especially in the context of post-pandemic recovery.

Sheila Block of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) writes that the government only projects a 1.3% increase in revenue for 2022-23. But with annual inflation currently hovering just below 7% she points out this doesn't make sense as inflation drives up revenues. Despite the government's attempt to create a narrative of financial peril and given the same spending patterns as previous years, Ontario will post a \$1 billion surplus in 2023. The government should take the opportunity to invest in the future of Ontario – its children. OSSTF/FEESO urges the government to increase investments in public education and other public services to ensure Ontario's future successes.

The government is abdicating its responsibility to properly invest in Ontario's future. The government has diverted tax dollars by providing billions in tax cuts, like the \$2 billion annual cost of dropping the fees for license plate sticker renewal, transferring over \$2 billion to parents, handing over billions to businesses with little accountability, and extending the cuts to the gasoline and fuel tax rates. These funds would be better spent on targeted investments in public programs to support all Ontarians.

Education is the cornerstone of economic growth. In its 2019 report, *The Economic Case for Investing in Education*, the Conference Board of Canada found that for each \$1.00 increase in public education spending, \$1.30 is generated in positive economic impacts for the province. Conversely, the removal of \$1 in funding cause \$1.30 in negative economic impacts. Investment in education simply makes economic sense.

Bill 36 only contributes further to the underfunding of public education and lack of investment in Ontario's future. The following are some of the areas that require immediate action by the government.

De-streaming, equity and inclusion, and access to services

The last time de-streaming was attempted it failed our students because it was underfunded. Class sizes were too large, resources were non-existent, and training was thin at best. OSSTF/FEESO supports a fully funded de-streamed academic program; however, to date we have not seen evidence that adequate resources will be provided to support all students in de-streamed classes, and we are concerned that the government is failing to properly support this important initiative. Such significant change to our education system will require investment if it is to lead to a reduction in barriers to marginalized students, not another austerity budget.

The government must address systemic inequities in education. The pandemic has highlighted the crucial role education plays in maintaining a strong and vibrant society. For example, remote and hybrid learning are failing students, educators, families and communities. For clarification, hybrid learning is where there is a teacher in a classroom with students both in the classroom, but also following along at home. The result is a distracted and fractured learning model that disadvantages both groups of students. In-person learning is both pedagogically preferable and lessens the inequities faced by equity-seeking and sovereignty-seeking students. Hybrid learning is not working. The government must take a leadership role and direct school boards to end the hybrid learning model and to provide more robust supports for those students who cannot attend at school, such as dedicated virtual schools where teachers and educational supports can be optimized for online learning.

Students should have opportunities for learning and growth within their diverse communities. More school-based services should be made available, including mental health and speech and language services. School boards should be provided with increased funding for services by board-employed practitioners.

The current funding formula ignores the inherent differences between urban, suburban, and rural areas. Adjustments must be made to the basic funding formula so there is adequate funding for boards to address inequalities that occur as a result of income levels, gender, race, special education identification, and newcomer and Indigenous status.

For example, the Urban and Priority High Schools Allocation only provides \$10 million, with no increase from 2021-22, for the students most at-risk in the identified list of 40 high schools. Other schools in other locations may have at-risk students in similar circumstances, but because they are not the most at-risk, no funding is provided to support these students. Any increase in the eligibility for this allocation only decreases the amount available to at-risk students in identified schools, which is what has happened this year when the number of identified schools increased by 6, without any increase in funding.

Special education funding is allocated similarly, with total funding being capped overall and then divided among school boards based on complicated statistical projections that do not acknowledge the individual needs of students. The Learning Opportunities Grant uses a system based on outdated census data that results in a system that inequitably attempts to anticipate the level of student need based on arbitrary labels.

There are also inequities in the funding of adult and continuing education, occasional teachers, education support staff, class size, at-risk student programs, programs for students whose first language is neither English nor French, programs for newcomers to Canada, student transportation, as well as in many other areas. The funding for these programs should be increased substantially as Ontario welcomes more newcomers to Canada and seeks to grow and enrich its workforce. This

would be consistent with Ontario's goals of attracting and training new workers for our growing economy.

OSSTF/FEESO is committed to equity and believes that investments in education funding must be made so there is adequate funding for boards to address inequalities and student needs that occur as a result of income levels, gender, race, special education identification, new immigrant, and Indigenous status.

Student mental health and well-being

Supporting student well-being and positive mental health is essential to student success. Providing permanent, predictable, and meaningful funding for specialized programming and supports for all students strengthens learner outcomes and translates into higher graduation rates, more career opportunities, and increased life long success. Having more staff in buildings creates safer schools and campuses, promotes student and worker mental health, and supports healthy communities. Mental health services must be available in every school and worksite. Tier 1 and Tier 2 services, which should be available in all schools (promotion, prevention and support services) need to be properly funded. Tier 3 supports are more specialized and intensive and are offered outside of the schools, but are essential for a small group of students.

Supporting the overall well-being of children and youth is a role our schools have filled for many years, and we continue to learn about the importance of this support to enable children and youth to reach their full potential as adults. School Board professionals such as Social Workers and Child and Youth Counsellors who are embedded in schools can support the delivery of Mental Health Literacy Programs, Bullying Prevention Programs, and other (Tier 1 – good for all) initiatives that encourage prosocial development. They are also able to deliver more targeted early intervention programming (Tier 2 – necessary for some), which encourages skill-building in students who may face challenges related to anxiety, social skills, and other developing needs. School-based staff are also well placed to identify students who require more intensive supports (Tier 3 – essential for a few) and to assist families in accessing community treatment programs.

OSSTF/FEESO believes that there is a need for comprehensive Tier 1 and Tier 2 mental health services within schools supplemented by access to Tier 3 services within the community, as appropriate. Students who require Tier 3 services often face barriers to access, significant wait times or a lack of available services in their communities. Intensive mental health services should be available by referral from schools, be timely, and be fully funded by the appropriate ministry so that there can be seamless and equitable access in every community in Ontario.

Tier 1 and Tier 2 services should be provided by board-employed professional student services personnel and paraprofessionals. Any gaps in service should first be addressed by hiring additional board-employed staff to enhance the services available to students in schools. If it is not possible to provide a service internally through board-employed staff, when considering external partnerships school boards must avoid duplication of services provided by existing board-employed staff and ensure a partnership protocol is in place.

Funding for mental health and well-being supports for all students must be permanent, predictable, and meaningful. These supports strengthen learner outcomes and translate into increased graduation rates, student opportunity and success. School boards must be accountable for ensuring that all funding provided for mental health and well-being is used effectively to provide the intended supports to students. A school-based team of professionals who have experience and an existing connection to schools is in the best position to support the needs of students. Any funding should

support increases in front-line services and be used to hire additional dedicated board staff to deliver service directly to students in schools as part of the school team of trained, experienced, and dedicated professionals.

Violence in schools

Violence in schools remains a major concern. The government must establish an education sector Health and Safety Regulation that addresses the serious and growing issue of violence against education workers. Mandatory enhanced training must be implemented to assist staff to prevent, appropriately respond to, and report incidents of violence. An increase in the number of trained adults in our schools is needed to maintain the physical and mental health of staff and students.

A growing number of OSSTF/FEESO members have reported incidents involving biting, punching, kicking, spitting, and other forms of assaults by students year after year. These members, primarily educational assistants, but also teachers, often work with high-needs students in special education classrooms. This issue has reached a crisis level, with severe physical and psychological impacts on education workers. This crisis also comes with increased costs in lost time, sick leave benefits, WSIB, and administrative time and resources.

In November last year, the University of Ottawa released a report called “In Harm’s Way: The Epidemic of Violence Against Education Sector Workers in Ontario.” The report identified that the rates of violence against education workers are amongst the highest of any occupation. The increasing rates of violence are attributed to increases in aggression coupled with decreasing staffing levels. Violence against education workers is becoming normalized and minimized; this normalization operates in conjunction with widespread minimization or denial of the extent of violence and its impacts. The harmful impacts are profound and lasting, including diminished physical and mental health and job performance. Workplace violence impacts everyone in the school community, including students’ anxiety levels and the development of social phobias as a result of their witnessing of frequent and increasingly normalized violence against predominantly women education workers.

OSSTF/FEESO’s program End the Silence → Stop the Violence has highlighted this issue and brought it to the attention of the government. In response, the Ministry of Labour released a document in March of 2018 titled, Workplace Violence in School Boards: A Guide to the Law. School boards must be compelled to utilize the best practices in this guide to ensure compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Providing proactive health and safety training, during PD days or other paid time, to all school board employees, is an important step toward reducing the incidents of workplace violence. Increased funding must be provided to school boards to create programs that protect those who work with high-needs students. More education assistants, specialists, and professional student support workers must be hired to support high-needs students and reduce injuries to educational workers.

Ontario’s school repair backlog

Students and education workers need safe, healthy, and accessible schools. The government must fix the more than \$16.8 billion repair backlog and establish stable funding sufficient to increase board-employed staff to maintain schools prevent further disrepair. This backlog continues to grow due to the chronic annual underfunding of school maintenance, which at present levels is only about 10% of what is necessary to ensure Ontario’s schools are maintained in a good state of repair.

The FAO reports that in the 2022 Ontario Budget, the Province plans to invest \$21.2 billion in education sector infrastructure over 10 years, from 2022-23 to 2031-32. This investment represents a \$1.5 billion (8%) increase from the \$19.7 billion education sector infrastructure investment over the previous 10 years from 2012-13 to 2021-22. However, after adjusting for inflation, the 10-year education sector infrastructure spending plan in the 2022 budget represents a \$3.0 billion (14%) spending decrease compared to the previous 10-year period. Ontario can do better.

The disrepair of schools is not only dangerous for staff and students, it also impacts the learning environment and student success, including their mental health and well-being. The funding pledged by the government will not keep pace with the need for repairs. The government must address the repair backlog with additional funding by increasing the out-of-date benchmarks for pupil accommodation. The School Operations Grant must be funded to a level that will maintain the good repair of buildings so that Ontario's backlog stops growing.

As well, further funding is necessary to enhance the accessibility of schools to meet the 2025 deadline of the Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

Postsecondary education

In postsecondary education, nominal funding increases have not kept up with inflation and do not address the growing need for more spaces in post-secondary institutions to educate professionals and train skilled workers to fuel Ontario's economic growth. The government's implementation of performance-based funding does nothing to enrich student outcomes. Research and experience from the United States show that performance-based funding for post-secondary institutions will do little to increase accountability, or, more importantly, student outcomes. Further investments are needed, including lowering tuition fees and increasing mental health supports for postsecondary students, to allow postsecondary campuses to thrive.

Other considerations

The foundation of economic growth begins with families and communities. The government must invest in public services to fuel economic growth. Services such as affordable child care, universal basic income, and improving access to supports will help build stronger, healthier communities. Ontario needs a well-educated and skilled workforce. Lower tuition fees will reduce the financial burden on students and families and improve access to post-secondary education.

Greater investments in community training and education for newcomers to Ontario and skill retraining opportunities for people transitioning back into the workforce are needed. Permanent paid sick days for workers will keep workers and communities healthy, reducing the spread of illness and providing financial security for families.

OSSTF/FEESO proposes an approach that protects and builds up one of the province's most valuable assets: Ontario's world-class publicly-funded education system. The global pandemic has revealed the deep levels of inequities in society and highlighted the crucial role education plays in maintaining a strong and vibrant community. Now is the time to invest in and enhance Ontario's publicly-funded education system and to rebuild the province and the people living in it.

OSSTF/FEESO calls on the government to invest in our future—the many diverse students in Ontario's public schools and postsecondary institutions.

OSSTF/FEESO recommends:

1. That the government fund public education and postsecondary education fully and ensure full allocation is available for spending by school boards;
2. That the government invest in the public education system instead of providing over \$2 billion in hand-outs to parents and use the funds to provide ongoing and targeted supports to the students that need it most;
3. That the government fund education and postsecondary education properly to ensure services are not eroded by inflation and enrolment growth;
4. That the government provide adequate funding for dedicated virtual schools to ensure that school boards are not forced to use a hybrid learning model which hurts both students trying to learn from home and students trying to learn in person;
5. That the government provide permanent funding for staff and classroom supports to address learning gaps where they are identified instead of disjointed and unfocused tutoring supports and time-limited learning recovery supports; and
6. That the government make further investments in public education and post-secondary education:
 - to make our schools and communities healthy and safe, by adequately addressing violence in schools and the school repair backlog,
 - to increase access to services for all students across Ontario so that students can receive the services they need in their schools and communities,
 - to provide classroom supports for at-risk students and the implementation of de-streaming,
 - to ensure that all students receive the supports needed to overcome the inequities they face in order to succeed, to equitably fund all programs, including e-learning, programs for adults and e-learning and other programs for newcomers and second language learners,
 - to address the staff shortages in Provincial Schools,
 - to increase access to and services within higher education, and
 - to properly fund postsecondary education to make higher education more affordable for students;