



Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy regarding *Bill 152, The Poverty Reduction Act, 2009*

April 27, 2009

Introduction

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on *Bill 152, An Act respecting a long-term strategy to reduce poverty in Ontario* or in short, the *Poverty Reduction Act, 2009*.

OSSTF/FEESO is a trade union which represents 60,000 members across the province of Ontario. The union works to protect our diverse membership which is represented in 140 bargaining units across the province. OSSTF/FEESO bargaining units represent both English and French members in elementary and secondary school workplaces, private schools, consortia offering support services to school boards and universities.

Beyond our primary role in the representation of our members, OSSTF/FEESO is concerned and interested in a broad range of social issues. Poverty is one of these concerns and during these most difficult economic times it is perhaps the most important issue. Poverty impacts our students and their families, as well as our communities.

At the outset, we believe that the government should be applauded for moving the poverty agenda forward with this bill. As well, we agree most wholeheartedly with the statement in the legislation which says, "The initial focus of the government's strategy is on breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty by improving opportunities for children, particularly through the education system."

Education is of paramount importance in the overall reduction of poverty in our society. Education is what lifts us all and has the ultimate ability to be the great equalizer in our station in this world. It is through our education system that we can have the greatest impact on the fight for the reduction of poverty.

However, words alone are not enough. Along with this legislation and its resultant policies must be a dramatic investment in the programs which can be used in the eradication of poverty in the province of Ontario.

There are many, many stories amongst educators and support staff of students arriving at school without breakfast or without a lunch – a situation in which those students have difficulty concentrating on their work or experience absenteeism due to illness. The problem is compounded by students' inability to ask for help due to pride and/or embarrassment. Violence in our schools is often cited as a consequence of difficult familial situations and poverty. These are just some of the consequences of poverty which have a tremendously negative impact on the success of our students and have the result of negating the full potential of a strong education.

Beyond the legislation OSSTF/FEESO was encouraged by some investments coming forth from the recent provincial budget. The government has advanced the bar in a number of areas which help those most disadvantaged in our society. Housing, low income tax credits and child benefits were welcomed additions. Continued commitment on the raising of the minimum wage, albeit slower than what we may wish is also encouraging. OSSTF/FEESO is hopeful that these investments are followed up by additional investments as well as the development of further strategies.

Given the stated commitment to education in the legislation and in other government announcements, OSSTF/FEESO would welcome our involvement in ongoing consultation in the area of poverty reduction. As stated in our introduction, we are well placed to reflect a broad range of opinions due to our diverse membership who work in every sector of education and are in contact with students from kindergarten to university. We believe our unique make-up in membership can provide a more integrated and fulsome approach in any strategy.



OSSTF/FEESO has advocated for the use of schools as community hubs. The school is often the most appropriate location for facilities that the greater community depends on and multi-community use of schools, if properly implemented, can help make our communities stronger. This is true in both our urban and rural environments. However, given the fact that more immigrants establish themselves in our larger communities, our cities must have added investments in order to properly accommodate the challenges and needs of our newcomers. OSSTF/FEESO urges the government to work closely with municipalities to ensure that funding at all levels is forthcoming to ensure that appropriate services and programs are delivered through school boards and their employees.

In order to ensure that all Ontarians are able to succeed, providing further investment in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and a returning to the mode of Adult Education programs that existed before their underfunding which began in the late 1990s should be priorities. Our publicly funded high schools are often the most accessible venues for the delivery of these programs because of their proximity to the homes of these newcomers and our instructors have the skills and training necessary to deliver successful programs.

Ontario Learns: Strengthening our Adult Education System, a report produced by Kathleen Wynne, Minister of Education, indicates that we are committed to higher educational achievement for Ontarians, lower unemployment, faster integration of new Canadians into the economy, and having more children arrive at school ready to learn. A strong adult education system can help us achieve these economic and social goals.

In addition, an OECD/UNESCO research finding in 2003 quoted in this report indicates Adult education and training can contribute directly to the goals of higher performance for underachieving students in the K to 12 system when the adults in their lives gain the language, literacy and numeracy skills that they need to effectively participate in their children's education. Currently Ontarians are suffering from significant job losses in many sectors due to the economic



crisis. Many of these workers would benefit from a combination of retraining and education that would open doors to versatile employment opportunities. Adding adults to partially filled buildings is a cost effective way to provide an important service and expedite their return to the active workforce while preventing, reducing and or eliminating the possibility of them and their children living in poverty with little hope of escape.

The government's decision to introduce full day junior and senior kindergarten programs provides a unique opportunity for the re-implementation of the successful teacher-ECE staffing model in our JK and SK classrooms which was dismantled by the changes in funding and legislated primary pupil-teacher ratios. Numerous reports and studies indicate that low student to staff ratios are important to successful kindergarten programs which give children a solid start to their futures. This teacher-ECE model would offer our youngest learners a unique combination of knowledge, experience and skills from experts in the area of early learning and ensure that their earliest learning opportunities prepare them for success.

OSSTF/FEESO hopes that the government commits to an ongoing regiment of minimum wage increases once their present commitment is fulfilled. As we stated earlier, these increases must be accelerated somewhat in order to more properly support families. We believe we must strive for not just a minimum wage but a livable wage. This can be complemented by the addition and augmentation of programs directed to the health and well being of all our citizens.

The government's spring budget had some positive steps such as housing and tax credits which will assist in addressing poverty issues, but misses the mark when it comes to increasing the minimum wage and funding pay equity. With two-thirds of minimum wage earners being women, many of them in part-time and temporary jobs, as well as an overall 29% gender gap, surely these are central issues to tackle if the government wants to decrease poverty for women.



Targets are important but must be looked at in the light of adequate investment. We should be aggressive in these targets and match them equally with aggressive investment. This must be the case even in spite of the challenging economic times. Raising the living conditions of those at the bottom of society will undoubtedly raise the lot of all Ontarians.

Conclusion

OSSTF/FEESO understands the challenges this government faces in these times. We are encouraged that the legislation is being moved forward and we are eager to be involved in any capacity in helping to advance the economic status of all Ontarians.

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