



Submission to the Ministry of Education on the Engagement Paper: Well-Being in Our Schools, Strength in our Society

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Engagement Paper. Our federation offers this submission to provide valuable advice and insight into Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education. It demonstrates our commitment to collaboration as a new member of the Advisory Council on Student Well-Being and the development of a meaningful Well-Being Strategy.

OSSTF/FEESO is a trade union that represents 60,000 members across the Province of Ontario. The union works to protect our diverse membership in over 150 bargaining units in elementary and secondary schools, private schools, and universities. Our members include public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, continuing education teachers and instructors, early childhood educators, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, university support staff, and many others in education

Since the Ministry announced its intent to launch a student well-being strategy, OSSTF/FEESO has welcomed the opportunity for meaningful input to shape this important work. It is well known and understood that the situation of children and youth experiencing serious mental health concerns has to be addressed. The professional supports for these young people and their families, or lack of them, is a priority. These children and youth are students in Ontario schools and cannot be overlooked. The government is attempting to address those needs through the *Moving On Mental Health*, but the promise of "a high-functioning child and youth mental health system" has yet to be realized.

The student well-being strategy is for all children and youth, including those with primary care mental health needs, and cites the current mental health work in education (school mental health leads) as one of the foundations of the strategy along with Healthy Schools, Safe & Accepting Schools and Equity and Inclusive Education. Since the Ministry added the fourth goal of promoting student well-being in Achieving Excellence, there have been many questions about how that goal is best achieved.

In OSSTF/FEESO's submission to the Student Well-Being Discussion Document, the importance of ongoing consultation was identified. Our union is pleased to now be a member of the Well-Being Advisory Committee and looks forward to the continued work supporting well-being in Ontario schools. Our response to the Discussion Document also highlighted the need for meaningful Professional Development as well as school based resources that are essential if our educational settings are to effectively support everyone.

The Engagement Paper reaffirms four policy areas that are foundational to student well-being in every school in Ontario: equity and inclusive education, healthy schools, mental health, and safe and accepting schools. OSSTF/FEESO has supported the implementation of each policy and, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, has developed and delivered several professional development workshops for school staff.

The Need for a Renewed Commitment to Professional Development

The Ministry of Education has identified that student well-being is supported by current policies related to equity, inclusion and safe schools. OSSTF/FEESO has demonstrated its commitment to address key issues that are known to impact student well-being. With funding from the Ministry, OSSTF/FEESO created and delivered workshops that specifically addressed bullying, cyberbullying, homophobia/transphobia and sexual harassment; each workshop was designed to provide teachers and educational workers with information about each issue as well as strategies to support affected students.

Our union believes that the delivery of quality professional development supporting equity, inclusion and safe schools is still required to support the well-being of students and staff in Ontario schools. A renewed commitment to offer school staff dedicated time to discuss issues relating to safe and equitable schools is needed. Fully understanding and properly responding to the complex issues that impact student well-being will only be achieved with the provision of meaningful opportunities for school staff to collaborate professionally.

Education's commitment to well-being must not only create school environments that support the cognitive, physical, emotional and social growth of students. This commitment must be accompanied by a dedicated effort to address the negative actions, attitudes and beliefs that undermine well-being. Ministry policies can only be effective when frontline staff working with students are aware, informed and supported as they carry out their professional responsibilities in schools.

Development of Professional Learning Opportunities

With the recent commitment to Collaborative Professionalism, OSSTF/FEESO offers the Ministry of Education an opportunity to utilize the knowledge and experience of professional support staff members such as psychologists, social workers and other support staff who have tirelessly worked in schools to support student well-being. Together with the resources such as School Mental Health Assist, we believe much would be accomplished by working towards the development of professional learning opportunities to enhance the capacity of the system to promote well-being.

Supports and Resources for Supporting Well-Being

OSSTF/FEESO agrees that positive learning environments that contribute to students' "overall sense of self, spirit and belonging" are key component of student well-being. In reviewing the Discussion Document, the role of the school is clear; roles of parents, families and communities are not. Factors such as poverty, inadequate housing, domestic violence, and in remote communities, access to potable water are not mentioned.

In recent years, we have seen the important roles in guidance and student success eroded. There have been cuts to many guidance departments with reductions in the numbers of guidance counsellors as well as the office support that is essential in these office areas that are often separate from the main office area.

Student Success teachers report being overwhelmed with the number of referrals; the underlying factors behind the referrals often stem from mental health needs that cannot be addressed with available resources. There is a need for those services and resources as is evidenced by the results of the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey.

As reported in the *Globe and Mail* on July 21, 2016, the survey released by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, showed that one-third of Ontario students in Grades 7 to 12 reported elevated levels of psychological distress, a substantial spike since 2013.

The rate jumped from 24 per cent in 2013 to 34 per cent – approximately 328,000 adolescents – in 2015, an increase called very ‘surprising’ by Robert Mann, senior scientist at CAMH and co-lead investigator of the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey. The spike in psychological distress has also been met with an increase in the number of adolescents who visit a mental-health professional. One in five participants (21 per cent) reported visiting a mental-health practitioner at least once during the last year, up from 12 per cent in 1999. “People are now recognizing that there are mental-health issues that students are dealing with that we need to be addressing, and I think the governments are mobilizing and schools are mobilizing to deal with these concerns,” Dr. Mann said. “It’s not that we’re seeing more kids with mental-health issues. It’s that people are reaching out for help more, which is a good thing,” said Kim Moran, president and CEO of the advocacy group Children’s Mental Health Ontario.

OSSTF/FEESO does caution against a belief that the promotion of well-being will negate the need for valuable services for those children and youth whose mental health may be suffering. These survey results clearly identify the need for any well-being strategy to address the increasing needs for those supports and resources. We also caution that any framework needs to be developed and implemented within the limitations of physical and human resources available in schools. The education of students remains our fundamental priority. We agree that learning must occur in environments that are safe and healthy where equity and inclusion are embedded in the school system. However, the promotion of well-being will only be a philosophical exercise if front-line services are further diminished and resources are not made available.

Enhance Funding for School-based Supports

OSSTF/FEESO calls upon the Ministry to ensure that the funding for school-based supports that are currently available are maintained, if not further enhanced with the implementation of the Well-Being Strategy. We also remind the Ministry to provide a full spectrum of services for children and youth whose mental health and well-being are compromised. With the inter-ministry collaboration that is taking place between Children and Youth Services, Health, Housing and Infrastructure, it is essential that a patchwork approach to service provision is not continued. This too, jeopardizes the health and well-being of children and their families.

OSSTF/FEESO is Committed to and Supports Student Well-being

The 2014 OSSTF/FEESO Submission to the Ministry of Education, *Building The Next Phase in Ontario's Education Strategy*, stated the following:

OSSTF/FEESO believes strongly in public education as the key to Ontario's future. Our schools must continue to equip our students with the knowledge, skills and sense of community that will make our province prosperous and dynamic. Our dedicated staff must be provided with the resources to accomplish those important

objectives. Our students must be supported by a caring society in order to achieve the ability and confidence necessary to meet the new challenges of the 21st century.

Specifically, we agree that too many First Nations, Inuit, Metis learners, children and youth in care, learners with mental health issues and those who require the support of special education are still struggling within the current system of education. The need to present those learners with the greatest opportunity for success and achievement necessitates commitment to increased awareness, improved understanding and enhanced supports and services that will see all learners become healthy, well-rounded and resilient young adults.

As evidenced by our earlier submission, OSSTF/FEESO understands and supports the need to promote well-being. In fact, in that same year, we provided a proposal to partner with the Ministry of Education on the subject of well-being, committing to the development and delivery of a resource and workshop on *Building Resilience*. We hope that our proposal will still be considered as the government moves forward on its commitment to student well-being. OSSTF/FEESO also welcomed the additional goal of promoting student well-being as outlined in *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. It is essential that the resources and supports created as the Well-Being Strategy is implemented and advanced, are directed primarily towards the goal.

Focus on Well-being Not Measurement

The Ministry has made a bold commitment to promoting the well-being of students. Any move towards the development of a measurement that will be reported on in a fashion similar to the reporting of EQAO literacy and numeracy scores will only serve to undermine the well-being of students and staff in areas of the province that are affected by significant factors such as those that are known to impact learning.

The school is, and will continue to be a place where children are exposed to conditions and supports which create positive learning environments. OSSTF/FEESO agrees that early years and school settings are places that will help children and students become resilient. Our focus must be on those efforts. To lose sight of the goal of promoting well-being by instead focusing on how to measure it is problematic.

Until such time that the larger issues of access to affordable housing, violence and poverty are addressed, the well-being of some students will certainly remain compromised. Measurement of student well-being will only serve to further disenfranchise the children and families who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Emphasize PPM No.149 and PPM No.159

As the engagement process begins with mental health agencies, public health and other service providers, the Ministry is asked to reinforce the policy direction outlined in PPM No.149 with school boards. This will provide clarification of roles and minimize duplication of valuable and currently, insufficient resources.

Based upon the direction of PPM No.159 OSSTF/FEESO is committed to work with boards in transforming school cultures through agreed upon consultative mechanisms. Our membership has always been committed to supporting the well-being of students. The implementation of this strategy is important and must be carried out using our recent commitment to collaborative professionalism.

OSSTF/FEESO Recommendations:

1. THAT the Ministry of Education increase funding for teachers and support staff who are currently working with the students whose well-being is compromised by issues related to mental health, poverty or violence.
2. THAT the OSSTF/FEESO proposal to develop a resource on Building Resilience be considered for approval and expand funding for professional development.
3. THAT the Ministry of Education reinforce to District School Boards and Provincial Schools the directives of relevant policies such as PPM 149 and PPM 159.
4. THAT the Well-Being Strategy be funded and continues to be developed and implemented in consultation with education partners, including unions.
5. THAT the Ministry of Education abandon the development of a strategy to measure the well-being of students and staff.