

Once again, welcome delegates and guests to the 96th Annual Meeting of the Provincial Assembly.

Those of you who know me, and there are many of you in this room, know the value I place on hope -- hope for what the future holds, and for how we, collectively, can shape that future. And you know that I also place a lot of value on the faith we have to have in ourselves and in each other. Faith in each other's strengths and abilities, faith in our leaders – and, most importantly, faith in our members.

I see the leaders and activists who keep this union moving forward every day. I see people who couldn't do the kind of work they do if they didn't have faith in their own ability – and in our collective ability – to accomplish the things we hope to accomplish. And I know that all of you, as you work in your districts and your bargaining units, exhibit that hope and that faith – faith in each other – and to the members you represent.

Now, I know that a lot of people, maybe even some people in this room, are cynical about politics and politicians. It's no secret that election turnouts have been trending downward for over 50 years. It's no secret that huge numbers of people have simply disengaged from the political process.

But we can't afford to be cynical about politics. We have to have hope and faith that we can change the political discourse in Ontario. We can't afford to be politically disengaged. We can't afford it because the working life of every OSSTF member is affected by the governments at Queen's Park and in Ottawa, and by those governments' attitudes toward public education, and toward public sector workers and the unions who represent them. We would not be serving our members, and we not be honouring our stated purpose of protecting and enhancing public

education, if we didn't work tirelessly to ensure that our views are heard and our voice is always part of the political conversation.

And that's why we constantly monitor the political environment. That's why we maintain open lines of communication with Ministers and their senior staff, with opposition critics and with MPPs of all stripes. We do whatever we need to do to make sure our voice is heard and to ensure that our vision for education in Ontario is always part of the discussion.

And of course when it's necessary, as it was in last year's provincial election when the spectre of a Tim Hudak government seemed a very real possibility, we put boots on the ground to defend our province from his extremist vision. OSSTF/FEESO members worked collectively with other union members and supporters all over the province to make sure everyone understood that Tim Hudak's anti-union, anti-public-sector policies would be disastrous for the citizens of Ontario. And ultimately those citizens heard our message, and they voted to relegate Tim Hudak to the status of a footnote in the history of this province.

That was an important victory, and what might be just as important, at least in the short term, is that the current post-Hudak version of the PC party apparently recognizes that it gains nothing from following that kind of agenda. For now, at least, they've stopped talking about right-to-work legislation or about slashing public sector jobs. And that's another win for the labour movement in Ontario. We've changed the PC agenda, and by doing that we've removed those extremist, anti-union viewpoints from the mainstream political discourse in this province.

But of course, right now the PCs are not our major concern. Because, even though we managed to fend off Hudak's extremist agenda, we still have a provincial government that's stubbornly clinging to the failed dogma of austerity. A government that sees every problem as a spending problem rather than a revenue problem. A government that believes the single answer

to all fiscal challenges is to freeze or roll-back the wages of public service employees. Well we've heard this story before, and we're not buying it. We will never buy into an agenda that asks teachers and education workers across this province to pay the price for misguided decisions this government has made.

This is a government that keeps telling us how strapped for cash it is, but won't even consider reversing any of its corporate tax cuts. A government so enticed by privatization that – as was reported by the government's own Auditor General – it apparently thinks nothing of squandering 8 billion dollars more on P3 projects than it would have cost to keep those projects squarely in the public sphere, where they belong. The government's plans to privatize Hydro One will have a similar impact – a finite, short-term revenue benefit to the province, in exchange for the loss of billions of dollars of long-term revenue to the private sector. Short sighted -- Misguided.

That's billions of tax dollars that could have been spent to enhance public services – including public education – but which instead ends up padding the bottom line of investors.

Our sisters and brothers in the university sector have had to endure, for years now, a level of funding that's frankly embarrassing. Ontario ranks dead last among Canadian provinces in per-student funding for universities. As for the funding that is provided, universities are under no obligation to use that money for programs and services that meet the needs of students, and there is no accountability – no meaningful public oversight – with regard to how that money is spent. So when a university eliminates the jobs of OSSTF members, as happened last year at Brock and at Guelph, and just this past week at Wilfrid Laurier, it's almost impossible to tell how much of the problem is a straight lack of proper funding from the government and how much is simply bad financial management or misguided priorities on the part of the institution. And that's

why OSSTF will continue to lobby for enhanced and transparent university funding, targeted to meet the needs of students rather than the whims of university administrators.

Wherever our members are affected, we can never stop working to counter the government's austerity agenda. We will continue to do whatever needs to be done to ensure our voice is heard, through discourse and lobbying where possible, or through collective action when necessary.

Traditionally we at OSSTF/FEESO haven't paid much attention to federal politics. – We work in public education, and education falls under provincial jurisdiction. But it has become abundantly clear over the past few years that we can no longer sit back and ignore the Harper government's attacks on unions and on working people in this country.

Stephen Harper's core agenda is to lower taxes by slashing public sector jobs and destroying the bargaining power of unions. Even in the private sector, this federal government cannot stomach free collective bargaining, and they jump at the chance to side with employers and legislate striking workers back to work wherever they have jurisdiction, such as in the air and rail industries.

Make no mistake: the Harper government has a plan to eradicate unions in Canada. Bill C-377 is one of the most absurd pieces of legislation any of us has ever seen, and it speaks volumes about the depths of deceit to which this government is prepared to sink. For those who may not be familiar with it, it will require unions to comply with what I can only describe as a ridiculous level of public financial disclosure – a level of disclosure that no other type of organization in the country is forced to comply with.

And the rationale for the bill is the government's assertion that unions are secretive and undemocratic and don't tell their members how those members' dues are being spent. I hope that everyone in this room, while you're sifting through the pages and pages of the Treasurer's Report and our annual budget later this weekend, will consider that proposition and reflect upon how ludicrous it really is.

We *are* transparent, and OSSTF members know exactly how their dues are used by their Federation.

But that's the deceit Canadian unions are up against with Stephen Harper, and we cannot stand by and let others within the labour movement fight that battle without us. That is one of the reasons we've maintained our involvement with the Canadian Labour Congress and strengthened our ties to the broader labour movement in Canada, not just to other provincial unions like ourselves, but to national unions as well. I'm proud that I was there on behalf of OSSTF, walking with Jerry Dias on the picket line in Thunder Bay, supporting our UNIFOR brothers and sisters in their struggle with Bombardier to protect their pensions and working conditions. I was proud to be there on behalf of OSSTF at the Steelworkers' rally in Pembroke, supporting our sisters and brothers in their battle for a reasonable contract with Commonwealth Plywood – a strike that's now the longest in Canadian history.

I'm proud that our delegates at the CLC convention in Montréal last May worked hard with members of UNIFOR, and with our education-sector brothers and sisters in OECTA and ETFO and BCTF, to help elect President Hassan Yussuff

We supported Brother Yussuff because he was, and is, so passionately committed to building a renewed labour movement in Canada. Not just a labour movement that reflects the diversity of

Canadian workers in the 21st century, but a movement committed to high-level action and grass-roots activism.

And we are proud to be part of that. We're proud that OSSTF/FEESO has embraced the Together Fairness Works campaign, to help educate union members and the general public alike about the real contributions the labour movement has made – and continues to make – to the fabric of this country. We're proud that more than 70 of our members from 26 Districts have attended Together Fairness Works workshops over the past two years, and that 33 Bargaining Units in 12 Districts took advantage of eighty-four thousand dollars in funding for Together Fairness Works activities.

We welcome the CLC's renewed commitment to political change at the federal level in Canada, to the defeat of the Harper government and its anti-union agenda. Over the past few months, over 100 OSSTF/FEESO members have attended CLC Election Preparedness workshops in a number of cities all over Ontario. And we will continue to ready ourselves for the federal election in October, and to encourage our members to get involved in local campaigns at the riding level. I don't think it can be said too strongly – if Stephen Harper wins power one more time, we'll be in a battle for the very survival of the labour movement in Canada. And without a strong labour movement fighting for the rights of workers everywhere in Canada, our ability to protect our own members and to keep working to enhance public education in Ontario will be compromised.

And that's why we're involving ourselves in politics on the federal level, as we have always done on the provincial level. We need to protect the work we do – the work I see happening every day at Provincial Office, and I know is happening every day at District Offices and in schools and universities and other worksites around the province.

As local leaders, you know all about the kind of work the Federation does on behalf of its members. Every one of you has at least one story about *your union* making a difference in your own life, or the life of one of your members, or someone in the community. Every one of you has a story about how and why you got involved. I know I have lots of stories, and yesterday I took advantage of the “*My Union Video Booth*”, just outside this room, to record one of them . . .

[show Paul’s video here]

Over the course of this weekend, we’re hoping that every one of you will take a few minutes to step into the booth and record your own story. Because it’s all of your stories that give meaning to the work this union does every day.

You know how hard we work to protect members’ rights in the schools and the workplaces, and that we go to bat for members and hold employers to account when collective agreements are violated or health and safety procedures aren’t followed. You know that we are constantly striving to provide members with current information and relevant perspectives through our in-house publications like *Update* and *Education Forum*, and through the countless pages of information and resources on the Federation website.

But we also know that it’s a constantly changing world, and we can never afford to stand still. That’s why members of the Communications and Political Action Committee and CPA staff have been offering specialized communications training that can cover everything from traditional newsletters to social media to online meetings for districts with major geographical challenges. And more than two thirds of our Districts have stepped up to take advantage of this training.

That says a lot about the extent to which our local leaders are committed to constantly improving all the various ways they serve the membership. This Federation relies every day on

the commitment of those local leaders, just as it relies on the dedication and the hard work of all the staff at 60 Mobile.

But more than anything, this Federation relies on the members themselves. I want to share what speaks to their dedication and commitment. Every year our Educational Services Department and members of the Educational Services Committee offer dozens of professional development workshops all over the province. And every year, *thousands* of our members take advantage of these workshops. In the past year alone at least five thousand members have participated in these workshops that cover everything from classroom management to dealing with bullying to equity issues. And this year we introduced a workshop that provides members with the information, understanding, awareness and tools to deal with the mental health issues of their colleagues and students.

Our members don't take these workshops because they're mandated. They take them because they believe in self-directed professional development, and they certainly don't need a regulatory body like the College of Teachers to advise them on how to do their jobs. Particularly when that regulatory body spends the fees we give them to host wine and cheese events and golf tournaments, and to attend political fundraising events for the current government. In what world is it the business of a regulatory body to lobby the government? What theI shouldn't be surprised, the Ontario College of Teachers has made an art form out of involving itself in issues that are none of its business. We will continue to push back against their mandate creep as long as they continue to exceed the proper boundaries of a regulatory body.

OSSTF workshops provide our members with skills and approaches that they can apply in the classroom or the workplace. But those workshops also provide knowledge that members carry

with them beyond the classroom, knowledge that enhances their roles not just as educators, but as the kinds of citizens who help to build better communities.

And, of course, building better communities is at the heart of what we all do in OSSTF/FEESO. It's why we work in education. It's why our members strive every day to improve a system that is already ranked in the top 5 in the world – and I do mean all of our members – the school secretary that has a list of duties as long as my arm, the custodial and maintenance staff who ensure we have the clean and safe schools that have been proven to have a direct impact on student achievement – EA's, ECE's and other front line education workers, from JK to the university sector, psychologists, social workers, speech and language pathologists and teachers, *all* of us.

We do the work we do to give the children and youth of Ontario every opportunity to realize their full potential in school and in their life beyond the classroom, from JK to post-secondary. We work every day to lay the foundations that will help our students succeed as adults – not just in their working lives, but as citizens who can understand and navigate all aspects of the world they live in, and who care about their communities. And I do not exclude our Adult Education teachers that reinforce these foundations in their adult classes as well.

You all know how extensive and wide reaching the work that you do is, and how tirelessly you work to ensure all students reach their potential. Even in a system that continues to be underfunded, you make the schools work and you strive every day to ensure that students succeed. Ninety-two percent of our teacher members – *ninety two percent!* – volunteer their personal time to run extracurricular activities, whether it's sports or clubs or class trips or any number of other things. And that's on top of the additional support the rest of our members

supply. It's not the government and it's not the school boards who keep the system in the top five in the world. It's all of us in this room and the 60,000 members we represent.

We do this work because we understand how inherently valuable it is.

Unfortunately, not everyone shares that understanding. And I don't have to tell you that it's been years since the government or the school boards of this province have given us any tangible evidence that they recognize the scope of our contribution or the value the work we do from JK to post-secondary. If anything, what we have seen over the last three years is an outright disregard for our dedication, our commitment and our value.

We don't need more Ministry and board-directed initiatives distracting us from the important work we do. Our WAVE Survey tells us that only eight percent of our members have ever found a Ministry or board initiative to be of any benefit whatsoever in their daily classroom activities. **8%** We're the ones who know best what needs to happen in the classroom. We know how to assess and evaluate our students, and how to work with their strengths and weaknesses. We know all of these things and more, and yet the government and the school boards seem determined to dismiss and undermine our professionalism at every opportunity. **And we have had enough of it – We are the professionals in the system.**

. The time is now, sisters and brothers, for us to take back our profession. The time is now to demand the recognition we deserve. And I don't care what role you play on the education team. For too long administrators have undermined our professionalism by altering grades, meddling in our assessment of students and fettering us with ineffective initiatives that hinder rather than enhance the work we do. We have endured it long enough, and we will do whatever we have to do to protect our professionalism, up to and including collective action.

Recognition of our professionalism is also directly linked to fair and transparent hiring practices. In the teaching profession, a new standard has been set for a hiring continuum. Teacher candidates will now become daily occasional teachers, then move into long term assignment positions, and finally into permanent jobs. Declining enrolment and an over-abundance of certified teachers have given school boards and administrators free rein for too long to ignore qualifications and seniority. The imposition of Regulation 274 was an attempt to implement a transparent and fair hiring practice to counter the nepotism that was becoming rampant across the province. The *Regulation 274 Final Report*, released in November, confirmed what we have always known – that Regulation 274 is flawed and has been implemented unevenly across the province, and that respecting teacher qualifications and experience does enhance student success, despite the claims and assertions of school board administrators.

And that's not the only place. As many of you know, we've had some frustrations getting negotiations underway over the past several months. The complacency with which the government and school boards have approached the bargaining process, especially for support staff, is frankly insulting. We had to wait an extra two months last year – from June 3 to August 5 – just to give notice to bargain centrally for support staff. Why? Because the government hadn't got around to creating the required regulation under the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act. And thanks to several more unnecessary delays, it is now seven months later and we are still almost a month away from our first central bargaining date for support staff. We'll finally be getting to the table on April 8, a full ten months after we should have been able to give notice to bargain. **Shame on you.**

Central bargaining for teachers and occasional teachers is a bit further along, but the frustrations there are just as palpable. After three years of imposed salary freezes, punctuated

with constraints on grid movement and the theft of gratuities, they have now come to the table clearly determined to attack our working conditions. Everything they have proposed, from the removal of class size caps to less prep time to more supervision time, and even an increase in management control over your time – more time on Ministry and board-directed initiatives – all of this serves only to limit our meaningful face-time with students and further erode the professionalism of what we do.

We are through with having our work devalued and our working conditions diminished.

We are through with having everything we've worked for, over almost a century, slowly chiseled away by a government and school boards that apparently can't get their heads around the fact that our working conditions are also the learning conditions of our students. The government and school boards that still haven't figured out that when they devalue our work, they devalue the entire system and that when they attack us, they attack student success.

Our goals in this round of bargaining remain consistent. We expect real improvements in working conditions and in compensation for *all* of our members. And we're not talking about improvements that we pay for ourselves through efficiencies and job losses, but real improvements that reflect a tangible appreciation on the part of the government and the school boards for the value and the significance of the work we do every day, and for the dedication and professionalism we bring to that work.

But we're not seeing that appreciation on the part of the government, and we're certainly not seeing it on the part of local school boards. It's been seven years since we've been able to address local issues in local bargaining for any of our members employed by school boards. That's a long time to wait, but all we're seeing is that same complacency, that same lack of

respect for the process and for our collective agreements, and that same indifference to our concerns. And now we see those same boards bringing strips to the central table.

We know we have a government that has become accustomed – perhaps *addicted* – to trying to solve its financial problems on the backs of public sector workers, including all of us in this room. It's a sad day in Ontario when Moody's sets education policy.

This is the first time we've bargained under the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act, and what we accomplish or don't accomplish over the next few months is going to set the tone for bargaining for years to come.

And so the time is now, brothers and sisters, to once again muster our collective strength, as OSSTF members have had to do many times before us. It's time for us to look to our left and look to our right and say, "Sister, Brother, I've got your back." It's time to commit to each other. It's time for us to speak in a strong, clear, unified voice, and to say to the government and to the school boards of this province that our patience has run out, and that it's no longer acceptable for them to treat us as if the work we do doesn't matter.

Because the work we do *does* matter, and it matters now more than it ever has. In a 21st century knowledge-based economy, public education is the *very foundation* of Ontario's social and economic future.

When we, as a Federation, say that we are committed to "protecting and enhancing public education," what we're really saying is that we are committed to Ontario's future. And we've remained committed even in the face of the insulting restraints that have been imposed upon in over the past three years.

But now it's time for us to be committed to each other. It's time for us to stand together until the government and the school boards of this province stop pretending that we haven't already given enough. Until they come to the table with something more than frozen salaries and diminished working conditions. Until they show us in a tangible way that they finally understand and appreciate the value of the work we do, and how important that work is to the future of Ontario.

Last May we convened a special meeting of this assembly. The delegates at that assembly unanimously endorsed a plan – a plan to ensure that we, collectively, take care of one another in the event that any bargaining unit is compelled to take job action in pursuit of a fair settlement. That endorsement is direct reflection of our members' resolve to achieve fair, freely-bargained collective agreements with school boards across this province. Strike votes in the fall of 2014 served to reinforce that resolve, but they also served as a stark indication of the level of frustration at the local level. Our members employed by school boards have gone six months without a contract, and despite giving notice to bargain on June 3 of last year, we are still awaiting meaningful negotiations. But all we have seen are outright attacks on the learning conditions of students across this province.

I ask that the delegates of the following districts rise when called:

District 3 Rainbow, District 6A Thunder Bay, District 13 Durham, District 19 Peel, District 20 Halton, District 24 Waterloo, District 25 Ottawa-Carlton.

The clock is ticking, and our patience is wearing thin. And with every tick of that clock, these seven Districts are moving closer to a full withdrawal of services by the end of April at the very latest. Unless we begin to see school boards take this process seriously, unless we see positive movement at those bargaining tables and the removal of any strips those boards are pursuing,

unless we see some real improvements, our members will make good on their commitment to job action.

To the magnificent 7, on behalf of all of us. Thank you for your commitment, your courage and your solidarity.

In conclusion let me say this:

We have a plan, and we will stay the course. If it comes down to job action, by any bargaining unit, anywhere in this province, this entire Federation – *every member* – will be actively supporting that action.

We are on this road together. We have faith in our resolve, we have faith in each other, and we walk down this road in solidarity. And when we get to our destination, we will have fair and reasonable collective agreements with real, concrete improvements.

We started down this road together and we will stay on this road together.