

AMPA 2019

Good morning AMPA delegates, Life members, and guests. Welcome to the 100th Annual Meeting of the Provincial Assembly. *Bienvenue à la centième Réunion annuelle de l'Assemblée provinciale.*

Helping us celebrate this weekend we have a few guests from around the country, and it's an honour for me to acknowledge and welcome them.

From the Canadian Teachers' Federation we have President Mark Ramsankar.

Welcome to Dean Ingram, the President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association, George Daley, President of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association and from the Manitoba Teachers' Society, President Nacho Norm Gould.

From AEFO and ETFO here in Ontario, please welcome our affiliate comrades, Presidents Rémi Sabourin and Sam Hammond.

Joining us at their first AMPA are delegates from the PSSP Bargaining Unit in District 13, Durham, who joined OSSTF/FEESO last summer, and are currently in bargaining for their first collective agreement.

And speaking of first collective agreements, let's congratulate members of the Université Saint Paul support staff Bargaining Unit in District 35, who achieved their first collective agreement at the end of January. Congratulations as well to the District 16 York Catholic PSSP bargaining unit who also just recently reached a first collective agreement. It took them five tries before they were able to hold a ratification vote that wasn't cancelled because of weather nevertheless, they persisted!

As we kick off our 100th Annual Meeting of Provincial Assembly, it is fitting that only yesterday we celebrated International Women's Day, as we do every year on March 8. It is, of course, a day on which celebrate the social, political and cultural achievements of women, here in Canada and around the world. When thinking of those achievements, it serves us well to remember that

International Women's Day has been observed, in one form or another, since before OSSTF/FEESO existed. For the most part it's true that as a society we've done a pretty good job of enshrining women's rights in legislation, in regulations and in collective agreements. And our courts, for the most part, have done a good job of affirming those rights.

And yet, even with all those rights enshrined in law, many of the disparities those laws are meant to address still exist. Wage discrimination still costs women thousands of dollars each year. Women are still disadvantaged by inadequate childcare programs. Sexual assault and sexual harassment remain common experiences for many women. And in our legislative bodies, as well as in the world of business, women are still significantly underrepresented in leadership roles.

And that speaks volumes about how much work must yet be done. Despite social advances, like the "me too" movement and despite legislative and political advances, sexist and misogynist attitudes persist – and until those attitudes, are always and everywhere confronted as socially and morally repugnant – there will always be more work to do in the struggle for true equity and equality for women.

As we celebrate our hundredth anniversary this year, and particularly this weekend, I think we have a right to take some pride in the fact the struggle for the rights of women in the workplace has been prominent in the work of this union from the very beginning and has led to expanding equity work of which we can all be proud. It might not be a stretch, in fact, to claim it as a struggle that resides within the very DNA of the Federation.

At our very first Annual Meeting, Jesse Muir, a teacher from Ottawa, brought a motion to the floor calling on the Federation to adopt the principle of equal pay for equal work, and to "fight to secure for women teachers the same pay as that given to men for the same class of work." When news of it hit the newspapers the following day, this Federation, which most people had not yet even heard of, became linked in the minds of the public with this radical notion of pay equity for women.

Jesse Muir was not the first courageous activist in the history of OSSTF/FEESO. The 62 teachers who had come together a few months earlier to establish this Federation in December

1919 were undertaking an act of courage just by showing up as seen in the video vignette that will now be shown.

[VIDEO PLAYS HERE]

At that founding meeting in 1919, with the unanimous election of William Michell as the first OSSTF/FEESO President, those 62 delegates set a very high bar for all who would follow. Michell was not only a respected teacher and principal, but on a battlefield in northern France, with little regard for his own safety, he had led the men under his command out of the trenches to attack and neutralize a German machine gun nest. For that act of extreme valour he was awarded the Military Cross, and he returned to Canada a celebrated war hero. As such, he was virtually irreproachable. No one was going to accuse Lieutenant Colonel William Michell of being a Bolshevik agitator.

There is, of course, a world of difference between Lieutenant Colonel Michell's acts of courage on the battlefield and anything that future leaders of OSSTF/FEESO have been expected to do. Obviously, we do not lead our members into an armed battle with those who oppose us. Our work is often difficult and sometimes daunting, but it is infinitely less daunting than the work that confronted William Michell on the battlefields of the First World War.

What we *are* called upon to emulate, however, almost every day in our roles as Federation leaders, is the commitment and willingness to take an unequivocal stand and fight for what we believe in. When William Michell returned to the classroom after defending his principles and his country on the battlefields of Europe, he turned his attention to defending the rights of his fellow educators, and the integrity of publicly funded education. He did that because he understood that the kind of country he was willing to go to battle for, and possibly to die for, was also the kind of country that can only live up to its potential when education is a public priority.

That imperative – to stand up for what is right and just – has been at the heart of every battle this Federation has fought and everything that we have accomplished over our hundred-year history.

And of course it is not just our leaders who have needed to be principled and courageous. Over the century of our history, OSSTF/FEESO members have stood shoulder-to-shoulder, time and time again.

For decades, in fact, it was necessary for members to risk their very livelihoods in pursuit of our collective goals. They did so because teachers in Ontario did not have a legal right to strike, and the only significant leverage our members had when negotiations with a school board were not going well was to resign *en masse* in the middle of school year.

Members had to rely on the bonds of solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the Federation to ensure that they would not pay for their actions with their jobs. By the early 1970s, the tactic of mass resignations was so well refined that the government of the day introduced two pieces of legislation designed to remove the position of strength educators had gained through collective action.

Our response to the government's move? Bigger and better collective action. On December 18, 1973, OSSTF and the other education affiliates staged a province-wide walkout. More than 20,000 educators gathered in Toronto at Maple Leaf Gardens for a mass rally. And from there they marched on Queen's Park. Almost every school in the province was shut down that day.

It was a show of resolve and solidarity so impressive that both pieces of legislation were abandoned by the government, and died on the order paper. The government actually sat down with the province's education unions and negotiated the terms of Bill 100, which was passed in 1975 and affirmed the legal right to strike for teachers in Ontario.

Twelve years later, in 1987, this Assembly approved a constitutional amendment that would have a lasting and positive impact on the nature and the character of this Federation. That amendment, which was followed by a change to our Letters Patent, allowed for all types education workers to be represented by OSSTF/FEESO.

The Federation moved in this direction not simply to solidify our strength, although that was certainly one of the outcomes. It was, even more so, a move that recognized an inherent community of interest – a shared vision and shared goals – among *all* the members of the

education team. And it demonstrated significant foresight on the part of those who advocated for it. It led to the inclusion of support staff and PSSP members working in both secondary and elementary schools, and eventually to representation for university sector education workers and Early Childhood Educators.

That decision, more than 30 years ago, ultimately made OSSTF/FEESO the Federation that it is today, with the distinction – and the unique perspective – of being the only education union in Canada that represents the entire education team, from Junior Kindergarten to post-secondary.

With that important change behind us, In 1989, OSSTF/FEESO members were once again called upon to take determined collective action in pursuit of a fair arrangement with the government. A massive rally of 25,000 members in Hamilton led to a complete revamp of teachers' pensions and the creation of the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, giving teachers an equal partnership with the government, who had previously had complete control over benefits, contribution levels and investment policy.

More recently--less dramatically but no less importantly--OSSTF/FEESO played a critical role in the restructuring of OMERS pension governance on behalf of our support staff members and we remain well represented at the Sponsors and Administration Corporations to this day.

And then, of course, there were the Harris years.

In the late 1990s our Federation was prominent in the Days of Action that were undertaken by the entire labour movement in Ontario with an eye to countering the Harris government's appallingly anti-union agenda. Those actions didn't stop everything that was on Mike Harris's agenda, but it did slow down the implementation of his Common Sense Revolution, thereby diminishing the damage.

And, of course, during that same period, public education came under attack by way of Harris's Bill 160. If you were working in Ontario's public education system in 1997, Bill 160 will almost certainly forever reside in the corners of your mind to which the most brutal and unpleasant memories are relegated.

Had it gone unchallenged, Bill 160 would have imposed sweeping changes, none of them welcome. But challenge it we did. On October 27, 1997, OSSTF/FEESO members were among the more than 126,000 education workers who walked out of their workplaces and shut down the entire education system for two full weeks.

To this day it remains the largest job action ever undertaken by education workers in North America.

We certainly didn't get everything we wanted from that action but things would have been much, much worse if we had not stood up in defiance. That protest brought home to an entire generation of Federation members the true meaning and value of solidarity and collective action. And it sent a signal to the Harris government and every government afterwards that cared to learn its history. We will prepare, and if provoked, we will execute. And will fight back as fiercely as any workers ever have to defend each other and the pillars of a just society.

As a relatively young teacher, walking the picket lines outside Exeter High School in Ajax, I, like so many other OSSTF/FEESO members across the province, gained a profound understanding of – and a lasting pride in – our union's role in defending this vital public institution that we value so deeply.

Since that time, other governments have confronted us and have discovered that we are more than worthy opponents when we are pushed to oppose their agendas. We have been accused of fighting with governments of every political stripe. And it is true. Take up that mantle and wear it proudly. Because we have never started those fights. We didn't suddenly attack unsuspecting governments. No, we responded when they came after us and publicly funded education. And in every case, whether through overt collective action, shrewd bargaining, or legal avenues such as those we successfully pursued in response to Bill 115, we have maintained our long and proud history of successful defending both the rights of our members and the integrity of public education.

And now we are almost nine months into a government the likes of which we haven't really seen before. There is, sadly, already a significant list of Ford government actions that are having a negative impact on education in Ontario. One of the government's first moves was the

cancellation of long-planned consultations regarding the inclusion of Indigenous content across the curriculum. This is a move that will have lasting consequences, and not just in the classroom.

The government's short-sighted decision to take Ontario out of the Western Climate Initiative cap and trade system will also have a direct impact on Ontario schools. A fund financed by that cap and trade initiative would have provided \$100 million for physical plant improvements to schools.

On a Friday afternoon in December, the government announced that \$25 million dollars targeted to Education Programs – Other, was being slashed, thereby eliminating crucial programs for at-risk youth, including Indigenous and racialized students.

We are all, of course, aware of the decision to repeal the 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum in favour of a 20-year-old curriculum that teaches nothing of consent, sexual and gender diversity, or online safety.

In January, the government announced a ten percent tuition fee reduction for college and university students. At the same time, however, they revamped the OSAP system so that students, far from seeing any tangible benefit from the tuition cut, will be saddled with even more debt when they graduate. To top it off, Ontario universities – already the victims of the lowest per-student funding in Canada – are not being compensated for the lost tuition revenue. That's almost a half-billion dollars lost to post-secondary institutions in Ontario beginning next year, and that directly affects our university sector members in District 35. We have good reason to know, when universities feel financial pressure, they come after our members. For that reason, OSSTF/FEESO's 60,000 members will continue to stand firmly behind university students and the workers – our members – without whom no university can function effectively.

Also in January, the Education Minister announced that the government was considering the removal of class size caps in early primary grades. A "Class Size Engagement Guide" released by the Ministry complains that "implementing hard caps on class sizes...is expensive and difficult for school Boards to manage." That's right – "difficult for school boards to manage."

If the Minister is that concerned about things being difficult to manage, then she needs to talk to some frontline educators. She needs to talk to the educational assistants and teachers and Early Childhood Educators and everyone else who actually has to manage the learning environment in the classroom. They'll tell her how larger class sizes will work. In addition, our ECEs and all OSSTF/FEESO members will tell her that there is no substitute for the two educator model in the full day kindergarten program.

Most recently, we have seen the unmitigated debacle that is Minister McLeod's attempted implementation of the new Ontario Autism Program. It has gone from being a terrible decision, clumsily introduced, to an absolute scandal that deliberately stranded children on waiting lists. And once again we hear there just isn't enough money to go around to serve these children's needs. Enough money? Enough! It is time we stopped agonizing over how to reslice the government revenue pie. For the sake of these children, for the sake of all Ontario's children, for the sake of everyone who needs social services, which is all of us, we need to find the courage to talk about increasing revenue. In a prosperous province that spends the least per capita on social programs, we need to put the needs of students in our school system above the desire of corporations and the well off to hoard their cash.

And we cannot ignore the fact that the government is in the process of laying the groundwork, through Bill 48, for the obliteration of self-governance from the Ontario College of Teachers. This scheme was advanced by the governing councilors' themselves, though not the OSSTF councilors, I'm proud to say, engaging in a pitiable orgy of self-abnegation. Elected councilors of the college decided that teachers are not worthy of the franchise that put them there in the first place. They debased themselves and insulted the profession they are meant to regulate in the public interest.

Those are just a few of the government's actions that have specifically impacted the education sector. The news from other sectors is no more encouraging.

Early in its mandate the government proved that it has little interest in evidence-informed decision-making when it cancelled the basic income pilot project before any data whatsoever had been returned. This move was wrong-headed on a number of levels, not the least of which was that it broke a clear election promise that the program would not be cancelled.

The repeal of the Bill 148, the long-overdue employment law reforms we finally achieved in 2017, and the decision to cancel the minimum wage increase, is a clear indication of the government's indifference to the challenges faced by Ontario's most vulnerable workers and of the power of the business lobby in this province.

The list goes on, and it's difficult to speculate what might come next. It's difficult because this government's established pattern is to announce its actions completely out of the blue, usually with no prior consultation with major stakeholders. Unless, of course, those stakeholders are the Chamber of Commerce or other entities closely aligned with the government's ideological proclivities.

Perhaps the closest indicators we have as to future concrete actions the Ford government might be considering with regard to education are contained in the report that the government commissioned from Ernst & Young. That report is billed as a line-by-line audit of spending under the previous Liberal government, and it is clearly calculated to paint the darkest possible picture of the province's fiscal situation. The goal, it seems, is to provide a rationale for deep spending cuts.

Not surprisingly, then, the report presents number of austerity-driven recommendations which, if applied to the education sector, could have enormous consequences for both our members and the students we work with.

The report muses about "alternate arrangements" for the funding of government services – arrangements that would provide funding directly to individuals, who would then "choose their service providers through a form of market activity." Should that model be applied to the education sector, it would most likely mean the introduction of a voucher system – a system that allows parents the use of public money to access private schools – public money that would no longer be invested in public education.

Additionally we find a proclamation that the findings of the review are consistent with the government's stated goal of finding "efficiency gains in the order of four cents on the dollar". That's four per cent that would be cut from the provincial budget. Applied to the Ministry of Education's budget, that four per cent would translate into roughly a billion dollars.

Despite what the premier has promised about not cutting jobs, it's impossible to calculate how the removal of a billion dollars from the education system would not result in significant job loss among front-line educators, not to mention a serious reduction in programming. The impact on the system, and on the students' learning environment, would be calamitous. And we've seen the first shoe drop with the Ministry warning school boards to delay hiring in the face of another, ominous upcoming Friday afternoon announcement. This statement tells us that we must not be distracted from the clear and present danger that an attack on staffing would pose.

And so we have been preparing on a number of fronts, and I'll talk about those preparations in a moment.

But first I want to emphasize that ever since the election last June, we have been – and we will continue to be – open to establishing a meaningful dialogue with the Ford government in order to advocate on behalf of our members' best interests, and on behalf of a strong system of publicly funded education from JK to post-secondary.

Remember, we do not talk to provincial decision makers because we like them or their ideas. We talk to them because they need to hear *our* ideas. They need to be told, repeatedly if required, that the work we do has intrinsic value to the province they've been elected to govern – and that a healthy public education system, including our post-secondary institutions, is crucial to the future of Ontario.

But there are other significant reasons for our approach. If we do end up in a prolonged clash with this government, we will want that portion of the public that is open to persuasion to understand that we have not easily chosen to go to battle – that we have, in fact, made significant efforts to avoid it – but have been provoked into it by the destructive actions of the Ford conservatives.

Also, our members deserve to know, before we ask them to engage in a fight with this government, that all other options have been exhausted. Because, let's be realistic, if we have to go to war, there will be damage on both sides.

So our approach to this – our willingness to engage in dialogue – is never about appeasement. It's about preparation. If we are going to get into significant conflict with this government, we have to be prepared to put up a hell of a fight, because we'll be fighting to win. And the government needs to understand that if they want a fight – if they prefer that over dialogue – they're going to get bloodied up in the process. Whatever we do must include a combination of intelligence and strength.

We have also been preparing on a number of other fronts. On the tables in front of you, you'll find a short document entitled "Protecting Members and Public Education". That document lays out four key aspects of our strategy – research, member mobilization, influencing the government as well as public opinion, and partnering with allies. Under each of those broad headings you'll see specific actions we have undertaken to support those goals. Many of these activities began almost immediately following the provincial election last June. The document also talks about next steps as we envision them.

Perhaps the most obvious thing that we're doing is something we'd be doing no matter who was in government – we're preparing for bargaining. The way things are progressing, in fact, the central bargaining table may be our first opportunity to have a substantive dialogue with representatives of the Ford government about any issues of mutual concern.

We can make educated guesses, but we can't know with any real certainty what to anticipate from the government at the bargaining table. Accordingly, we are preparing for a number of possibilities, and when the time comes, we will be ready to employ strategies that are most effective for the circumstances.

One thing we do know is that throughout the bargaining process, we will remain focused on addressing the needs of OSSTF/FEESO members. Beginning last year with Provincial Executive site visits across the province, we have been committed to gaining deeper insights into members' priorities. As we move closer to bargaining, we will be using focus groups to sharpen our understanding and to augment what we've learned through our priorities surveys.

Whatever the government brings to the bargaining table, we will simply not accept the premise that our members must sacrifice to help finance corporate tax cuts and other ideologically-driven policies that serve only to undermine the province's revenue stream.

The new Protective Services Committee is also playing an important role, not just in amplifying the voices of local leaders, but in developing expertise at the local level. The active engagement of local leaders and local members is crucial, not just for this round of bargaining, but for the future strength of the Federation.

We are also preparing ourselves for any move by the government toward a system of voucher or charter schools. A delegation of Provincial Executive members and staff from Provincial Office met for two days in December with key players at the American Federation of Teachers to learn from their experience – both their successes in fighting privatization, and their early missteps. We are continuing to develop a comprehensive strategy to defend public education in Ontario should the government move in that direction.

In November and again in January, as many of you will know, we brought local leaders and Political Action officers together in Toronto.

The November meeting was primarily to assess the extent to which members were engaged with the current political climate. We needed to hear from local leaders what *they* believed their members' perceptions were with regard to the potential threats that might be posed by the current government. And we needed to talk about strategies for engaging members who were not yet paying attention, or who were not yet taking those potential threats seriously.

At the meeting in January we talked about specific strategies. Provincial staff presented workshops on member engagement and communications strategies, organizing rallies, and lobbying local politicians. And we began concrete planning for the hugely successful information rallies that so many districts pulled off without a hitch on and around February 7 at MPPs offices all over the province.

Those rallies were an important step, for a couple of reasons. Yes, it was important for us to deliver a clear message, prior to the government drafting its budget, that any cuts affecting

frontline education workers will not be acceptable, because any cuts of that nature will also have a negative impact on the students of this province.

But the rallies were also an important step in raising awareness within our own membership that this is no time to be complacent.

That awareness is crucial. Because, frankly, complacency among our membership would pose a threat every bit as dangerous as the potential actions of the government. We know that if and when government actions begin to pose an increased threat to the interests of our members, the ensuing battle is not going to be won by the Provincial Executive or by the staff at Mobile Drive or even by the hundreds of leaders and activists sitting in this room this morning. A room – even a room this size – full of leaders and activists will not be enough to defend our members' interests in the face of a government that simply doesn't value what we do. A government, in fact, whose political base loves a good display of populist contempt for exactly the kind of professionalism and expertise that our members bring to the table every day when they go to work. As union leaders we have little cachet with the public and less with Doug Ford and his government.

Before any real battle with this government comes, we need to make sure that every single one of our members is ready for it. It's going to be up to every local leader in this room to ensure that their members understand, well in advance, the serious damage that a government like this has the potential to do, not just to their working conditions, but to the entire system of publicly funded education.

Now, I'd prefer that no such battle with the government ever materializes. We can hope that the Grants for Student Needs announcement, which we are expecting soon, does not contain any unpleasant surprises.

It would be wonderful if the provincial budget, which we're expecting sometime in early April, did not contain measures that negatively impact our members, or our students, or the integrity of the public education.

And I would like to hope that when we get to the bargaining table later this year, we will be able to engage in meaningful and respectful negotiations, and find our way to a fair agreement.

Those are a lot of things that we're hoping for. And we will continue to hope, but with the understanding that there's a big difference between hoping for something and banking on something.

The only thing that we can bank on, is the resolve and solidarity of our members. If a battle comes, it won't be enough for me to take a stand or for the Provincial Executive to take a stand, or even for every local leader to take a stand. It will be up to the members to take a stand, and I have no doubt that they will. Because we have seen time and time again that when public education is in jeopardy, or when the crucial work we do in the schools and universities of this province is threatened, virtually every OSSTF/FEESO member becomes an activist. It has been that way in this Federation since the very first meeting 100 years ago.

It was the members who showed up to take a stand to win bargaining rights and the right to strike. It was the members who came together by the thousands to demand an equal say in their pension plan. And it was the members who showed up by the tens of thousands to take a stand against Mike Harris and his repugnant anti-education legislation. And year after year, members have joined in solidarity not just in province-wide battles but also to support individual bargaining units in their struggles. The weight of 60,000 behind a single bargaining unit in a contest with the employer has often been enough to turn the tide in our favour.

So, if we have to do battle with the current government, it will be the members who take on that battle, too. And when that battle is won, the victory won't belong to me or to the people on this platform. It will belong to every single member of this Federation.

We have a great deal to celebrate this weekend. Our history is long and our history is proud. It's a history punctuated with significant achievements and noteworthy victories, and also with the inevitable episode or two that might have worked out better. And that's fine too, because the point of history is not just to give us something to celebrate, but also something to learn from.

But mostly, I think, what the history of OSSTF/FEESO gives us is inspiration. It tells us that we have – consistently for a hundred years now – lived up to our motto: *Let us not take thought for our separate interests, but let us help one another.* **Ne pensons pas a nos interets individuel, mais plutot a nous entraider.**

It tells us that we have always, *always* honoured our stated commitment to protecting and enhancing public education. That when we advance the interests of our members through collective bargaining we invariably also advance the quality of education. And that this happens because our members *insist* that we bargain on behalf of their ability to do their utmost for the students that they work with.

Under normal circumstances, our role in ensuring that students from JK to university get the best possible education is fulfilled in our classrooms and offices and worksites. But every now and then, the defence of the publicly funded education system has to be waged within Queens Park or on its lawns, out front of our worksites and in the streets. Should that be required, we will not shirk our responsibility to stand up for each other and this most critical public institution.

Mostly what our history brings home to us is that all the great things this Federation has achieved over a century have been achieved by people who are more-or-less just like us – educators who are proud of the work they do, proud of the crucial role public education plays in the life of their communities and of their province, and willing to come together and act collectively in defense of that work when it comes under attack.

We have been doing this for a hundred years, and we will continue to do it for generations to come.

Thank you, and have a great one-hundredth AMPA!