

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Press conference—November 18, 2019
Remarks by President Harvey Bischof

Good afternoon, and thank you for being here.

On October 15, after months of inaction at the bargaining table, we announced that we would conduct a strike vote among our members. That voting concluded on Friday.

I'm here today to announce that OSSTF/FEESO education workers have voted 92 per cent in favour of strike action, and OSSTF/FEESO teachers and occasional teachers have voted 95.5 per cent in favour of strike action.

This is a powerful mandate from our members, and it sends a compelling message.

Our members are committed to defending the quality of education in Ontario against a government that is determined to undermine it.

They are absolutely prepared to defend their ability to provide the best possible learning environment for the students they work with.

Our members are telling us—and they're telling the government—that they are frustrated with the pace of negotiations. They are losing patience with a government that refuses to engage in meaningful discussion about major issues that affect the quality of learning in their schools.

Our members have given us the strong strike mandate that we requested. While we're pleased about that, we are extremely disappointed that we're still here trying to move these negotiations forward.

We gave our notice to bargain almost seven months ago. But we're still waiting for even one meaningful, serious response to our key proposals that address the quality of public education in Ontario.

Nevertheless, we are still at the table. We have four days of bargaining this week. And we sincerely hope that the government and the school boards will take advantage of these opportunities to finally move negotiations forward.

The Minister of Education has said over and over again how focused he is on keeping students in the classroom.

I hope it surprises no one that we want to keep students in the classroom too. But we want to keep students in classrooms that are functional. Classrooms that are safe. Classrooms that aren't bursting at the seams. Classrooms where every student has an equitable shot at success, because the supports are in place to make sure that happens.

None of that will be possible if the Ford government does not change its plans.

We haven't seen the Education Minister at the bargaining table. But we see him in the media. On the one hand we hear him talking about how much he wants a deal, but on the other we see him whipping up fear and anxiety among students and parents.

I have to say, we wish the Minister would invest as much energy in trying to get a deal as he puts into positioning the Ford government for a possible strike.

We've had a new Minister of Education for five months now. If he's learned anything about education in that time, and if he really wants a deal, he could start by going to the Premier and explaining that the Doug Ford education agenda—the plan announced back in March—simply isn't going to work.

He needs to tell Premier Ford that larger class sizes undermine student learning.

That slashing course options cuts off paths to students' futures.

That fewer supports will cause students who are already struggling to fall further behind.

That mandatory e-learning will not modernize the system; it will simply disadvantage enormous numbers of students and lead to lower graduation rates.

He needs to tell Premier Doug Ford that the government's plan is causing chaos in our schools and that it's only going to get worse.

In short, it's time for the Minister of Education to do the right thing and take a stand on behalf of the province's students.

We are almost seven months into the bargaining process and, frankly, there is no deal in sight. Our goal, though, remains as it was when we began back in the spring.

We want an agreement that's good for students, good for educators, and good for Ontario's economic future. Our proposals are positive, and we are absolutely confident that Ontarians are far more aligned with our vision for education than with the path the Ford government is trying to take us down.

Ontarians don't want to see the province's students crammed into classes of 40 or 45.

They don't want students with special needs to be denied the supports they need to succeed.

And they don't believe it's reasonable for teachers, education workers, or any working person to have their real income reduced year over year, and fall further and further behind the cost of living.

They don't want to see Ontario's economy put at risk through short-sighted cuts and a failure to invest in our shared future.

The Ford government, though, is asking us, and everyone else in Ontario, to accept all of these things.

But Ontarians don't have to rely on my interpretation of these negotiations, and they don't have to listen to government spin, either. They can see all of our proposals, and all of the government's proposals, at BargainingForEducation.ca, the website we've created exactly for that purpose. We're confident Ontarians will have no problem recognizing whose vision respects and defends the value of our globally-recognized education system.

We are at the bargaining table today. We will be there for three more days this week, doing what we've been doing since day one—Trying to get the Ford government and school board associations to engage, finally, in meaningful discussions about substantive issues that affect the quality of education in our classrooms.

We are at the bargaining table today and not on the picket line as we could have been. This is a choice we made for this week because we remain committed to looking for solutions through negotiations. I sincerely hope the Ford government seeks the same and isn't intent on creating additional unnecessary conflict.

I'll take questions now.