



Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Pre-Budget Consultations, 2025

February 3, 2025

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) was founded in 1919. OSSTF/FEESO represents over 60,000 public high school teachers, teachers at provincial schools, occasional teachers, educational assistants, instructors, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, behaviour analysts, child and youth workers, social workers, plant support personnel, and many other educational workers and support staff in public schools and universities.

OSSTF/FEESO is pleased to provide its submission 2025 Budget Consultations.

The government's 2024 budget continues to short-change Ontario's students. The budget effectively cuts funding for elementary and secondary education, as funding has stagnated under this government and further been eroded by inflation since 2017. Since 2018-19, per pupil funding for elementary and secondary education has increased by only 15%. Over that same period, inflation has grown by over 20%, while government revenues have grown by over 36% - plainly evincing that this government is simply not prioritizing public education.

Indeed, contrary to this government's claims of record education funding, Ricardo Tranjan, of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), notes that, with the planning provision removed and adjusting for inflation, Ontario is spending \$1,500 less per student than it did in 2018-19 on elementary and secondary public education. He further calculates that Ontario will have 4,990 fewer teachers than it would have had funding been kept at the same levels and included only inflationary adjustments.¹

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA), representing public English-language school boards in Ontario, has found that education funding per student for 2024-25, when adjusted for inflation, sits at the lowest level in a decade. OPSBA notes that school boards are left to deal with these inflationary pressures on their budgets. They also advocate for increased funding to education and say that nine in ten Ontarians agree that spending on public education is an investment in the future.²

¹ From Tranjan, Ricardo. (May 3, 2024). Ontario's Core Education Funding has dropped by \$1,500 per student since 2018. CCPA. Retrieved November 20, 2024, from <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/ontarios-core-education-funding-has-dropped-by-1500-per-student-since-2018/>

² From Ontario Public School Boards' Association. (May 2, 2024). Adjusted for inflation, per-pupil funding is lowest in recent history. Retrieved November 20, 2024, from https://www.opsba.org/opsba_news/ontarios-education-funding-gap-continues-to-grow/

In the post-secondary education sector, the cuts are even more drastic, with planned spending in 2024-25 *actually decreasing* by \$1.0 billion; (-7.5%) than was spent in 2023-24.

After six years of Ford Conservative governments, Ontario remains last in Canada for provincial university per pupil funding, well below the national average. Underfunding, combined with a continued freeze of tuition fees, has pushed Ontario's post-secondary sector to the brink of collapse financially as institutions struggle to raise enough revenues to continue to offer the courses and supports students need and deserve. This is a real per capita decrease of 8.1% in post-secondary funding over those six years.

This government is making choices that will negatively affect all Ontarians for generations. The choice to underfund education is one that will impact Ontario for decades to come. Investments in public education are perhaps the most financially sound decision a government can make: **each dollar of public education spending generates \$1.30 in total economic benefits** to Ontario. At the same time, the inverse holds true for each dollar taken from public education.³

This continued underfunding and underspending in the kindergarten to Grade 12 (K to 12) and university and college sectors is jeopardizing student outcomes and negatively impacting Ontario's future. The ongoing lack of sufficient investment in public education is shortsighted and especially disappointingly given that Ontario is in a period when economic recovery and inflation have significantly grown provincial revenues.

This government's failures on this critical portfolio are numerous and wide-ranging. From the recruitment and retention crisis affecting Ontario schools, the lack of funding for classroom student supports, the failure to address student mental health properly and ensure services are available to students, the lack of funding to initiative or direction to reduce violence in schools, the failure to properly implement de-streaming with appropriate supports for students, to the continued strangling of funding for universities and colleges, this government continues to short-change Ontarians.

This government has had many opportunities to increase investments and enhance public services. It is receiving *historic* amounts of revenues. Yet, instead of providing any real investments, it continues to underfund services at less than what inflation and demographic changes in the population require and chooses instead to make transfer payments to individuals with public tax dollars. This year alone, instead of funding education to keep up with inflationary costs, the Ford government is removing over \$3 billion from public services as payment to taxpayers in advance of a provincial election.

OSSTF/FEESO believes that all students deserve to have every opportunity to reach their full potential and succeed personally and academically, with access to rich learning experiences that provide a solid foundation of competence and confidence that continues throughout their lives. Ontario needs well-educated, intelligent, skilled, and resilient workers and this requires a properly funded public education system that will support all students and their needs.

³ From Conference Board of Canada. (June 19, 2019) The Economic Case for Investing in Education. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/the-economic-case-for-investing-in-education/>

OSSTF/FEESO calls on the government to implement the recommendations contained in this submission. Each of which would have a positive and immediate impact on student learning and outcomes. This government has ignored every one of them. This proposed budget continues to take money out of Ontario's world-class schools and campuses. It continues to ignore what students need in order to be healthy and achieve the success they deserve. The economic payoff is indisputable. The ability to properly fund public education exists. Now is the time to act to strengthen public education.

The solution is simple:

- Invest in publicly funded education and the economic future of Ontario.
- Fix the teacher and education worker shortages.
- Provide comprehensive programming for students.
- Ensure safe and healthy places to learn and work.

Invest in publicly funded education and the economic future of Ontario

School Board Funding

OSSTF/FEESO is very concerned that public education continues to be underfunded. Despite the government's continued claims of historic investments in education, real education funding has not kept up with the pace of enrolment growth and inflation. Ricardo Tranjan, of the CCPA, notes that, with the planning provision removed and adjusting for inflation, Ontario is spending \$1,500 less per student than it did in 2018-19.

In 2021, \$2.2 billion in education funding that could have been used to improve student outcomes went unspent. As well, in recent years, another \$2 billion was transferred directly to parents. As you read this, more than \$3 billion is being doled out to families in advance of the government's self-serving early election call. Providing this funding to school boards as an investment in public education would have been much more effective in improving student outcomes, as the school boards are in a much better position to provide educational services to students.

Furthermore, in 2023–24, base education funding was increased by only 1.4%. With a 0.6% enrolment increase and 1.2% of funding unallocated to school boards and unavailable for to support student needs and programming, this is effectively a reduction in funding to school boards. Compounding this intentional short-changing of public education, inflation of 6.8% in 2022 and 3.1% in 2023 has meant that school boards have much less buying power and are struggling to maintain programs.

Adjusting for enrolment, education funding this year has only increased by 1.9%, while annual inflation in Ontario, as of March 2024, was 2.6%. Further, excluding a planning provision of \$1.4 billion (4.9%), there is a net decrease of 3.0% to education funding. Due to this intentional underfunding, school boards are looking at cutting programming and staff.

For 2024-25, \$37.6 billion in spending is planned for the education sector, which includes Childcare and Early Years Programs. While this is \$400 million more than was spent in 2023-24, it must be noted that the federal government gave Ontario an additional \$0.6 billion in funding

this year over last year for the implementation of its commitment to \$10-a-day childcare by 2025.

As many Ontarians know, inflation continues to erode buying power. The annual average Consumer Price Index (CPI) for Ontario for 2023 remained high at 3.8%, following 6.8% in 2022 and 3.5% in 2021. This is a nearly 15% rate of inflation since 2020. Provincial per pupil education funding during that time only increased 10.6% and funding for classroom supplies such as textbooks, computers, art supplies and gym equipment received only a 3% increase over this period—which works out to a 12% reduction in buying power in respect of the supplies, resources and consumables students use on a daily basis.

One-time grants for learning recovery and limited funding for reading, mathematics and de-streaming initiatives have proven to be inadequate, particularly given the learning loss caused by the pandemic. Ontario's students need increased, appropriately focused and sustained funding to meet their educational needs.

The restructuring of the former Grants for Students Needs into Core Education Funding (Core Ed) fails to fix any of the long-standing issues that have plagued K to 12 education funding since the current funding model was introduced in 1997. The same issues identified in the report of the Education Equality Task Force (EETF) in 2002 continue to create inequities and underfund school boards, reducing the programming that can be offered to students. Ostensibly presented as a move towards transparency and accountability, the switch to Core Ed serves more to mask the systemic and intentional underfunding of public education and consequent shortchanging of Ontario's students.

Re-investing in a robust publicly funded education system in Ontario will produce thriving students, thriving schools, thriving communities, and a thriving economy. OSSTF/FEESO urges the government to make real investments in Ontario's education system to build for a better tomorrow. Now is the time to embrace the opportunity before us. Ontario's world-class publicly funded education system must be protected and enhanced to build a strong Ontario and benefit all Ontarians.

OSSTF/FEESO calls on the government to make immediate and real increases to funding and to further invest in publicly funded K to 12 education and the economic future of Ontario.

Recommendations:

1. Increase Funding:

- Immediately redirect tax-funded transfers to individuals to invest in Ontario's public education system.
- Immediately increase education funding to pre-2018–19 levels with automatic annual inflation adjustments.
- Ensure education funds are fully utilized by school boards for student support.

2. Staffing and Class Sizes:

- Fund staffing models to reduce class sizes and provide necessary student supports.

- Use a standard formula for educational worker staff/student ratios from kindergarten through post-secondary education based on the needs of students.
 - Provide equitable funding to all programs, including adult and continuing education.
3. Review and Overhaul Funding:
- Conduct a comprehensive review of the Core Education Funding with an expert panel that includes a focus on equity and inclusion.
4. Learning Models:
- Abolish hybrid learning and fund dedicated remote learning where warranted.
 - Remove mandatory e-learning in secondary schools and fund e-learning equitably with in-person learning.
5. De-streaming and Equity:
- Provide enhanced funding for de-streaming, including reduced class sizes, dedicated education workers, training, planning time, and resources.
 - Support culturally responsive curricula, learning materials, and professional development.

Post-Secondary Education Funding

In the post-secondary education sector spending is even more constrained, with planned spending of \$12.2 for 2024-25. This is \$1.0 billion less (-7.5%) than was spent in 2023-24.

These cuts, which the government attempts to justify by pointing to a decline in international student enrolment at public colleges and universities, will deepen the financial crisis already gripping post-secondary institutions. These institutions, left to navigate a landscape of frozen tuition fees and reduced government support, had been forced to rely heavily on the income from international student fees. The planned severe reduction in funding threatens to exacerbate an already untenable situation.

In post-secondary education, the government has consistently and significantly reduced public funding to universities. In 2022, provincial funding accounted for only 24% of total university revenues in Ontario, significantly below the national average of over 35%. Only two provinces—Ontario and Nova Scotia—fall below this average, with Ontario pulling the national average down. Notably, between 2018 and 2022, university operating revenues, derived from both the provincial government and domestic student fees, saw a substantial decline, amounting to approximately \$3,200 (in 2020 dollars) per full-time student. This staggering reduction underscores an ill-conceived trend of underfunding that demands immediate attention and highlights the need for increased transparency in post-secondary funding models.

Two publications, the “Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario’s Post-secondary Sector” from a Blue-Ribbon Panel and the “Back from the brink. Restoring public funding to Ontario’s universities,” prepared by the CCPA report that Ontario ranks at the bottom among provinces in

government support for universities. Despite the global recognition of Ontario's universities and their commitment to preparing graduates for the evolving social and economic landscape, the lack of sustainable and predictable funding jeopardizes the quality of education delivered.

Additional investments are needed to improve access to post-secondary education, support academic perseverance, and boost graduation rates. Lowering tuition fees and reversing changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) that were made in 2019 will not only alleviate immediate student debt post-graduation but will also prevent a lifelong reduction in students' net wealth, and make university studies more affordable, sensible, and accessible to all Ontarians. This can be achieved by ensuring that all low-income and middle-income Ontarians have access to grants sufficient to cover the cost of tuition, facilitating their ability to adapt to evolving economic conditions.

Safe and properly maintained campus infrastructure is integral to the creation of a vibrant learning and working environment at Ontario's post-secondary institutions. As of 2019, deferred maintenance at these institutions was estimated to cost \$4.7 billion. Without increased funding for the facility and equipment renewal, the declining state of Ontario's post-secondary institutions will negatively impact recruitment and retention, research capabilities and student learning and could decrease enrolment.

Furthermore, given the impact of the pandemic, now is the time to enhance mental health supports for post-secondary students. Increasing the number of support staff that guide and assist students throughout their academic journey will contribute to the overall thriving of both students and campuses and the cities and communities that host them. Immediate investments are crucial for the future of the sector, considering that in 2016, 53% of workers in Ontario's post-secondary sector experienced precarious work conditions. Despite the growth in university enrolment, the number of qualified permanent support staff positions has decreased, worsening student experience and emphasizing the need for proactive measures.

Ontario's universities are globally recognized for their excellence and for preparing graduates to meet the demands of an evolving social and economic landscape. However, chronic underfunding has severely compromised the quality, accessibility, and sustainability of post-secondary education across the province. Ontario ranks last among all Canadian provinces in every major post-secondary financing metric. According to Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA), no other province has underfunded post-secondary education to the extent that Ontario has.⁴ The provincial government provides the lowest per-student university funding in Canada, amounting to just 57% of the national average, as reported by the Blue-Ribbon Panel.⁵ This funding gap has persisted for years, with real per-student operating funding declining by over 30% since 2006-07.

⁴ Usher, A., & Balfour, J. (2023, September 6). *The state of post-secondary education in Canada 2023*. Higher Education Strategy Associates. <https://higheredstrategy.com/spec-2023/>

⁵ Harrison, A. (2023). *Blue-Ribbon Panel on Post-secondary Education Financial Sustainability: Ensuring financial sustainability for Ontario's post-secondary sector*.

The financial strain on Ontario's universities is further exacerbated by the unsustainable reliance on international tuition fees.⁶ Since 2008, international tuition fees have accounted for all new operating income in Canadian higher education.⁷ At least ten Ontario universities are currently projecting operating deficits for 2023-24,⁸ with a combined shortfall exceeding \$175 million. Additionally, the implementation and repeal of Bill 124 have created a retroactive financial burden of \$345 million this year and \$266 million annually thereafter. The Auditor General of Ontario (AGO) has identified this chronic underfunding as a significant risk, underscoring the need for immediate action.

The ongoing lack of stable and predictable funding not only threatens the financial stability of Ontario's universities but also jeopardizes their critical role in driving economic growth and innovation. The CBoC highlights that every dollar invested in post-secondary education generates \$1.36 in economic benefits. Universities contribute to community economic development, research, innovation, and commercialization, fostering a skilled workforce essential for Ontario's global competitiveness. Without sufficient investment, these institutions cannot maintain their role as economic catalysts or address the growing demands of students and the labour market.

The government's reliance on performance-based funding metrics has been widely criticized for failing to enhance accountability or improve student outcomes. Indeed, research and experience indicate that performance-based funding does little to enhance accountability or student outcomes. In 2023, Manitoba abandoned a similar policy after stakeholders highlighted its negative consequences. Ontario should follow this example and replace performance-based funding with stable and predictable models, such as enrolment-based and special-purpose funding envelopes, which are better suited to meet the needs of the post-secondary sector.

Beyond operational funding, the government must also address systemic barriers to access and affordability. Reducing tuition fees and reversing changes to the OSAP introduced in 2019 are critical steps. These changes would alleviate immediate student debt burdens and prevent long-term financial disadvantages for graduates. Ensuring that low- and middle-income Ontarians have access to tuition grants would further enhance access to higher education, enabling more students to adapt to evolving economic conditions and contribute to Ontario's prosperity.

Investing in Ontario's post-secondary education system is not merely a cost; it is a vital strategy for economic growth, social equity, and long-term prosperity. By reversing harmful policies and committing to sustainable funding, the Ontario government can ensure that its universities remain drivers of innovation, skilled workforce development, and global competitiveness.

⁶ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (2022). *Value-for-money audit: Financial management in Ontario universities*. Office of the Auditor General of Ontario.

⁷ Usher, A., & Balfour, J. (2023, September 6). *The state of post-secondary education in Canada 2023*. Higher Education Strategy Associates. <https://higheredstrategy.com/spec-2023/>

⁸ Council of Ontario Universities. (2024, November 15). *COU statement on one-year anniversary of BRP report*. Ontario's Universities. Retrieved from <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/news/cou-statement-on-one-year-anniversary-of-brp-report/>

These actions will not only enhance the lives of students and their families but also strengthen Ontario's economy and position as a global leader in higher education. OSSTF/FESSO calls on the government to make immediate and real increases to funding and to further invest in publicly funded post-secondary education and the economic future of Ontario.

Recommendations:

6. Post-Secondary Education:

- Immediately increase per-student university funding by at least 20% and commit to ongoing annual increases matching inflation.
- Ensure funds for post-secondary education are fully utilized and benefit students through increased transparency and accountability.
- Abandon performance-based funding metrics for post-secondary institutions in favour of stable, predictable funding models.
- Lower tuition fees by adequately funding post-secondary institutions and reversing changes to the OSAP.
- Provide additional funding to universities to address the financial impacts of Bill 124 and support long-term institutional stability.

Fix the teacher and education worker shortages

Ontario must provide education funding for staffing models that support the success of students and workers at school and on campus. We must increase support staff numbers to respond to growing mental health needs, eliminate wait lists, and ensure that every student has access to the supports they need.

Boards across the province struggle on a daily basis to find qualified individuals to fill vacancies or replace absent employees. The Auditor General's Office of Ontario noted in its report on the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) that about 20% of the time a supply teacher is unable to be found to replace an absent teacher in 2022-23. The TDSB has also had difficulty finding replacement staff for positions such as child and youth workers and school-based safety monitors. In 2022-23, the TDSB could not find a replacement for child and youth workers 48% of the time.⁹

A crisis is building in Ontario schools as current educators retire and leave the sector, a demographic reality that was accelerated as salary increases for education workers trailed those in other sectors. The need is acute — more qualified and trained teachers are needed now to ensure the current generation of students has access to the education, support, and resources they need to succeed.

⁹ From Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (December 3, 2024) Retrieved December 5, 2024, from https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/audits/en2024/AR-PA_TDSB_en24.html

This crisis has already arrived in certain areas of Ontario, in particular in northern and rural school boards, and in the provincial schools.

With respect to education workers, this retention and recruitment crisis has been further worsened by the settlement of compensation at a \$1 per hour increase. While lower paid job classes received normative raises, other job classes including psychologists, psycho-educational consultants, social workers, and speech language pathologists – job classes that are vital to addressing students growing mental health needs – received annual increases that were less than 1.5% when inflation was growing by 6.8% and 3.8% in 2002 and 2023, making them more likely to seek employment outside of public education and resulting in less supports for students while their needs reach peak levels. With an increase in students requiring mental health supports, more professional supports are needed. Schools need more funding to attract and retain these types of professionals and more funding to address the increased needs of students.

Already school boards are reporting that there are no teachers and education workers available to fill available jobs. This situation will worsen unless the government takes action to attract and recruit a new group of educators. The crisis is particularly dire with highly educated education workers and skilled trades, where the stagnation of education funding has led to wages that are under market value across Ontario.

OSSTF/FESSO calls on the government to make immediate and real increases to the funding of public elementary and secondary education to fix the teacher and education worker shortages.

Recommendations:

7. Compensation and Recruitment:

- Improve compensation and working conditions.
- Launch an active recruiting campaign to attract qualified teachers and education workers.

Provide comprehensive programming for students

Comprehensive programming for students involves a holistic approach to education that includes parental and community involvement and prioritizes every student's academic, social, emotional, and physical development.

By investing in comprehensive programming, Ontario's publicly funded schools and campuses will offer all students an enriching, supportive, and well-rounded educational environment that prepares them for success in all aspects of life.

The global pandemic presented unprecedented challenges and revealed deep levels of inequities in society. The pandemic magnified the significant inequities that continue to plague our public services and institutions and negatively affect the lived experiences of students and families in Ontario. It also highlighted the crucial role education and schools play in fostering and maintaining a strong and vibrant society.

The current education funding model, which was developed over 25 years ago specifically to limit education funding, created disparities that have only been exacerbated over the years. Over two decades ago the EETF, led by Dr. Rozanski's, recognized these disparities: the underfunding of school maintenance and operations, the negative consequences of the funding formula's fixation with uniformity and its inadequate funding for special education, programming for students at risk, and support for students whose first language is neither English nor French. In the years since changes to education funding have only compounded those issues and school boards are left to make difficult choices on the allocation of funding to areas of crisis because they are not receiving enough funding to support the programs that students need.

Program changes since, mostly politically or financially motivated, are also consistently underfunded, magnifying these issues, and forcing school boards to redirect funding from other programs. Both Special Education and Learning Opportunities total funding, which support the most at-risk students, have been consistently capped and divided among school boards in an inequitable manner based on statistical projections, which do nothing to address individual school board or student needs.

Students in schools across Ontario are not receiving the funding and supports they need in order to thrive, from early learning through post-secondary. To properly address these inequities, funding should be directed to improving learning conditions where they are needed. For all students' smaller class sizes mean students can achieve greater success.

There are inequities for students across the system that must be addressed. From the funding of adult and continuing education, occasional teachers, education support staff, class size, at-risk student programs, to student transportation, greater investments must be made. OSSTF/FEESO is committed to equity and believes that investments in education funding must be made so there is adequate funding for boards to address all inequalities that occur as a result of income levels, gender, race, special education identification, new immigrant, and Indigenous status.

As Ontario continues its strong economic recovery, it will need a well-educated, intelligent, skilled, strong, and resilient population. The priority of this government must be to invest in education at all levels to address funding shortfalls, the mental health of students and staff, and the widening gaps in inequity among the diverse peoples of Ontario.

OSSTF/FEESO is committed to equity and believes that investments in education funding must also be made to address inequalities arising from differences in income levels, gender, race, special education identification, newness to Canada, and Indigenous status. Improving learning conditions for all involves recognizing and meeting the unique needs of learners. When students feel safe and see themselves represented in schools, they succeed.

There are also inequities in the funding of adult and continuing education, occasional teachers, education workers, class size, at-risk student programs, student transportation, and many other areas. OSSTF/FEESO promotes the need for systemic changes and actions that are permanent. Funding must be sustained and specifically address systemic inequalities.

Students should have opportunities for learning and growth within their diverse communities. All services for students should be viewed through the lens of equity and inclusion. Systemic

inequity must be addressed through changes that provide positive impacts to equity and sovereignty-seeking groups, and these changes must be actionable and permanent.

Funding should be needs-based to ensure all students receive necessary services, regardless of income, gender, race, special education identification, or immigrant and Indigenous status. Special education and at-risk student programs need expanded funding, including education assistants for secondary students.

OSSTF/FEESO supports de-streaming in Grade 9, provided it is implemented with proper supports such as smaller class sizes, training, and planning time for educators. Permanent funding should address systemic inequities in technology access, curriculum opportunities, programming, and educator support. De-streaming courses must include curriculum modifications that reflect inclusion, diversity, and cultural appropriateness. Past experience with de-streaming shows that it cannot be successful without these supports.

Newcomers to Canada require increased support for English or French language learning, provided in schools and adult education centres. In-person learning should be prioritized to reduce educational inequities, with no mandatory e-learning. Remote instruction, if necessary, should be through dedicated virtual programs with smaller class sizes and appropriate resources.

The government must provide permanent, predictable, and meaningful funding for specialized programming and supports for all students from early learning through post-secondary education. Strengthening learner outcomes translates into increased graduation rates, student opportunity, and success. Equity objectives are met best when funding is accessible and widespread.

With the pandemic further magnifying the importance of mental health and well-being, more mental health professionals are needed to provide services directly to students in Ontario's schools and on campuses. Schools are the initial point of contact for such services for many students and school-based services should be available to all students that need them and be integrated with community mental health providers for students with higher needs. All tiers of services should be structured through schools to make them more accessible, equitable, and inclusive. Schools are the first point of contact for students and parents and educators can assist in identifying students that need additional supports. School-based professionals would be a unique position to provide and assist in the delivery of these essential services.

There is an obvious need for more school-based services, including mental health and speech and language services. Specifically, school boards should be provided with increased funding for services by board-employed practitioners. Students should be able to get referrals directly through school-based workers for more specialized health needs and services. Intensive mental health services should be available by referral from schools, be timely, and be fully funded by the appropriate ministry so that there can be seamless and equitable access in every community in Ontario.

Schools across Ontario are seeing a growing demand for mental health and wellness supports for students. As was noted by the Auditor General's Office of Ontario in its report on the TDSB safety and finances, the level of mental health and wellness staff at schools has not kept pace

with the demand by students for these services. TDSB administrators have also reported being unsupported in fulfilling their duties, including 65% of surveyed TDSB administrators reporting concern for their own well-being.¹⁰

In order to address the needs of all students, funding for mental health and well-being must be permanent, predictable, and meaningful. These supports strengthen learner outcomes and translate into increased graduation rates, opportunity, and success. Employers must be accountable for ensuring that all funding provided for mental health and well-being is used effectively to provide the intended supports to students. A school-based team of professionals who have experience and an existing connection to schools are in the best position to support the needs of students. Any funding should maximize the number of front-line services and be used to hire additional dedicated staff to deliver services directly to students in schools as part of the school team of trained, experienced, and dedicated professionals. Having more staff in buildings creates safer school buildings and campuses, promotes student and worker mental health, and healthy communities.

OSSTF/FESSO calls on the government to make immediate and real increases to funding to provide comprehensive programming for students.

Recommendations

9. Recovery Programs:

- Implement and fund a comprehensive learning recovery program to support student achievement and success.

10. Mental Health Services:

- Fully fund and support mental health services in schools and on campuses.
- Ensure timely and equitable access to mental health services.
- Increase funding for trauma and learning support post-COVID-19.

11. Address Systemic Inequities:

- Provide funding to reduce class sizes and increase classroom and school-based supports.
- Ensure supports are based on actual need, not demographic predictions.

12. Support for All Students:

- Increase funding for students at risk, students with special education needs, Indigenous students, English and French language learners, and newcomers to Canada.
- Allocate adequate funding for permanent support staff positions in universities.

¹⁰ From Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (December 3, 2024) Retrieved December 5, 2024, from https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/audits/en2024/AR-PA_TDSB_en24.html

13. Community Hubs:

- Develop schools and campuses into community hubs offering comprehensive programs and services.

Ensure safe and healthy places to learn and work!

Ontario's schools and campuses should be safe, welcoming, well-maintained, and vibrant places to work and learn. Every publicly funded school and campus should be a source of pride in communities across the province. Students and staff will succeed, excel, and feel safe when provided world class facilities and resources.

All students, teachers, and education workers, from junior kindergarten to post-secondary, need safe, healthy, well-maintained environments in which to learn and work. Investments in well-maintained physical spaces and resources will protect and improve the physical and mental health of staff and students in Ontario's publicly funded education system and means more and better jobs for Ontario workers. Additionally, students and staff want a learning environment that is free from violence. We need a culturally responsive, proactive violence prevention plan that includes training and funding.

Students and staff continue to experience an escalation of violence in schools. The government must establish an education sector Health and Safety Regulation that will end violence against education workers.

Enhanced mandatory training must be implemented to prevent, appropriately respond to, and report incidents of violence. An increase in the number of trained adults in our schools is needed to maintain the physical and mental health of staff and students.

Year after year, increasing numbers of OSSTF/FEESO members and other workers have reported assaults by students, including biting, punching, and kicking. This violence, primarily affecting educational assistants and staff in special education, has reached a crisis level, and is causing severe physical and psychological harm and increasing costs related to lost time and benefits.

A 2021 University of Ottawa report highlighted that violence against education workers in Ontario is among the highest of any occupation, driven by rising aggression and decreasing staffing levels. This violence is becoming normalized, profoundly impacting workers' health and job performance, and affecting students' anxiety and social development.

OSSTF/FEESO's End the Silence—Stop the Violence program has raised awareness, prompting the Ministry of Labour to release a guide on workplace violence in schools. To reduce incidents, school boards must adopt best practices, provide proactive health and safety training, and secure increased funding to hire more support staff for high-needs students.

OSSTF/FEESO released survey results in June 2024 showing a significant increase in violence in Ontario schools. Key findings include:

- 75% of members report more incidents of violence since they began working in schools.
- 31% have personally experienced physical force.

- Violence is particularly high among women and those providing direct student support.
- The lack of resources and accountability is a major concern.
- Violence impacts the ability to recruit and retain qualified staff.

Statistics show that violence in schools is on the rise in every part of this province. This is so even though we know that school boards are not doing a good job of tracking and reporting incidents of violence. School boards must do a better job of tracking and reporting incidents. In its recent report, the Auditor General noted the TDSB has underreported violent incidents to the Ministry each year, since at least as far back as 2017-18. From 2017-18 to 2021-22, the TDSB reported a total of 993 incidents to the Ministry when it had actually recorded 1,078 incidents that should have been reported to the Ministry. This is a difference of 85 incidents, or 9%. Further, between 2017/18 and 2022/23, violent incidents at TDSB schools increased by 67%, from 244 to 407. Violent incidents across the rest of the province's school boards grew by 114%, from 1,840 to 3,932 (this includes the 67 of the 72 school boards that reported 2022/23 incident data to the Ministry as of June 1, 2024, excluding the TDSB).¹¹

OSSTF/FEESO, along with its partners across the education system, has a vision for public education. We believe in public schools as places where students, teachers, and a wide range of education workers come together in a shared commitment to foster student learning and growth. Unfortunately, this vision is all too often disrupted by outbursts of violent and otherwise discourteous behaviour. Such instances of violence make learning difficult, if not impossible. Students deserve better, but the problem is getting worse.

A key system-level factor that must be taken into consideration is the serious underfunding of public education in Ontario. Ontario ranks fifth among all provinces in its education spending and is spending approximately \$1,500 per student less now than it was in 2018-2019. The result is a severe strain on staffing, classroom resources, and programs to support vulnerable students. Underfunding creates instability in the system and creates major barriers to providing students with the learning opportunities they deserve.

In January 2025, OSSTF/FEESO released a Safe at School, White Paper on Building Safer School Communities.¹² This white paper outlines data collected on school violence, how it affects students and workers and makes recommendations to make schools safe. In it OSSTF/FEESO urges Ontario's education community to implement 30 recommendations for the sake of building safer schools now.

The disrepair of schools is dangerous for staff and students and negatively impacts the learning environment and student success, including their mental health and well-being. The effective funding cut pledged by the government will not come close to keeping pace with the need for repairs. The government must address the repair backlog with additional funding by increasing the out-of-date benchmarks for pupil accommodation. The School Operations Grant must be

¹¹ From Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (December 3, 2024) Retrieved December 5, 2024, from https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/audits/en2024/AR-PA_TDSB_en24.html

¹² From OSSTF/FEESO. (January 22, 2025) Retrieved January 23, 2025, from https://www.osstf.on.ca/-/media/Provincial/Documents/Publications/research-studies/reports/en-safe_at_school-white_paper-digital_copy.ashx

funded to a level that will maintain the good repair of buildings and the ongoing refusal of this government to do so means that learning conditions in Ontario's schools continue to deteriorate.

The government's current plan for \$23 billion in infrastructure investment in education, which includes child care spaces, does not acknowledge the school repair backlog that continues to grow from the \$16 billion it hit in 2019¹³, to \$21.7 billion in 2024¹⁴. The Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (FAO) described the government's 2022 education infrastructure \$21.2 billion ten-year spending plan as 14% less in real 2021 dollars than the plan for the previous ten-year period¹⁵. With inflation of nearly 10% since, this plan continues to fall behind the needs of Ontario school boards. The FAO now estimates that it will cost \$31.4 billion to clear the school building infrastructure backlog, maintain schools in a state of good repair, and to build new schools to address projected capacity pressures.¹⁶

Students and education workers need safer, healthier, and more accessible schools. The government must fix the more than \$31 billion infrastructure backlog and establish the stable funding necessary to increase board-employed staff to maintain schools and prevent further disrepair. This backlog continues to grow due to the chronic underfunding of school maintenance annually, which is projected to be at about only 10% of what is necessary to ensure Ontario's schools are maintained in a good state of repair and fails to ensure that schools will meet the obligations of the Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

The FAO noted in 2022 that the government plans to invest \$21.2 billion in education sector infrastructure over 10 years, from 2022–23 through 2031–32. After adjusting for inflation, this 10-year investment plan represents a \$3.0 billion (14%) decrease in infrastructure spending in 2021 dollars as compared to the previous 10-year period.¹⁷

In its report on the state of school disrepair¹⁸, released in December 2024, the FAO estimates that given the current levels of funding under the Ford government, the percentage of school buildings that are not in a state of good repair will almost double in the next 10 years, going from 38 per cent this year to nearly 75 per cent by the 2033–2034 school year. The government must immediately invest a minimum of \$31.4 billion to clear the school repair backlog, bring all schools up to at a good state of repair, and build new facilities to accommodate over-capacity in schools.

¹³ From Rushowy, Kristin. (November 6, 2019). Repair backlog in Ontario schools hits \$16.3 billion. Toronto Star. Retrieved April 19, 2024, from <https://www.thestar.com/politics/provincial/repair-backlog-in-ontario-schools-hits-16-3-billion/>

¹⁴ From Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (December 17, 2024). Ontario School Boards: School Building Condition, Student Capacity and Capital Budgeting. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from <https://fao-on.org/en/report/school-boards-capital-2024/>

¹⁵ From Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (November 14, 2022). Ministry of Education: Spending Plan Review. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from <https://fao-on.org/en/report/2022-education-estimates/>

¹⁶ From Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (December 17, 2024). Ontario School Boards: School Building Condition, Student Capacity and Capital Budgeting. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from <https://fao-on.org/en/report/school-boards-capital-2024/>

¹⁷ From Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (November 14, 2022). Ministry of Education: Spending Plan Review. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from <https://fao-on.org/en/report/2022-education-estimates/>

¹⁸ From Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (December 17, 2024). Ontario School Boards: School Building Condition, Student Capacity and Capital Budgeting. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from <https://fao-on.org/en/report/school-boards-capital-2024/>

In that report, the FAO identified that over 84% of buildings in the TDSB were in a state of disrepair and that it would cost \$6.8 billion to bring them up to a state of good repair. This does not include costs necessary for new builds to relieve enrolment capacity pressures.

OSSTF/FESSO calls on the government to make immediate and real increases in funding to ensure safe and healthy places to learn and work.

Recommendations:

14. Health and Safety Regulations:

- Establish a specific education sector regulation within the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act.
- Create a standard enhanced 'one-click' online reporting tool for workplace violence.

15. Increase Qualified Staff:

- Increase the number of qualified and trained adults in schools.
- Provide enhanced mandatory training to prevent and respond to violence in schools.

16. Emergency Funding:

- Allocate emergency safe school funding to hire more qualified staff.
- Create a tuition waiver program to attract students into education programs for high-need occupations.

17. Transparency and Action Plans:

- Release data on serious student incidents and workplace violence inspections.
- Develop a Safe School Action Plan with a Community and Stakeholder Action Table.

18. Infrastructure and Accessibility:

- Provide funding to address the \$16.8 billion repair backlog in public schools.
- Conduct a comprehensive review for stable school infrastructure funding.
- Ensure compliance with the 2025 Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).
- Double provincial funding for post-secondary facilities and equipment renewal.