

# **Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, 2026 Pre-Budget Consultations**

January 2026

## **Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, 2026 *Pre-Budget Consultations***

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 for the 2026 Pre-Budget Consultations.

### **Education sector**

The 2025 Ontario budget continues to shortchange students as funding for education has been eroded over this government's tenure. Since 2018-2019, \$6.3 billion in funding has been removed from the education system<sup>1</sup>. Instead of prioritizing in the investment in students who are key to Ontario's future prosperity, the government instead allocates billions to undetermined programs without the oversight of the legislature using \$2.0 billion in planned reserves while adding an additional \$1.5 billion to the existing contingency fund, as reported in the 2025 Fall Economic Statement.

The government's claims of "historic funding" for education don't add up. Since 2018, Ontarians have faced historic inflation of 23%. Everything costs more. Yet education funding per student has increased by only 18%. That means, Ontario school boards are receiving less funding per

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<sup>1</sup> Tranjan R (2025) Ontario has underfunded schools by \$6.3 billion since 2018. In: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/ontario-has-underfunded-schools-by-6-3-billion-since-2018/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

student than they were 7 years ago. As a result, students have fewer supports in their classroom and school. Students are being shortchanged.

Education is an investment in our future. The Ontario Public School Board Association, representing Ontario's 72 school boards, notes that school boards are left to deal with these inflationary pressures on their budgets. The increased cost of fuel and supplies means that less money is available for classrooms. They also advocate for increased funding to education and found that nine in ten Ontarians agree that spending on public education is an investment in the future.<sup>2</sup> They quote the Conference Board of Canada report that each dollar of public education spending generates \$1.30 in total economic benefits<sup>3</sup>. These benefits include not only higher productivity and earnings, which in turn mean more tax revenue for Ontario, but also include savings on health care, social assistance, crime, and other social programs.

### **Post-secondary Education Sector**

The government's decision to freeze tuition in 2018 and subsequent underfunding has led to the near collapse of post-secondary education in Ontario. Ontario ranks dead last in its support of universities, providing just 58% of the per-student funding as compared to the average funding provided by all other provinces. At \$10,246 per full-time domestic student, Ontario is more than \$5,600 behind the next closest province at the bottom of the list. And, despite mandating a 10% tuition cut and then freezing tuition in 2019, Ontario ranks third highest in tuition fees for undergraduate students.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 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/](https://www.opsba.org/opsba_news/ontarios-education-funding-gap-continues-to-grow/). Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>3</sup> McArthur-Gupta, A., The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, & The Conference Board of Canada. (2019). The Economic Case for Investing in Education. In Pedro Antunes & Marie-Christine Bernard (Eds.), The Conference Board of Canada. [https://investinourkids.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/10322\\_EconomicCase\\_InvestingEducation\\_RPT.pdf](https://investinourkids.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/10322_EconomicCase_InvestingEducation_RPT.pdf). Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security: 2025 Spending Plan Review—Financial Accountability Office of Ontario %. (2025, October 29). Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. <https://fao-on.org/en/report/estimates-2025-pse/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

For post-secondary students, the return on investment in higher education is just as profound. In ROI of Higher Education—November 2025<sup>5</sup>, the Conference Board of Canada determined that both colleges and universities provide a positive return on investment on funding invested by governments across all fields of study. These returns include higher earnings and the same sorts of savings on social programs as above. Moreover, more spending is an investment in a more skilled and innovative workforce, boosting fuelling economic development.

For Ontario universities, the 2019 ten per cent tuition cut for domestic students was not accompanied by a proportional increase in provincial funding, and tuition rates have remained frozen since. At the same time, Ontario has moved from grants to loans for financial assistance for post-secondary students, making higher education only a dream for many students. The problem isn't just in the underfunding, it's also that Ontario restricts the number of students that it funds for post-secondary education, resulting in colleges and universities in Ontario providing higher education to students without any government funding support.

## **Summary**

This government is making choices that will have lasting consequences that affect all Ontarians. The choice to underfund education is one that will impact Ontario for decades to come. As noted above, the Conference Board of Canada reported in 2019 that 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: every dollar removed diminishes those benefits. Make no mistake, despite the continued obfuscation by this government, education funding is being eroded.

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<sup>5</sup> The Conference Board of Canada. (2025, November 3). ROI of Higher Education—November 2025—The Conference Board of Canada. [https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/roi-of-higher-education\\_nov2025/](https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/roi-of-higher-education_nov2025/). Accessed 2 Dec 2025

Persistent underfunding across Kindergarten to Grade 12 and post-secondary sectors is jeopardizing student success and weakening Ontario's future. This short-sighted approach is particularly troubling given that provincial revenues have grown significantly during a period of economic recovery and inflation.

Ontario schools face a recruitment and retention crisis, inadequate classroom supports, insufficient mental health services, and rising violence without proper intervention. Post-secondary institutions are similarly constrained, struggling under frozen tuition and declining government support. These choices continue to shortchange Ontarians.

Despite repeated opportunities to strengthen public services, the government has opted for underinvestment—funding education below inflation and demographic needs—while diverting over \$3 billion in public funds to pre-election payouts.

School boards across Ontario continue to face chronic underfunding. Instead of addressing this reality, the government has relied on legislation such as Bill 33—along with investigations and supervision of school boards—to distract from the true crisis. Since 2018, the government has removed \$6.3 billion from school board funding, leaving boards struggling to meet rising needs, and costs with fewer resources. When adjusted for inflation, per pupil funding has effectively decreased, as government allocations have not kept pace with escalating costs. The result is a widening gap between what students need and what schools are funded to provide.

OSSTF/FEESO maintains that every student deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential through rich, well-supported learning experiences. Ontario's prosperity depends on a strong, equitable education system that prepares skilled, resilient workers. The recommendations in this submission offer immediate, positive impacts on student outcomes.

The resources exist; the economic case is clear. Now is the time to act and invest in public education for the benefit of all Ontarians.

OSSTF/FEESO calls on the government to revitalize education in Ontario with a series of commitments to public education.

The solution is simple:

- A. Invest in our students and publicly funded education to secure the economic future of Ontario to secure the province's long-term economic and social wellbeing.**
- B. Fix the teacher and education worker shortages that are limiting Ontario's schools and campuses that are limiting the capacity of schools, universities, and colleges.**
- C. Provide the comprehensive supports that students need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.**
- D. Ensure places of working and learning are safe, healthy and inclusive so every person can thrive.**

**A. Invest in our students and publicly funded education for the economic future of Ontario.**

### **School Board Funding**

School boards continue to be underfunded. The government has used Bill 33 and the investigation and supervision of school boards to conceal the real crisis. This government has removed \$6.3 billion from school board funding since 2018. The amount of funding per pupil, when adjusted for inflation, has decreased due to government funding not keeping up with the growing rates of inflation.

This government has been steadily eroding education funding using inflation. It can use the phrase “historic funding levels” because of the high rates of inflation and the growth in the number of students attending Ontario’s world-class public schools. The real story is that over the past years the government has been steadily eroding funding by providing less funding than the rise in inflation. Coupled with the underfunding of teacher and education worker compensation benchmarks, school boards are left to make up the difference.

In 2024-25, real per-student provincial operating funding to school boards was \$14,504, the lowest level over the last 10 years. Going forward, the FAO estimates that the 2025 budget spending plan will increase real provincial operating funding to school boards to \$14,521 per student in 2025-26. That represents only a 0.1% increase, while inflation continues to crest 2%.

In contrast, school boards are spending \$14,997 in 2024-25, almost \$500 (3.4%) per student more than they are receiving funding from the government for, representing use of accumulated reserves to meet student needs. The FAO predicts this gap will grow to almost \$550 (3.8%) per student this year.

The situation is more dire for future years. According to the FAO, the government plans to underfund education by an annual rate of 3.2% over the next three years.<sup>6</sup> This is not sustainable. Underfunding is occurring across nearly every aspect of education funding to public school boards.

OSSTF/FEESO urges the government to make real investments in Ontario’s education system to build for a better tomorrow. Ontario has long taken pride in its worldclass publicly funded education system, and the government frequently highlights its central role in preparing students for a strong, competitive future. To truly build a better tomorrow, OSSTF/FEESO calls on the

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education: 2025 Spending Plan Review - Financial Accountability Office of Ontario %. (2025, October 27). Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. <https://fao-on.org/en/report/estimates-2025-edu/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

province to reinforce that vision by investing in classrooms, campuses, staff, supports, and safe learning environments—ensuring that every student benefits from a stable, high quality publicly funded education system that reflects the government’s commitment to student success and Ontario’s long-term prosperity. 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.

The restructuring of the former Grants for Students Needs into Core Education Funding 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 in 2002 continue to create inequities and underfund school boards, reducing the programming that can be offered to students. These include gaps in funding for Special Education due to the increasing needs of students, underfunding of salaries of teachers and education workers, as well as equitable access to programs and resources across different regions and socio-economic contexts. Ostensibly presented as a move towards transparency and accountability, the switch to Core Education Funding serves more to mask the perpetual, systemic and intentional underfunding of public education and consequent shortchanging of Ontario’s students.

OSSTF/FESSO 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. Staffing and Class Sizes:**



- Fund staffing models to reduce class sizes and provide necessary student supports, particularly for de-streamed classrooms, special education and to support student mental health.
- Ensure that there is funding for improved educational worker staff/student ratios from kindergarten through post-secondary education.

## 2. Learning Models, De-streaming and Equity:

- Remove mandatory e-learning in secondary schools and fund e-learning equitably with in-person learning.
- Provide enhanced funding for de-streaming, including dedicated education workers in every classroom, training, planning time, and resources.
- Provide equitable funding to all programs, including adult and continuing education.

### **Post-Secondary Education Funding**

In the post-secondary education sector spending is even more constrained. The FAO estimates that, while per full-time equivalent student government funding increases by 4.6% for 2025-2026, the government is planning to decrease per student funding by 14% by 2027-28. This is on top of the funding losses universities are experiencing due to fewer international students attending post-secondary institutions.

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, have been forced to rely heavily on the income from international student fees. Stripping it away now 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 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 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.

Moreover, 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 net wealth, making 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 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 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 and increasing the number of support staff to guide and assist them 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.<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> 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/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

Panel.<sup>8</sup> This funding gap has persisted for years, with real per-student operating funding declining by over 30% since 2006-07.

The financial strain on Ontario's universities is further exacerbated by unsustainable reliance on international tuition fees.<sup>9</sup> Since 2008, international tuition fees have accounted for all new operating income in Canadian higher education.<sup>10</sup> At least ten Ontario universities are currently projecting operating deficits for 2023-24,<sup>11</sup> 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 has identified this chronic underfunding as a significant risk, underscoring the need for immediate action.

Ontario's reliance on international student enrolment is a symptom of a much deeper issue rooted in long-term underfunding of the post-secondary sector. The province's funding model was created at a time when domestic enrolment was flat or declining, and it no longer reflects today's realities. Demand from Ontario students has been rising steadily. Since 2020, applications from Ontario high school graduates to Ontario universities have increased by 17 per cent. In addition, the province is preparing for a substantial rise in the population of potential domestic learners. The number of Ontarians aged 20 to 24 is projected to increase by approximately 12 per cent by 2030, which represents about 100,000 additional individuals in that age group. Currently, about 24 per cent of people aged 20 to 24 attend university. If this participation rate remains constant, Ontario will require roughly 24,000 additional university

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<sup>8</sup> Harrison, A. (2023). *Blue-Ribbon Panel on Post-secondary Education Financial Sustainability: Ensuring financial sustainability for Ontario's post-secondary sector*. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>9</sup> Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (2022). *Value-for-money audit: Financial management in Ontario universities*. Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>10</sup> Usher, A., & Balfour, J. (2023, September 6). *The state of post-secondary education in Canada 2023*. Higher Education Strategy Associates. <https://higherstrategy.com/spec-2023/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>11</sup> 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/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

spaces by 2030 to serve this age group alone. This projection does not include mature learners or applicants from other communities. With universities already carrying thousands of unfunded domestic students because of the provincial funding cap, the system does not have the capacity to respond to this level of anticipated demand.

Data from the Council of Ontario's Universities (COU) shows the severity of the financial pressures institutions are facing. Universities have already implemented close to 550 million dollars in cuts in recent years, affecting academic programs, student services, and staffing levels. Despite these reductions, universities are still projecting a collective annual deficit of 265 million dollars in 2025–26, with further shortfalls expected in the years that follow<sup>12</sup>. This situation underscores an urgent need for stable, predictable, and ongoing funding. Without it, the financial health of Ontario's universities will continue to deteriorate, undermining their ability to fulfill their essential role in the province's economy.

Research by the Conference Board of Canada demonstrates that every dollar invested in post-secondary education generates approximately 1.36 dollars in economic returns. Universities strengthen local and regional economies, drive research and innovation, support commercialization, and contribute to the development of a highly skilled workforce. These functions are critical to Ontario's competitive position in a global economy. If the province does not invest sufficiently in its universities, these institutions will not be able to sustain their role as engines of economic growth or meet the evolving needs of students, employers, and emerging industries.

The government's reliance on performance-based funding metrics has been widely criticized for failing to enhance accountability or improve student outcomes. Research and experience

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<sup>12</sup> Council of Ontario Universities. (2025, October 29). *COU statement: Response to Fall Economic Statement*. Ontario's Universities. Retrieved from <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/news/ontarios-universities-call-for-sustainable-funding-to-protect-and-grow-ontarios-economy/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

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 address systemic barriers to access and affordability. Reducing tuition fees and reversing changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (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.

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.

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:**

### **3. Post-Secondary Education Funding:**

- Immediately increase per-student university funding by at least 20 per cent and commit to ongoing annual increases indexed to inflation.
- Abandon performance-based funding metrics and launch a consultation with all stakeholders to develop a stable, evidence-based funding formula.
- Provide additional funding to universities to address retroactive financial impacts, including those arising from Bill 124, to ensure long-term institutional stability.
- Fund the expansion of university enrolment to accommodate projected growth in domestic students while maintaining quality and access.
- Ensure that all post-secondary funding is fully utilized and benefits students through enhanced transparency, accountability, and reporting.

### **4. Accessibility of Post-Secondary Education:**

- Reduce tuition fees by adequately funding universities to relieve students from subsidizing operating costs.
- Reverse the 2019 changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) to improve affordability and accessibility for low- and middle-income students.

## **B. 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 enhance support for mental health services in schools and ensure that every student has the support they need to reach their full potential.

Boards across the province struggle 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 in 2024 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.<sup>13</sup>

A crisis is building in Ontario schools as current educators retire and leave the sector, a demographic reality that was accelerated as salaries increases for education workers have continued to trail 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. This crisis has already arrived in certain areas of Ontario, especially 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 did receive a raise that was competitive with inflation, many job classes with higher qualifications, such as psychologists, psycho-educational consultants, social workers, and speech language pathologists to name but a few, received annual increases that were less than

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<sup>13</sup> 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](https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/audits/en2024/AR-PA_TDSB_en24.html). Accessed 2 Dec 2025



1.5% when inflation grew 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 and the inadequate compensation these education workers receive has contributed to a shortage. Schools need more funding to attract and retain these types of professionals and more funding to address the increased needs of students.

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:**

#### **5. Compensation and Recruitment:**

- Provide more competitive compensation and improve working conditions in order to retain qualified teachers and education workers.

#### **6. Collective Bargaining:**

- Allow free collective bargaining of public sector wage increases without legislative interference.

### **C. Provide comprehensive programming for students**

Comprehensive programming for students involves an integrated 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 education funding model—designed more than 25 years ago to restrict spending—has created deep and persistent inequities. Even Dr. Rozanski's Education Equality Task Force warned that chronic underfunding, a rigid one-size-fits-all formula, and inadequate support for special education, at-risk students, and English-language learners were leaving schools behind. Since then, these gaps have only widened. Today, school boards are forced to make impossible choices, redirecting limited dollars to the most urgent crises rather than providing the full range of supports students deserve.

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.

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.

OSSTF/FEESO supports de-streaming in Grade 9, provided that 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. For all students, smaller class sizes mean students can achieve greater success. Past experience with de-streaming shows that it cannot be successful without these supports.

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.

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 Toronto District School Board's (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.<sup>14</sup>

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. School-based professional support staff would be in a unique position to provide and assist in the delivery of these essential services.

<sup>15</sup>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.

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<sup>14</sup> 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](https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/audits/en2024/AR-PA_TDSB_en24.html). Accessed 2 Dec 2025

## **Recommendations**

### **7. Mental Health Services:**

- Fully fund and support mental health services in schools and on campuses so that students can get the services and assessments they need promptly.
- Increase the number of qualified, caring adults in schools to provide for the needs of the entire school and community.

### **8. Address Systemic Inequities:**

- Provide funding to reduce class sizes and increase classroom and school-based supports, especially in de-streamed classrooms.

### **9. Supports for Post-Secondary Students:**

- Expand mental health services and permanent support staff positions to improve student well-being and campus resilience. Allocate adequate funding for permanent support staff positions in universities.

## **D. 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 with 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 and caring 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<sup>16</sup> 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 released survey results in June 2024 showing a significant increase in violence in Ontario schools. Key findings include:

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<sup>16</sup> Bruckert, C., Santor, D., Mario, B., & CUPE Education Workers. (2021b). IN HARM'S WAY: The Epidemic of Violence Against Education Sector Workers in Ontario. In Summary Report. <https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-34885059/documents/d1b968c2fd564e559ca00334aa83d3f5/In%20Harm's%20Way%20-%20Summary%20Report%20November%202021.pdf>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

- 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. However, we also 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).<sup>17</sup>

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.

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<sup>17</sup> 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](https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/audits/en2024/AR-PA_TDSB_en24.html). Accessed 2 Dec 2025

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 up to \$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, Position Paper on Building Safer School Communities*.<sup>18</sup> This 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 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

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<sup>18</sup> 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](https://www.osstf.on.ca/-/media/Provincial/Documents/Publications/research-studies/reports/en-safe_at_school-white_paper-digital_copy.ashx). Accessed 2 Dec 2025



grow from the \$16 billion it hit in 2019<sup>19</sup>, to \$21.7 billion in 2024<sup>20</sup>. 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 period<sup>21</sup>. 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.<sup>22</sup>

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

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<sup>19</sup> 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/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>20</sup> 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/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>21</sup> 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/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>22</sup> 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/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

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.<sup>23</sup>

In its report on the state of school disrepair<sup>24</sup>, 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 overcapacity in schools.

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:**

### **10. Health and Safety Regulations:**

- Establish a specific education sector regulation within the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act.

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<sup>23</sup> 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/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

<sup>24</sup> 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/>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025

- Ensure that supervisors and managers are trained and take violent incidents seriously and follow the guidelines recommended in the *Workplace Violence in School Boards: A Guide to the Law*<sup>25</sup>.
- Create a standard enhanced online reporting tool for workplace violence and share the data with stakeholders in order that workers can be informed and can maintain an ongoing student safety plan.

#### 11. Increase Qualified Staff:

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

#### 12. Create a tuition waiver program to attract students into education programs for high-need occupations.

#### 13. Transparency and Action Plans:

- Release data on serious student incidents and workplace violence inspections.

#### 14. Post-Secondary Infrastructure:

- Invest in campus infrastructure, deferred maintenance, and safe learning environments to support student success and institutional capacity.
- Double provincial funding for post-secondary facilities and equipment renewal.

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<sup>25</sup> Workplace Violence in School Boards: A Guide to the Law. (2023). In A Guide to the Law. <https://files.ontario.ca/mlitsd-workplace-violence-in-school-boards-guide-en-2023-11-23.pdf>. Accessed 2 Dec 2025



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