

**OSSTF submission to the  
Social Policy Committee  
on  
*Bill 52, The Learning to Age 18 Act***

August 29, 2006



Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation  
Fédération des enseignantes-enseignants  
des écoles secondaires de l'Ontario



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## **Introduction**

There are two key elements to this bill. The first is the requirement to continue learning until age 18, either in school or in a variety of “equivalent learning” venues. The second is the enforcement mechanisms to keep these pupils learning, ie \$1000 fines and most importantly the suspension or withholding of a driver’s licence for non-compliance. In this brief OSSTF comments on the two aspects of the bill, and offers three recommendations.

## **Learning to Age 18**

OSSTF supports and applauds the preamble to Bill 52, in which the government articulates a number of strong belief statements about learning until age 18, such as:

- “the education system needs to instil in young people a lasting, positive attitude towards learning that will keep them motivated to stay in school...;” and
- “pupils must have a real choice through equivalent ways of learning that meet the requirements of the Ontario Secondary School Diploma;” and
- “no initiative is more essential to the province’s future than a plan that ensures young people keep learning until they graduate or turn 18...”

It is because OSSTF believes in these statements that one of the planks in the OSSTF Student Success platform for the last provincial election was that “every student will stay in school until age 18.” The government’s version of the OSSTF plan, however, does not require students to remain in secondary schools while they do this learning, but recognizes such “equivalent learning” locations as workplaces or activities offered by community groups.

It is the details of these “equivalent learning” establishments which causes considerable

concern for OSSTF members. We note that acceptable learning locations will be further defined in Ministry and board policies and guidelines, which are subject to much less scrutiny than regulation. Who will set the standards and requirements for the board policies? Not only program and teacher quality but student safety may be at risk.

Who will approve the providers of equivalent learning and their courses or programs? There are certainly cautionary tales in this area as well. For example, the “inspection” of private schools which offer secondary credits leaves much to be desired. Similarly, the process employed by the College of Teachers to approve of providers for the highly unpopular Professional Learning Program (PLPs) amounted to little more than a “rubber stamp” of any applicant who paid the appropriate fee. There is real danger that the requirements for achieving secondary school credits will be watered down.

We are aware that a predominant reason for students currently leaving school early is a lack of engagement with schools. Those who have difficulty maintaining good attendance are in most instances also disadvantaged by serious family and/or mental health issues. These same students are also at considerable risk of experiencing low literacy levels, interpersonal and adjustment problems, and subsequent employment problems.

Absence from school is usually just one symptom of many wider underlying problems in the lives of these children. They often come from families which are disadvantaged and torn, they therefore face major barriers to learning.

We would suggest that the best strategy to keep students learning to 18 is to increase the number of professional supports in the school. The Ministry should mandate these services and provide increased protected funding to ensure that they hire qualified school board employees. These members of the educational team hold professional degrees and provide counselling, crisis intervention, assessments, life skills to students headed to

university, college or the world of work. A key role in the successful completion of high school is provided by our attendance counsellors, social workers and other professionals. All of these professionals have been instrumental in the identification of at-risk students as well as in interventions that contribute to their success.

The Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) is held in very high regard nationally and internationally. We do not want to see the value of this diploma eroded. While a national youth program such as Katimavik has indisputable value, we are concerned about the inclusion of community agencies in the acceptable list. Could this open the door for religious groups or fly-by-night charities to offer themselves as centres of learning? Community agencies can and do vary widely. Reputable agencies may be suitable sites for co-operative education placements, but only if the students are supervised by a teacher.

While colleges of applied arts and technology may offer some attractive programs, their instructors are not required to have any teacher training. Only trained and certified secondary school teachers, with the invaluable assistance of board-employed professional support staff, have the professional knowledge and skills to ensure learning and diploma success for teenagers of all learning styles, abilities and needs. Credits must be granted by secondary school principals only. Existing dual-credit programs are all taught by secondary school teachers, and this practice must continue for any expansion of dual-credit offerings.

It is crucial that all aspects of the planned High Skills Majors, specialization programs that will hopefully serve as an incentive for at-risk students to graduate and proceed to skilled careers, ensure the use of certified teachers.

Parents want their children taught by qualified teachers, trained in pedagogy and accountable to the school board and to the College of Teachers for their conduct. Instead of using the less costly alternative of simply sending students out to work and then counting their work experience as learning, OSSTF urges the Ministry to fund more shops and technical programs and train more tradespeople as teachers of technological education using the summer internship programs already available.

In the briefing documents released in advance of the bill, more detailed examples were provided of external learning opportunities that might “count” for the new programs. Pilot projects undertaken to date by the Ministry of Education under the “Learning to 18” program revealed that senior students (ie those most at risk of dropping out before 18) are hard to motivate unless a credit is attached to their efforts. Therefore, the Ministry plans to grant credits for external credentials such as WHMIS, First Aid/CPR and job-specific certifications in the trades.

Two other provinces recognize equivalent credentials for secondary school credits. The most clear-cut examples may be found in British Columbia, where the official list of course codes for secondary credit includes a number of provincially-recognized external credits. British Columbia developed its program between 1997 and 2001, ironically using Ontario’s practice of granting up to two credits for Royal Conservatory of Music credentials as its model. In BC the Ministry of Education centrally evaluates these courses, ensuring that there is documented systematic learning that can equate to appropriate subject areas in the curriculum. While 81 out of 408 listed courses that count for a BC secondary diploma are external credit courses, almost half of them are in music,



dance or fine arts; only 12 are in applied skills areas such as First Aid Instructor, Ground Search and Rescue, Outward Bound, Pony Club or Red Cross Swimming Instructor; and only three are in technical subjects (woodworking and tourism).

Almost none of these credentials is likely to be obtained by students at risk, therefore, their usefulness as a model for the Ontario program (except perhaps for adult students) is severely limited.

British Columbia also allows students to take postsecondary courses and count them towards secondary school graduation. OSSTF opposes this practice, which as mentioned above does not require the use of certified teachers and professional support staff or centrally-approved curriculum. It is also of very limited value for encouraging students under 18 to stay in school, since teenagers do not normally drop out to go into post-secondary studies!

Newfoundland, the only other province to recognize external credentials, recognizes courses taken through Air Cadets, Army Cadets, and Sea Cadets as well as Royal Conservatory of Music courses. Again, there is little to be learned here in terms of attracting students to stay in school in Ontario until age 18.

While admittedly Ontario students are allowed to count the highest Royal Conservatory of Music achievement for high school credit, the students who have taken years of music lessons are usually university-bound and not the target clientele for Student Success initiatives.

All provinces recognize co-operative education courses among their elective credits. The Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) whose courses are considered only as pre-apprenticeship training can also learn from the Alberta model where the Registered Apprenticeship Program allows students to accumulate genuine apprenticeship hours as well as high school credits. Currently, qualified teachers supervise all aspects of the program. Expanding both co-op and OYAP opportunities for Ontario's youth will be crucial to the success of the Learning to 18 initiatives. Incentives for employers to offer co-op placements and to take on student apprentices as part of an expanded OYAP program will be essential. Time release will also have to be funded specifically for new co-op education coordinators to find enough appropriate job placements and for co-op teachers to monitor the students in these work sites. Of course, more funding must also be provided to re-open, update and operate technical shops in secondary schools. These programs cost more to operate than traditional academic subjects and the funding formula must recognize that fact.

### **Enforcement via the driver's licence**

While OSSTF members support the goals of the Act to motivate all students to stay in school, continue learning and earn a diploma, OSSTF was totally surprised by the heavy-handed enforcement provisions that were placed in Bill 52.

These provisions will prove difficult, if not impossible, to implement, and will sour parents and students alike on the program. Instead of parents supporting a laudable educational initiative, they are criticizing the "big brother" approach the Bill takes.



There are several practical reasons why this enforcement mechanism will not work:

- School principals or board designates are to determine whether the student is still learning until age 18. Who in the board shall be designated? Teachers, whose duties leave no time for more administration. Attendance counsellors, whose positions have been eliminated by so many school boards? School principals themselves, who have already been recognized by the Minister's own paper on the Role of the Principal as having too many duties that take them away from their core responsibilities to their students and staff?
- In Section 6 of Bill 52, adding Section 21(2) to the *Education Act*, two options of issuing the proof of continued participation in learning are provided - either directly to each student/parent and also to the Ministry of Transportation. This would seem to add a lot of work to the existing heavy workload of school administrators. The most practical way of implementing the compliance provisions as they are currently written would seem to be a single form that each student would obtain from the Driver's Licence office, then get it signed by a principal to attest that they are learning either in school or in alternate locations. Principals or their staff may have to do considerable investigation for those who have dropped out to judge whether their learning should count or not. The compliance provisions create a lot of paperwork, particularly if there are appeals.
- Rural and northern parents feel particularly targeted, since public transit is not an option in these areas.
- The plan punishes only those who don't yet have a driver's licence. If a student moves quickly to get a G1 licence after turning 16 then drops out at age 17, there will be little deterrent value.



Enforcement via the driver's licence may involve disproportionately more cost, time and animosity with parents and students than the drop-out problem it is designed to address. Instead of focusing on the positive aspects of the program that will entice students to stay in school and improve student success, attention will be focused on punishing the minority who drop out.

The public and the education community favour incentives to keep kids in school. There was no public outcry demanding that drivers licences be withheld. The carrot will be more successful than the stick in this situation. OSSTF asks that the government reconsider this part of Bill 52.

## **OSSTF Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1**

Amend section 2 of Bill 52 to ensure that one further paragraph be added to the *Education Act*, subsection 8(1), paragraph 3.0.1, namely that equivalent learning be taught or directly supervised by teachers (as already defined in the *Education Act* as members of the College of Teachers).

### **Recommendation 2**

Provide additional targeted funding for expansion of co-operative education and technical education programs and facilities.

### **Recommendation 3**

Any and all references to the *Highway Traffic Act* should be eliminated from the proposed legislation.

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