



## **Submission on Bill 43 - Build Ontario Act**

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation was founded in 1919. OSSTF/FEESO represents over 60,000 public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, instructors, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, and many other educational workers employed in full-day kindergarten to university.

OSSTF/FEESO is pleased to make a submission on Bill 43, with respect to its impact on the public education and university and college sectors.

The government continues to short-change education. Last year \$2.2 billion in education funding went unspent; \$2.2 billion that could have been used to improve student outcomes and make schools safer. In its May review of education spending, the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (FAO) identified a \$200 million funding gap for this year. On top of this, the government's Fall Economic Statement, as captured by Bill 43, revealed the removal of another \$500 million from education funding. Consequently, school boards are experiencing financial pressure as enrolment continues to increase and inflation balloons to 4.7%. Since 2018-19, Grants for Student Needs spending has increased by only 2%; however, after accounting for inflation and enrolment growth, real spending per student has dropped by 6.7%.

Education is the cornerstone of economic growth. In its 2019 report, *The Economic Case for Investing in Education*, the Conference Board of Canada found that for each \$1.00 increase in public education spending, \$1.30 is generated in positive economic impacts for the province. And so too does the removal of \$1 in funding cause \$1.30 in negative economic impacts. Investment in education provides returns – this makes economic sense.

Instead of providing learning and classroom supports for students during the pandemic that would provide real returns to Ontario, the government squandered over \$1.7 billion on direct payments to parents and removed \$2.2 billion from the 2020-21 planned education spending. Most recently, the FAO estimates that education has been underspent by \$688 million through the first two quarters of 2021-22. The government should stop short-changing education and instead invest in education. In postsecondary education, the FAO has noted over \$250 million in underspending.

Bill 43 only continues the underfunding of public education and lack of investment in Ontario's future. The following are some of the areas that require immediate action by the government.

### **De-streaming, equity and inclusion, and access to services:**

The government must address systemic inequities in education. The pandemic has highlighted the crucial role education plays in maintaining a strong and vibrant society. For example, remote and hybrid learning are failing students, educators, families and communities. For clarification, hybrid learning is where there is a teacher in a classroom with students but also students following along at home and the result is a distracted and fractured learning model. In-person learning diminishes the inequities faced by equity-seeking and sovereignty-seeking students. Hybrid learning is not working. The government must take a leadership role and direct school boards to end the hybrid learning model and to provide more robust supports for students, such as dedicated virtual schools where teachers and educational supports can be optimized for online learning.

Students should have opportunities for learning and growth within their diverse communities. More school-based services should be made available, including mental health and speech and language services. School boards should be provided with increased funding for services by board-employed practitioners.

The last time de-streaming was attempted it failed our students because it was underfunded. Class sizes were too large, resources were non-existent, and training was thin at best. OSSTF/FEESO supports a fully-funded de-streamed academic program; however, without assurances that adequate resources will be provided to support all students in de-streamed classes, we have significant concerns. It will require investment if it is to lead to a reduction in barriers to marginalized students, not another austerity budget.

De-streaming initiatives need to be implemented alongside educator training, the development and delivery of high-quality curriculum, a re-evaluation of school culture, open communication of all stakeholders involved, additional resources and time for educators and students to complete curriculum, and continuous monitoring of student outcomes. In order to foster and maximize equality of opportunity for all students, de-streaming initiatives should be viewed as an ongoing process, adjusting to the needs of students, teachers and education workers on a continuous basis.

The current funding formula ignores the inherent differences between urban, suburban, and rural areas. Adjustments must be made to the basic funding formula so there is adequate funding for boards to address inequalities that occur as a result of income levels, gender, race, special education identification, and newcomer and Indigenous status.

For example, the Urban and Priority High Schools Allocation only provides \$10 million for the students most at-risk in the identified list of 34 high schools. Other schools in other locations may have at-risk students in similar circumstances, but because they are not the most at-risk, no funding is provided. Any increase in the eligibility for this allocation only decreases the amount available to at-risk students in identified schools.

Special education funding is allocated similarly, with total funding being capped overall and then divided among school boards based on complicated statistical projections that do not acknowledge the individual needs of students. The Learning Opportunities Grant uses a system based on outdated census data that results in a system that inequitably attempts to anticipate the level of student need based on arbitrary labels.

There are also inequities in the funding of adult and continuing education, occasional teachers, education support staff, class size, at-risk student programs, programs for students whose first language is neither English nor French, programs for newcomers to Canada, student transportation, as well as in many other areas.

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 inequalities and student needs that occur as a result of income levels, gender, race, special education identification, new immigrant, and Indigenous status.

### **Student mental health and well-being:**

Supporting student well-being and positive mental health is essential to student success. Providing permanent, predictable, and meaningful funding for specialized programming and supports for all students strengthens learner outcomes and translates into higher graduation rates, more

opportunities, and increased success. Having more staff in buildings creates safer schools and campuses, promotes student and worker mental health, and supports healthy communities. Mental health services must be available in every school and worksite. Tier 1 and Tier 2 services, which should be available in all schools (promotion, prevention and support services) need to be properly funded. Tier 3 supports are more specialized and intensive and are offered outside of the schools, but are essential for a small group of students.

Supporting the overall well-being of children and youth is a role our schools have filled for many years, and we continue to learn about the importance of this support to enable children and youth to reach their full potential as adults. Professionals such as Social Workers and Child and Youth Counsellors who are embedded in schools can support the delivery of Mental Health Literacy Programs, Bullying Prevention Programs, and other (Tier 1 – good for all) initiatives that encourage prosocial development. They are also able to deliver more targeted early intervention programming (Tier 2 – necessary for some), which encourages skill-building in students who may face challenges related to anxiety, social skills, and other developing needs. School-based staff are also well placed to identify students who require more intensive supports (Tier 3 – essential for a few) and to assist families in accessing community treatment programs.

OSSTF/FEESO believes that there is a need for comprehensive Tier 1 and Tier 2 mental health services within schools supplemented by access to Tier 3 services within the community, as appropriate. Students who require Tier 3 services often face barriers to access, significant wait times or a lack of available services in their communities. 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.

Tier 1 and Tier 2 services should be provided by board-employed professional student services personnel and paraprofessionals. Any gaps in service should first be addressed by hiring additional board-employed staff to enhance the services available to students in schools. If it is not possible to provide a service internally through board-employed staff, when considering external partnerships school boards must avoid duplication of services provided by existing board-employed staff and ensure a partnership protocol is in place.

Funding for mental health and well-being supports for all students must be permanent, predictable, and meaningful. These supports strengthen learner outcomes and translate into increased graduation rates, student opportunity, and success. School boards 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 is in the best position to support the needs of students. Any funding should maximize the amount of front-line services and be used to hire additional dedicated board staff to deliver service directly to students in schools as part of the school team of trained, experienced, and dedicated professionals.

### **Violence in schools:**

Violence in schools remains a major concern. The government must establish an education sector Health and Safety Regulation that will end violence against education workers. Mandatory enhanced 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.

A growing number of OSSTF/FEESO members have reported incidents involving biting, punching, kicking, spitting, and other forms of assaults by students year after year. These members, primarily educational assistants, but also teachers, work with high-needs students in special education classrooms. This issue has reached a crisis level, with severe physical and psychological impacts on education workers. This crisis also comes with increased costs in lost time, sick leave benefits, WSIB, and administrative time and resources.

Earlier this month, the University of Ottawa released a report called “In Harm’s Way: The Epidemic of Violence Against Education Sector Workers in Ontario.” The report identified that the rates of violence against education workers are amongst the highest of any occupation. The increasing rates of violence are attributed to increases in aggression coupled with decreasing staffing levels. Violence against education workers is becoming normalized and minimized; this normalization operates in conjunction with widespread minimization or denial of the extent of violence and its impacts. The harmful impacts are profound and lasting, including diminished physical and mental health and job performance. Workplace violence impacts everyone in the school community, including students’ anxiety levels and the development of social phobias as a result of their witnessing of frequent and increasingly normalized violence against predominantly women education workers.

OSSTF/FEESO’s program End the Silence → Stop the Violence has highlighted this issue and brought it to the attention of the government. In response, the Ministry of Labour released a document in March of 2018 titled, Workplace Violence in School Boards: A Guide to the Law. School boards must be compelled to utilize the best practices in this guide to ensure compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Providing proactive health and safety training, during PD days or other paid time, to all school board employees, is an important step toward reducing the incidents of workplace violence. Increased funding must be provided to school boards to create programs that protect those who work with high-needs students. More education assistants, specialists, and professional student support workers must be hired to support high-needs students and reduce injuries to educational workers.

### **Ontario’s school repair backlog:**

Students and education workers need safer, healthier, and accessible schools. The government must fix the more than \$16.8 billion repair backlog and establish stable funding that is necessary to increase board-employed staff to maintain schools prevent further disrepair. This backlog continues to grow due to the chronic underfunding of school maintenance annually, which was then projected to be at about only 10% of what is necessary to ensure Ontario’s schools are maintained in a good state of repair.

The disrepair of schools is not only dangerous for staff and students, but it also impacts the learning environment and student success, including their mental health and well-being. The funding pledged by the government will not keep 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 so that Ontario’s backlog stops growing.

As well, further funding is necessary to enhance the accessibility of schools to meet the 2025 deadline of the Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

### **Postsecondary education:**

In postsecondary education, nominal funding increases do not keep up with inflation, nor do those increases address the growing need for more spaces in schools for educated professionals and skilled workers to fuel Ontario's economic growth. The government's implementation of performance-based funding does nothing to enrich student outcomes. Research and experience from the United States show that performance-based funding for post-secondary institutions will do little to increase accountability, or, more importantly, student outcomes. Further investments are needed, including lowering tuition fees and increasing mental health supports for postsecondary students, to allow postsecondary campuses to thrive.

### **Other considerations:**

The foundation of economic growth begins with families and communities. The government must invest in public services to fuel economic growth. Services such as affordable child care, universal basic income, and improving access to supports will help build stronger, healthier communities. Ontario needs a well-educated and skilled workforce. Lower tuition fees will reduce the financial burden on students and families and improve access to post-secondary education.

Greater investments in community training and education for newcomers to Ontario and skill retraining opportunities for people transitioning back into the workforce are needed. Permanent paid sick days for workers will keep workers and communities healthy, reducing the spread of illness and providing financial security for families.

Our plan, Strengthen Public Education—Rebuild Ontario, protects and builds up one of the province's most valuable assets: Ontario's world-class publicly-funded education system. The global pandemic has revealed the deep levels of inequities in society and highlighted the crucial role education plays in maintaining a strong and vibrant community. Now is the time to invest in and enhance Ontario's publicly-funded education system and to rebuild the province and the people living in it.

OSSTF/FEESO calls on the government to invest in our future—the many diverse students in Ontario's public schools and postsecondary institutions.

### **OSSTF/FEESO recommends:**

1. That the government put back the \$0.5 billion removed from education for 2021-22;
2. That the government fund education and postsecondary education properly to ensure services are not eroded by inflation and enrolment growth – for public education, this means immediately adding \$200 million to the Grants for Student Needs to close the funding gap that was identified by the FAO; and
3. That the government make further investments in education and post-secondary education:
  - to make our schools and communities healthy and safe, by adequately addressing violence in schools and the school repair backlog,
  - to increase access to services for all students across Ontario so that students can receive the services they need in their schools and communities,
  - to provide classroom supports for at-risk students and the implementation of de-streaming,
  - to increase access to and services within higher education, and

- to ensure that all students receive the supports needed to overcome the inequities they face in order to succeed.