



## **Submission to the 2023-2024 Education Funding Consultations**

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) 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.

OSSTF/FEESO is pleased to provide its submission to the Ontario Ministry of Education for the 2023-2024 Grants for Student Needs (GSNs).

OSSTF/FEESO is very concerned that public education continues to be underfunded. \$2.2 billion in education funding, that could have been used to improve student outcomes, went unspent in 2021. As well, over \$2 billion was transferred directly to parents over the past few years. Providing this funding to School boards instead as a direct investment in public education would have been much more effective, as the school boards are in a much better position to provide educational services to students.

The government continues to short-change Ontario's students, with the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario projecting annual shortfalls in education funding totalling \$6.0 billion through 2027-28. This continued underfunding and underspending in the sector has already led to a \$2.1 billion surplus in 2021-22 as well as forecasted budget surplus in future years, reaching \$8.5 billion by 2027-28. Ontario is in a period where the economic recovery and inflation have pushed revenues above program expense. The government should take the opportunity to invest in the future of Ontario – its children. The government must increase investments in public education in order to meet the demands of our growing economy.

Publicly-funded education in Ontario has been dedicated to providing students with rich learning opportunities, skills, and a sense of community for generations. These building blocks for student success enhance the social and economic fabric of a diverse, dynamic, and prosperous province. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) believes that a strong publicly-funded education system continues to be essential to Ontario's future and 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. Investment in education also create a range of private, social and fiscal benefits, such as higher tax revenues and costs savings in health care, social assistance, and criminal justice.

The global pandemic presented unprecedented challenges and revealed the deep levels of inequities in society. The pandemic highlighted the crucial role education plays in maintaining a strong and vibrant society. However, it has also magnified the significant inequities that continue to plague our public services and institutions and negatively affect the lived experiences for students and families in Ontario. As Ontario moves out of the pandemic, it will need well-educated, intelligent, skilled, strong, and resilient workers and a public education system that

will support all students and their needs. The priority of this government must be to address these funding shortfalls and to make significant investments to address mental health and the widening gaps in inequity among the diverse peoples of Ontario.

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 strong foundation of confidence that continues throughout their lives. The current education funding model, which was developed nearly 25 years ago, created disparities in funding that have only been exacerbated over the years.

Next year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Rozanski report, which then recognized the underfunding of school maintenance and 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.

Program changes since then have magnified these issues and have been consistently underfunded, forcing school boards to redirect funding from other programs. Special Education funding, in particular, has been consistently capped overall and divided out among school boards in an inequitable system based on complicated statistical projections, which do nothing to address individual student needs.

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 that occur as a result of income levels, gender, race, special education identification, new immigrant, and Indigenous status. Improving learning conditions for all is about recognizing and meeting the unique needs of learners. We see learning conditions as equity conditions, creating an improved Ontario. 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 support staff, class size, at-risk student programs, student transportation, as well as in many other areas. OSSTF/FEESO promotes the need for systemic changes and actions that are permanent. Funding must be sustained and specific to addressing systemic inequalities.

OSSTF/FEESO calls on the government of Ontario to invest in our greatest asset, the many people who access Ontario's world-class public education system. The economic payoff is indisputable. Now is the time to act to strengthen public education.

Our submission is contained in two parts. Part A responds directly to the Funding Engagement Guide and the questions posed by the Ministry of Education, and Part B, which provides additional submissions on education funding.

## **Part A – Funding Engagement Guide submissions**

### **EFFICIENCIES AND REDUCING ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN**

#### *Considerations:*

- 1. What other initiatives could support the reduction of administrative burden or further streamline reporting for the education sector?*
- 2. What are the areas where there is potential or opportunities to find new efficiencies?*

While “red tape” and administrative burden could be reduced, OSSTF/FEESO must highlight that these measures are designed to provide accountability for the use of funds and to ensure the funds are used in a way that maximizes the investment in terms of providing services to students. Reductions in reporting and administration must result in improved services to students and any savings should be reinvested into direct supports for students.

OSSTF/FEESO has expressed many times that we are concerned about accountability for the school board spending of Learning Opportunities Grant and Priorities and Partnerships Funds allocations. Reporting on both has been notoriously lacking. It is unclear whether these programs have been evaluated critically to determine whether they have indeed increased positive student outcomes, and further research on this matter is warranted. In every school board, valuable funding has been redirected from the classroom and students to assign teachers, principals, and education support staff to areas that are administrative in nature. Streamlining reporting is important, but making sure that evaluations of these programs are properly done is essential to ensure value for money.

All programs should be evaluated critically and individually to ensure resources are being provided directly to students and are not being redirected from classrooms and front-line workers.

OSSTF/FEESO notes the following duplications and also identifies potential savings for the ministry.

A windfall of savings can be achieved by eliminating the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). EQAO testing has not proven itself to provide any value for money. The premier has already indicated that he understands the shortcomings of the EQAO. The current standardized testing regime creates high-stakes, high-stress, low utility evaluations. The Ministry of Education spends approximately \$35 million per year to operate EQAO. Many alternative methods of testing (e.g., randomized) would save millions of taxpayer dollars that could be better invested in staffing schools with caring adults to support students in their education and well-being. OSSTF/FEESO recommends that the EQAO and its testing programs be discontinued and the savings be reinvested into student learning. At a minimum, more cost-efficient alternative methods of standardized testing, such as randomized tests, should be used.

The School Boards Collective Bargaining Act (SBCBA) was intended to reduce the costs associated with collective bargaining in Ontario’s education sector. The primary mechanism for these savings was to be a restriction on the items negotiated at the central tables to matters requiring provincial funding – primarily salaries and benefits. However, the SBCBA currently allows school boards to bring administrative issues and issues related to working conditions to the central tables. As a result, school board participation in the last round of central bargaining stalled progress and added costly months to the bargaining process. The Ernst and Young review confirmed that working conditions and administrative issues should be negotiated between the school boards and the unions at local bargaining tables as it would be more efficient. OSSTF/FEESO recommends that the government work with all education affiliates to streamline central bargaining focused solely on salaries, benefits, and other provincial funding-related matters, bargaining directly between the government and the unions. School board

associations would provide a consultative role rather than a decision-making role at the central table.

A final area of potential savings stems from the dependence of school boards on rights arbitration, which should be reduced. A fair, effective, and timely grievance procedure is an essential component of effective labour relations. Our Collective Agreements contain grievance procedures that allow for a speedy resolution of disputes. Unfortunately, school boards have shown an increasing tendency to rely on the longest, and most expensive mechanism in our procedures: rights arbitration. Since 2011 the number of rights arbitrations has significantly increased. This dispute resolution process costs taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, which could be spent on supports for students instead. OSSTF/FEESO recommends that the province review school board expenditures on rights arbitration to identify overall trends and specific problem areas. We further recommend that the Minister of Education intervene to discourage school boards from relying on rights arbitration as a default strategy when resolving grievances and promote more collaborative alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

### **CAPITAL: REDUCING TIME TO COMPLETION FOR CAPITAL PROJECTS**

*Considerations:*

1. *What are the relevant considerations and opportunities to shorten each phase of planning and construction (planning, design, municipal approvals, approval to proceed (Ministry Approval), procurement, construction, opening)?*

There is a growing school repair backlog that was estimated at nearly \$16 billion by a 2017 independent assessment of Ontario's Auditor-General. 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 government should take steps to eliminate this backlog by funding school operations so that school boards can return schools to a state of good repair. To ensure that schools last and new builds are needed less, the government must fund school operations at a level that allows school boards to keep their schools in good repair.

### **CAPITAL: JOINT USE OF SCHOOLS**

*Considerations:*

1. *What impediments do school boards face when considering opportunities for Joint-Use schools with their co-terminus school boards?*
2. *There are a number of successful joint-use arrangements in place. What are the elements of success (governance, administrative practices, conflict resolution, etc.) that be replicated and scaled up across current and potential joint use arrangements?*

## Part B – Other Considerations

1. End transfer of taxpayer funds to parents. Immediately end the practice of removing taxpayers' money from the education envelope and putting it in the hands of parents. Some of this money will work its way into the private school system and the pockets of people who seek to profit from education. Because of economies of scale, this funding would be much more effective if used by school boards to improve services and programs to students, such as reducing class size and providing other supports to students who need them. This government claims to be accountable and transparent, but this program is exactly the opposite of those goals.
2. Increase the funding to repair schools and fully address the larger than \$16.3 billion backlog. The disrepair of schools is not only dangerous for staff and students; it also impacts the learning environment and student success, including their mental health and well-being. The government has pledged to spend \$13 billion over ten years, but this rate of funding 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. Additional funding to meet the 2025 Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) deadline should also be provided.
3. Increase the funding generators for Educational Assistants in the Pupil Foundation Grant (PFG). Funding for EAs to support students should be increased across all divisions. Currently, there is no funding generator for educational assistants in the PFG at the secondary level, although there is in each of the elementary divisions. Students' need for supports does not disappear after Grade 8. Without this funding to support students with differentiated needs, school boards are forced to take money from other allocations to pay for educational assistants assigned to students in secondary schools. By putting a generator into the GSNs for these essential education workers, the ministry could better assess where money is going and relieve pressure on funding intended for other projects or purposes.
4. Update support staff salary benchmarks. The benchmarks in the funding formula for education workers are not consistent with current salaries. They should be updated to better reflect the education, value, and expertise of these essential members of the school team. Support staff salaries, in many school boards, are very low and should be adjusted, so school boards are not forced to redirect funds from other grants or programs. With the current shortage of qualified education workers, a salary enhancement would attract and retain these valuable and dedicated workers who are critical to the success and well-being of students.
5. Reinstate FDK funding and ensure full allocation to Early Childhood Educators (ECEs). For several years, funding generated through the JK-3 Pupil Foundation Grant for ECEs has been constantly underspent. By analyzing the EFIS reporting from school boards since the program's full inception, OSSTF/FEESO has found that since 2014-2015, over \$200 million earmarked for ECEs in Full Day Kindergarten has not been used for ECE staffing. For 2016-2017, this amount alone was over \$80 million provincially. Boards have used their discretion under the rules of the GSNs to reallocate these funds elsewhere. OSSTF/FEESO members working in the FDK program report high JK/SK

class sizes, classes in which no ECE is assigned or multiple split classes – all a direct result of boards choosing not to allocate FDK funds to ECEs. OSSTF/FEESO is calling on the government to envelope the funds generated for FDK so that the program can operate as intended and not be used to subsidize other chronically underfunded portions of the GSNs.

6. Accountability of School Boards for Trustee Association Fees. Following the passage of *The School Boards Collective Bargaining Act*, the ministry allocated funding, through the Administration and Governance Grant, essentially to pay school boards' fees to their respective trustee associations. This taxpayer-provided funding is unaccounted for by school boards. OSSTF/FEESO insists that the trustee organizations be required, through law, to report publicly the allocation and expenses of these funds for the interest of public accountability and transparency.
7. Increase funding in all grants, at a minimum, to cover annual inflationary increases. The government has underfunded school boards for the costs of goods and services school boards must procure. For example, within the Pupil Foundation Grant for 2022-23, every allocation is funded with an increase that is far below the current rate of inflation. This underfunding of grants puts pressure on school boards that result in funds being diverted from other programs, classrooms, and students to support the increased costs of goods and services.
8. Provide real funding and supports addressing violence in schools. Violence in schools remains a huge problem for all education workers. 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. 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 number of 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.
9. Increase funding for adult day school and adult non-credit continuing education. There exists an inequity between adult day school programs that serve students who are primarily 21 years old, or older, and regular day school programs. These programs are identical to regular day school programs for students under the age of 21 but are funded at a level that is far below those programs. All learners, regardless of age, deserve to have every opportunity to reach their full potential and succeed personally and academically, with access to rich learning experiences that provide a strong foundation of confidence that continues throughout their lives. GSN funding for these programs should be increased.

Similarly, non-credit adult continuing education is funded at a far lower level than regular day school programs for all students. In school boards that offer Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS), Adult English as a Second Language (ESL), and other non-credit programs for adults, the funding is from different ministries, as well as federal LINC funding. These streams of funding do not provide for appropriate administration and preparation time needed by Adult Education Instructors to ensure the program requirements are met. Portfolio Based Learning Assessment methodologies have been mandated as the method of assessment and time required to adequately operationalize the program is non-existent, creating tremendous pressure on Adult Education Instructors and frustration for students. Improving language skills in adults, including those new to Canada, has a significant positive impact on the economy as these adults seek employment within Ontario. As well, many of these programs operate on a continuum with schools where individuals enrolled in ESL will progress to LBS and then enrol to take credit courses with the school board. The funding for these programs should be consolidated under the Ministry of Education and must also be increased.

10. Review and Overhaul of Grants for Student Needs. A comprehensive, expert panel that includes members from all stakeholder groups should be convened to conduct a review of the GSNs through the lens of equity and inclusion. This panel should meet at set intervals to conduct ongoing reviews, for example, every three to five years. The funding formula has not been reviewed since 2002, leaving the public education system critically underfunded and schools in desperate need of repair.
11. Increase mental health supports for students, including trauma and learning support, from early learning through post-secondary. Increase the availability and breadth of mental health supports in every school. Fully fund and support mental health services in schools provided by board-employed professionals and paraprofessionals so that students are healthy and able to succeed. Ensure that mental health services are available by referral from schools, can be obtained in a timely manner, and are fully funded so there can be seamless and equitable access across Ontario.
12. Increase funding to address inequities where and when they exist. Inequities exist in every classroom in Ontario. To properly address these inequities, funding should be directed to improve learning conditions where they are needed. With smaller class sizes in all schools, all students achieve greater success. Students should have opportunities for learning and growth within their diverse communities. Systemic inequity must be addressed through a change that provides positive impacts to equity- and sovereignty-seeking groups, and these changes must be actionable and permanent.
13. Funding for special education and programs for at-risk students must be expanded so that those who need supports receive them to ensure they succeed. GSNs should be adjusted to provide education assistants for students in secondary, just as they are funded throughout the elementary grades. OSSTF/FEESO advocates for needs-based funding so that all students who require services and supports have every opportunity to reach their full potential and succeed personally. The allocations in the Learning Opportunities Grant and Special Education Grant should be supplemented by funding to support learners based on their needs.

14. The best way to improve student success is investment directly into classrooms and services for students. This investment in school-based staff will assist students in overcoming challenges that prevent them from reaching their full potential. Numerous studies have shown that the best method of improving education outcomes is by directly supporting students in the classroom; any support must be directed to the classroom or student services instead of administration.
15. Elimination of hybrid and mandatory e-learning. The richest learning occurs in-person. Hybrid learning must be abolished and remote learning must be used sparingly in emergency situations like the pandemic, where students would be unable to learn in-person for long periods of time and other options are not viable. While some students may benefit from e-learning, no students should be mandated to take e-learning courses. The mandatory e-learning graduation requirement should be removed.
16. De-streaming must be properly implemented with curriculum modifications that reflect inclusion and diversity and that are culturally appropriate and engaging. Any de-streaming of courses must be accompanied by permanent funding to address systemic inequities that students experience with access to technology, curriculum opportunities, programming, and educator support. Supports would include: smaller class sizes, training, time for educators to adjust and plan for a new curriculum, and rich resources developed specifically for de-streaming and addressing inequity.