



OSSTF/FEESO Submission to the Finance and Economic Affairs Committee on 2022 Pre-Budget Consultations

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to provide input for the development of the 2022 Ontario Budget.

OSSTF/FEESO was founded in 1919 and 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.

SAFE RETURN TO IN-PERSON LEARNING

Amid the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, when the premier promised not to spare a penny to keep schools open and safe, the government refused to take steps to better protect students and staff. The government has failed Ontario's schools by:

- Cancelling contact tracing;
- Reducing access to PCR testing;
- Ending transparent reporting of case counts in schools;
- Excluding schools from occupancy caps similar to those for households and businesses;
- Failing to reduce class sizes to ensure real cohorting and physical distancing can be established and maintained;
- Failing to have N95 masks ready for deployment; and
- Leaving education workers and teachers without priority access to vaccinations and boosters.

Ontario's students deserve better.

EDUCATION AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION FUNDING

The government continues to short-change public 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. Additionally, in postsecondary education, the FAO noted over \$250 million in underspending.

In its May 2021 review of education spending, the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (FAO) identified a \$200 million funding gap for this year. Further, the government's Fall Economic Statement of 2021, 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%. This situation will only get worse as the government's long-term plan creates a \$12.3 billion funding shortfall over the next nine years.

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.

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. Conversely, for every \$1.00 removed from education spending, \$1.30 in negative economic impacts are produced. The government should stop short-changing education and instead invest in education.

Bill 124, Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act, 2019, has created a crisis in Ontario’s public service. The 1% cap on compensation has created a wage disparity between the provincial public sector and private and other sectors. With the annual inflation rate at 4.7% and increasing, Ontario’s public sector workers, including nurses and health workers, teachers and education workers, and many professionals – the majority of whom are women – have fallen behind other sectors in their wages. This is contributing to a shortage of skilled workers in hospitals, LTCs, schools, and other settings. The public sector needs to retain and recruit workers by showing them the respect they deserve. Employers and unions must be able to negotiate compensation freely to attract a new generation of public service workers and professionals.

OSSTF/FEESO urges the government to move beyond the status quo and to build for a better tomorrow by investing in education and public services. Now is the time to embrace the opportunity before us. Ontario’s publicly-funded education system must be protected and enhanced to help rebuild the province and the people living in it.

Recommendations:

1. Adopt measures to protect students and staff from COVID-19, such as:
 - contact tracing in schools and daycare centres;
 - providing access to rapid antigen and PCR testing to all students and staff;
 - providing accurate and updated case counts in school and daycare centres;
 - reducing class sizes to ensure real cohorting and physical distancing can be established and maintained;
 - providing appropriate PPE, including N95 masks; and
 - providing priority access to vaccinations and boosters for education workers and teachers.
2. Increase education and post-secondary education funding annually in all areas so that, at a minimum, it keeps up with inflation and other cost pressures.
3. Ensure that education and post-secondary education funds are not underspent and provide supports directly to students in schools and classrooms.
4. Immediately repeal Bill 124 and support the free bargaining of public sector wage increases that will help retain and attract a new generation of workers and professionals to the public sector.

INCREASING STUDENT-CENTRED SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

The global pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges and revealed the deep levels of inequities in society. It highlights the crucial role education plays in maintaining a strong and vibrant society. The pandemic has 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.

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. Both the Special Education and Learning Opportunities funding, which support the most at-risk students, have been consistently capped overall and divided out among school boards in an inequitable manner based on complicated statistical projections, which do nothing to address individual student needs.

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 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.

In post-secondary education, nominal funding increases have not kept up with inflation, nor have those increases addressed the growing need for more spaces in schools for educated professionals and skilled workers to fuel Ontario's economic growth. 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. This government's implementation of performance-based funding does nothing to enrich student outcomes and should be abandoned. Further investments are needed, including lowering tuition fees and increasing mental health supports for post-secondary students, to allow post-secondary students and campuses to thrive.

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

Recommendations:

5. Provide funding to support staffing models that support student and worker opportunities for success, including:
 - funding to reduce class size and provide student supports in classrooms and schools where they are needed;

- using a standard formula for worker staff/student ratios for education workers in publicly-funded education; and
 - providing equitable funding to all programs, including adult and continuing education, to support all learners.
6. Review and overhaul public education funding by conducting a comprehensive review through the lens of equity and inclusion of the Grants for Student Needs by an expert panel that includes members from all stakeholder groups.
 7. Abandon performance-based funding of post-secondary institutions and provide increased stable and predictable funding.
 8. Lower tuition fees to reduce the financial burden on students and families and improve access to quality publicly-funded post-secondary education.

MENTAL HEALTH

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

With the pandemic further magnifying the importance of mental health and well-being, more mental health professionals are needed to provide services directly to students in Ontario's schools. Schools are the initial point of contact for many students and should be fully integrated with community mental health providers. All tiers of services should be structured through schools to make them more accessible, equitable, and inclusive.

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. When considering external partnerships, if it is not possible to provide a service internally through board-employed staff, 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. Having more staff in buildings creates safer school buildings and campuses, promotes student and worker mental health, and healthy communities.

Recommendations:

9. Provide funding to increase mental health supports for students, including:
 - trauma and learning support post-COVID-19, from early learning through post-secondary; and
 - mental health supports in every school/worksites and on every campus.
10. 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.
11. Ensure that mental health services are available by referral from schools, can be obtained in a timely manner, and are fully funded by the appropriate ministry so that there can be seamless and equitable access in every community in Ontario.

IMPROVING LEARNING CONDITIONS FOR ALL

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. All services for students should be viewed through the lens of equity and inclusion. Systemic inequity must be addressed through change that provides positive impacts to equity- and sovereignty-seeking groups, and these changes must be actionable and permanent.

More school-based services should be made available, including mental health and speech and language services. Specifically, school boards should be provided with increased funding for services by board-employed practitioners.

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.

OSSTF/FEESO is concerned that, any allocation of funding based on proxy measures, such as demographics and statistical projections, can lead to systemic inequities. OSSTF/FEESO advocates for needs-based funding so that all students who need services and supports have every opportunity to reach their full potential and succeed personally and academically, regardless of inequities that result from income levels, gender, race, special education identification, and new immigrant and Indigenous status.

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. Grants 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.

Newcomers to Canada must have access to increased supports for English or French language learning. These supports should be provided in schools and through adult education centres and should address the increased need that school boards across the province are experiencing. School boards must be held accountable for ensuring that language funding for newcomers provides comprehensive classroom supports.

Finally, all students should have access to in-person learning and not be subjected to hybrid classrooms. In-person learning helps to diminish inequities in education for equity- and sovereignty-seeking groups. There should be no requirement for mandatory e-learning. Where remote instruction is necessary, it should occur in a single modality through dedicated virtual learning programs, with smaller class sizes and appropriate resources, which allow for teachers and education workers to provide high-quality learning opportunities for all students. Funding and support must be provided for culturally responsive curriculum, learning materials, assessment and evaluation, testing, and learning environments. As with in-person learning, direct and specific supports must be provided, where needed, to bridge gaps caused by inequity and to increase student success and well-being.

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.

By focusing on higher-need areas, better outcomes can be achieved with targeted reductions in class sizes for at-risk students and students identified with special education needs. These classes should be funded beyond the current class size average, based on a model of ADE, for at-risk students and students in special education. Accountability is necessary to maximize the impact on students.

Recommendations:

12. Provide funding and supports to address systemic inequities and to ensure every student is successful, including:
 - reduced class sizes;
 - increased classroom supports, such as education assistants in post-secondary classes; and
 - increased school-based supports, such as professional student support personnel.
13. Funding and support must be provided for culturally-responsive curriculum, learning materials, assessment and evaluation, testing, and learning environments.
14. Provide additional funding to ensure that students that have needs, such as students at risk and students with special education needs, receive those supports.
15. Provide increased funding for English and French language learners and supports for newcomers to Canada.
16. Abolish hybrid learning and fully fund school boards to provide dedicated remote learning only where it is warranted through virtual schools.

17. Remove the requirement for mandatory e-learning in secondary schools and fund e-learning equitably with in-person learning.

18. Provide enhanced funding for de-streaming including:

- reduced class sizes;
- dedicated education workers in classrooms;
- training for all educator workers and teachers;
- time for educators to adjust and plan for a new curriculum; and
- rich resources developed specifically for de-streaming and addressing inequality.

PROVIDING SAFE, HEALTHY LEARNING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

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 will result directly in 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.

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, year after year, involving biting, punching, kicking, spitting, and other forms of assaults by students. 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.

In November of 2021, 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.

Recommendations:

19. Establish a specific education sector Regulation within the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act.
20. Increase the number of qualified and trained adults in our schools. Professional student services personnel, secretaries, custodians, educational assistants, early childhood educators, and teachers all provide a high level of care for students.
21. Provide mandatory enhanced training to prevent, appropriately respond to, and report incidents of violence in schools.

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 and 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.

Recommendations:

22. Fix the \$16.8 billion repair backlog for Ontario public schools.
23. Conduct a comprehensive review to establish stable funding for school infrastructure and increase board employed staff to address and prevent further disrepair in Ontario's schools.
24. Provide funding to meet the 2025 Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ADA) deadline.

CENTERING SCHOOLS AS PART OF OUR COMMUNITIES

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 childcare, 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.

A robust publicly-funded education system is dependent on investments in communities and public services. The foundation of economic growth begins with families and communities. When they have direct access to strong public services and supports, families and communities succeed. Strong public services fuel economic growth.

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.

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.

Recommendations:

25. Immediately reach an agreement with the Federal Government to provide affordable childcare to all.
26. Institute a universal basic income.
27. Increase investments in community training and education for newcomers to Canada, as well as improved skill retraining opportunities for people entering or transitioning back into the workforce.
28. Provide paid sick days to allow workers the ability to stay home when sick. This will significantly reduce the spread of illnesses, keep workplaces safe, and provide financial security to families.