



Good morning AMPA delegates, life members, and guests. Welcome to the 101st Annual Meeting of the Provincial Assembly, and the first-ever Remote Annual Meeting of the Provincial Assembly.

Bienvenue à la cent unième Réunion annuelle de l'Assemblée provinciale.

It's worth noting that this speech was recorded almost a week ago, so it is possible there have been recent developments that are not reflected here. Significant developments will be addressed, as always, through the usual Federation communication channels.

And here I'll leave my script for a moment, to acknowledge that right now across North America and Europe there are important demonstrations occurring as we once again confront the scourge of anti-black racism. OSSTF/FEESO has been and will remain committed to fighting for the equity, respect, and justice that all our members and all our students deserve.

It is also worth noting that we are engaging in AMPA in this fashion because, of course, we are in the midst of a once-in-a-century global health crisis. On behalf of the Provincial Executive, I hope that you and your loved ones are well and that, as you worry about taking care of others, you are also giving some thought to taking care of yourselves.

Unless this is your first AMPA you will know that an annual highlight of this meeting is the presentation of the Student Achievement Awards in Honour of Marion Drysdale. In today's format, we felt that any attempt to incorporate that presentation would not sufficiently honour the achievements of the award recipients. We will honour those students at a future OSSTF/FEESO event.

Under normal circumstances our agenda would also include the introduction of the chairs of the Federation's councils and committees. Again, this format is not ideal for that, so I will instead take a moment now to acknowledge all of our committee and council chairs, and to thank them for all their hard work in what has turned out to be an eventful and often difficult year.

It is also our custom, in non-election years at AMPA, to invite international guests with whom we have forged productive working relationships, undertaken projects of mutual interest, and become friends. Absent that opportunity this year, I will still take this opportunity to remind you that international solidarity work, with education unions and other workers around the world, has been an important focus for OSSTF/FEESO for many years.

From the outset of the current global crisis, we have sought out ways to play a constructive role in assisting those who have been most severely affected by the social and economic disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the actions we have taken are two that honour our long tradition of international solidarity. We have made a donation to the

Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. They have been an insistent voice advocating for workers' rights in Bangladesh, particularly in the garment industry, since 2001, and we have had a relationship with them for a number of years. And we have also donated to the Education International COVID-19 Response Solidarity Fund. This Fund will assist education affiliates around the world who find themselves in dire circumstances because of COVID-19, especially in countries that are lacking in basic infrastructure and public services.

We are living through very unusual times. For twelve weeks now almost every aspect of our lives has been circumscribed by the global COVID-19 crisis. From our personal and family relationships to the day-to-day work of our members to – as we see today – the way we undertake the business of the Federation, crisis management has become a part of our lives. All of us, whatever our role, have been doing the best we can, sometimes through trial and error, to adjust to a circumstance that none of us has ever experienced before. And we recognize that for some of our members, including in the university sector, that means being at their worksites continuing to do essential work.

Over these past several weeks, Ontario's front-line educators have been asked temporarily to reinvent the way they deliver education to the students of this province. And OSSTF/FEESO members have stepped up. With minimal support or useful guidance from the government or the school boards, our members are doing everything within their power, under circumstances that are, in many cases, challenging in the extreme, to ensure the continuity of learning for their students. To the extent that a level of meaningful education has been maintained during this pandemic, the credit goes almost entirely to OSSTF/FEESO members and to other frontline educators.

But let's be clear – this unexpected period of distance learning cannot serve as a starting point for some kind of technology-based transformation of Ontario's education system. What we are practicing in Ontario today is crisis pedagogy and damage mitigation. What this experience has done, in fact, is to lay bare the flaws inherent in any vision of education that discounts the value of face-to-face instruction. Every day, our members see the massive gaps in students' abilities to engage in learning. Every day we see how existing inequities are amplified and exacerbated. We see that many students simply don't have access to the technology required for distance learning. And we see that many students, frankly, just require face-to-face guidance and encouragement from educators, and that they simply disengage when that kind of personal connection and interaction is not available.

Our members are acutely aware of these shortcomings. Many parents understand these problems. And yet, the Minister of Education is acting as if these stopgap measures by which we are working to complete a school year, hastily thrown together in response to a global health emergency, are somehow a testament to his government's vision for distance learning in Ontario, and maybe even a blueprint for the future.

Characteristically blind to social and economic disparities, and apparently indifferent to the legitimate concerns we and others have raised about privacy and safety, Stephen Lecce has now positioned himself as the champion of "online synchronous learning." Never one to back away from a lame buzz-phrase, he has been raving about "dynamic live learning." In one instance the Minister issued a tweet that had to be removed and re-issued because he had initially published a screen capture with the pictures and names of an entire class of elementary students.

But this is what happens with a Minister who treats every issue as a mere exercise in political optics. This is what happens when we have a minister who attended an elite private high school. Who has never raised or educated a single child. Who had no working connection to publicly funded education whatsoever before being appointed in a process that sure as hell didn't consider qualifications or merit. This is what happens when you have a Minister of Education who was born on third base and thinks he hit a triple.

Let me be absolutely clear about our position: this Federation is not naïve about technology, and we are not luddites. We do not oppose online or synchronous learning. We know that these approaches can be effective in the right circumstances, with the right students, and when issues of equity, privacy, and security have been addressed. We are NOT looking for ways to undermine online learning. On the contrary, OSSTF/FEESO members are making extraordinary efforts every day to innovate and to embrace whatever technologies and methods are required to deliver curriculum, and to provide other crucial supports to students in the midst of a global health emergency.

But still, more than one media commentator has suggested that our temporary adoption of emergency remote learning could pave the way for a broader acceptance of online learning on the other side of this pandemic. And the Minister of Education, whose leaked planning document just last year envisioned a future system in which students would be able to complete their entire high school diploma online, has embraced this current situation as an opportunity to prove that online learning is the inevitable wave of the future.

It will prove nothing of the sort. It will only reinforce that now is absolutely not the time for political opportunism. Now is not the time to ignore the voices of front-line educators. Now IS a critical time to set aside unproductive partisanship and ideological attachments and, instead, collaborate with us for the ongoing good of our students. OSSTF/FEESO has repeatedly stated and demonstrated our commitment to cooperation with employers and government but it has been and remains an uphill battle to get them to work sincerely with us.

OSSTF/FEESO members know what is and isn't working with their students. But we have all learned very well over the past two years, and particularly since March 15 of last year, that the Ford government neither understands nor really cares about what works and what doesn't work in education.

Throughout the entire round of bargaining that we completed in April, in fact, we were up against a government whose education agenda had nothing to do with education at all. We were up against a government whose only real goals were funding cuts and the creation of conditions conducive to creeping privatization. And we were up against a majority government just into the second year of its mandate – a government so emboldened by its new-found power, a government feeling so invincible, that they were confident they could get away with declaring war on one of Ontario's most valuable assets, its public education system. They were confident that they could slash thousands of teachers – one out of every four – from Ontario's high schools. They were confident that nothing could stop them from imposing four mandatory elearning courses on the province's high school students. They were confident they could slash funding for crucial supports, and for the education workers who deliver them. They were confident that they could do all this and that nothing could stop them.

By now we all know that the central agreement we ratified last month did not stop them entirely. We know that the Ford government has still achieved a small part of what it set out to achieve. But only a small part. Through careful strategizing, through an enormous amount of work by local leaders, and through the commitment and sacrifice of our members, we moved a hostile, majority government almost completely off their original agenda. Rarely if ever, in the centurylong history of this Federation, has such an aggressive government attack been blunted to this degree. In the last conflict that most closely resembles this one, a full two week walkout of the entire education sector in the 1997 political protest, we came nowhere near to achieving the results we did this time, but with greater sacrifice from the membership.

We did not end up with the agreement we had hoped for, so we do not celebrate this as a victory. But in light of what we were up against, this is a significant achievement, and something we can be quietly proud of.

It seems both a short time and an eternity ago that we believed the agreement we hoped for was still achievable. That was the case right up until the week before March Break. By the following week, however, the COVID-19 crisis had turned social and economic norms upside-down and inside-out on a global scale. Almost no one was paying attention to anything other than the global health crisis. Suddenly, virtually all the political heat the government had been taking over their education agenda for the previous twelve months simply and understandably dissipated.

From a bargaining perspective, we had to face the reality not only that there was virtually no chance of achieving further improvements, but that parts of what had been achieved would be in jeopardy if an agreement was not struck then. Our hard-won political capital and public support could easily have been squandered if we were seen to be badly out of step with the times. To ignore this reality, and to attempt to stay on a path that was quickly crumbling beneath our feet, would have been a wilful disservice to our members and a handicap to future efforts to advance our members' and students' interests.

But settling for an agreement that has shortcomings is not the same as backing down from a fight. We have been fighting this government's agenda, with significant success, for well over a year, and that battle did not end with ratification of the central agreements. We can't predict how this current crisis will play out, and we can't predict exactly how this experience will affect the political disposition of the people of Ontario. But we do know that there will be a provincial election in June of 2022, and from now until then, no matter how this crisis ultimately influences the political landscape, that election needs to be a major focal point of our efforts.

It is true, since shortly after the onset of the pandemic, that many people have been looking at Premier Ford a little more favourably than in the past. This is typical in times of crisis, especially when the whole of the population is threatened by a common adversary. It is equally true that upward spikes in popularity can just as quickly turn down.

Most importantly, we cannot allow the disruption caused by this pandemic to become an excuse for political amnesia. It's important for all of us – for all Ontarians – to remember that before he became a deer caught in the headlights of a global health crisis, Doug Ford and his government never listened to experts – except, perhaps, to experts in the pillaging of public services in the interests of private profit.

It's important for all of us to remember that, right from his government's first weeks in power, reckless, half-baked decisions, made with no regard for consequences, became the order of the day -- decisions that were not even remotely based on available evidence, data, or input from credible advisors with pertinent expertise.

It's important to remember that Doug Ford abruptly cancelled the basic income pilot project – a cruel move that threw thousands of low-income Ontarians into devastating uncertainty and wasted the 50 million dollars that had already been invested in the project. It's a move that now seems all the more short-sighted in light of what the COVID-19 crisis is teaching us about economic priorities.

The list of knee-jerk decisions – almost always targeting Ontario's most marginalized and vulnerable citizens – goes on and on.

Social assistance recipients, racialized communities, victims of violence against women, even children and youth in need of prescription drugs – all of these groups were targeted.

It's important to remember that the most vulnerable working people in the province were stripped of hard-won protections when Doug Ford rescinded the previous government's labour reforms.

It's important to remember that tens of thousands of kids can expect to wait as long as two-and-a-half years for crucial mental health services, thanks to Doug Ford's funding cuts. And that families of children with autism were plunged into panic and dismay when the Ford government slashed access to the therapies and services they need.

And, in the context of the current pandemic, it's particularly important to remember that Doug Ford not only made massive cuts to Ontario's Public Health Units, but that he also scaled back inspections of the province's long term care facilities. Last year only nine of Ontario's 626 facilities received comprehensive inspections – inspections that were once a mandatory annual occurrence to ensure the safety and proper care of residents. In short, the Ford government made it much easier than it already was for private, profit-driven care facilities to cut corners and ignore staffing shortages. And we've all seen, over the past several weeks, how tragically that has worked out.

It's been one blunder after another, a litany of short-sighted moves, often with unanticipated consequences. They have thrown entire sectors into uncertainty, if not turmoil.

And as we all know, the story is the same when it comes to education. This government's indifference to the value of education, its contempt for those who deliver education, and its disdain for the unions that represent front-line educators have been on display right from the beginning.

It began with the abrupt cancellation of consultations about the inclusion of Indigenous content across the curriculum – a move that will have lasting consequences, and not just in the classroom.

In a cynical move designed to pacify some of the most repugnant and intolerant voices in the province, the government announced the rollback of the of the Health and Physical Education curriculum.

Programs for at-risk youth, including Indigenous and racialized students, were effectively eliminated when the Parent Outreach Grants were paused and \$25 million dollars was slashed from education programs.

And long before the COVID-19 crisis, the Ford government's approach to higher education was hurting everyone involved. In a duplicitous sleight of hand – a move billed as a ten per cent reduction in tuition fees – the government actually increased student loan debt for post-secondary students, and removed access to the free tuition program for low income families that was launched by the previous government. At the same time, hundreds of millions of dollars in tuition-generated revenue was stripped from the province's colleges and universities. Students will be saddled with student loan debt for years after graduation. And universities will be struggling with even less funding than they had before, and we know from experience that funding shortfalls at universities disproportionately impact our members in District 35, and make everything, including bargaining, more difficult for our D35 Bargaining Units. Our members at Algoma University are in a difficult round of bargaining right now. At the University of Ottawa, management has demonstrated a shocking disrespect for the local bargaining team and the membership they represent by applying for a final offer vote. A resounding "no" vote is needed to show this paternalistic employer who really speaks for workers. All OSSTF/ FEESO members stand in solidarity with these two units as they work toward deals that protect the rights and working conditions of their members.

All of these Ford government moves took place before March 15 of last year, when they revealed their devastating plan for Ontario's publicly funded high schools and elementary schools. We have been fighting that plan ever since. We fought it at the bargaining table, we fought it on picket lines, and we fought it at countless rallies and demonstrations.

We fought hard enough and smart enough to force the government to abandon their plan's most egregious elements. But that doesn't mean the fight is over. The fight against larger class sizes, the fight against mandatory e-learning, the fight for better supports for vulnerable students, the fight for equity among racialized and indigenous students, and the fight to keep this government from doing any more damage than it's already done – all of these fights have to continue.

We didn't start these battles. In fact, we said publicly, from the outset, that we were more than willing to engage in productive dialogue. But this government came out of the gate showing disrespect for indigenous students, and for LGBTQ students. This government set up a snitch line against educators who wanted our students to be safe and to feel welcome. And then it launched a full-scale assault on students' learning conditions, members' working conditions, and our constitutional right to free collective bargaining.

Despite our best efforts, this government has done damage, and our job now is to ensure that Ontarians are reminded daily of the consequences. We will ensure that this government owns every single problem that arises in the system. And we will ensure that their record hangs like a stinking albatross around their necks until the next election, when we will finally rid ourselves of Doug Ford, Stephen Lecce, and this dumpster-fire of a government.

That must be the goal. This province cannot withstand another term of this destructive government. Ontario cannot afford another four years of public policy clumsiness, cronyism, and cruelty. Starting today, we set our sights on June 2, 2022.

That is the biggest favour we can do our students. It is the biggest favour we can do our members. It is the most important thing we can do for publicly funded education. The best thing we can do for the future of this province is to make sure that the Ford government ends at a single term.

This, then, is a call to action. No one who wants this chaos to end can afford to sit on the sidelines for the next two years. We must, absolutely must, work in solidarity to defeat this Ford abomination. We must commit Ontario to a positive future for our members, our students, and our education system. At our best, it is what we have always done. Nothing less than our best will do now.

Finally, on behalf of the Provincial Executive, stay strong, stay safe. Let's now get on with the business of this remote AMPA while remembering that, in the words of the old Vera Lynn song, we'll meet again some sunny day.