Addressing Violence in Elementary Schools

Teachers and other education staff want their students to be successful. There are a number of challenges that prevent educators from being able to provide each student with the support and individual attention they need. These challenges include disruptive student behaviour, large class sizes, and implementation issues related to full-day Kindergarten.

The incidence of school violence is becoming an increasing concern for school staff and parents. In January 2017, ETFO held a news conference and issued a four-point “call to action” that requires government and school board intervention:

- The government must ensure the necessary funding and resources for special education programs.
- The government must promote a comprehensive approach to children’s mental health that includes inter-ministerial supports and possibly an inter-ministerial task force for children’s mental health in schools.
- The Ministries of Education and Labour must proactively enforce school board compliance with health and safety legislative and policy requirements and protocols for reporting violent incidents.
- The government and school boards need to foster a stronger health and safety culture within school boards and support increased training at all levels.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Supports for students with special needs are seriously lacking in elementary schools. Elementary schools often struggle to provide adequate services for students with high-risk behaviours. These high-risk behaviours could harm the student or others, including classmates and staff. This harm includes both psychological and physical harm; it interferes with teaching and learning outcomes and diminishes health, safety and wellbeing. Cutbacks to school board special education supports and lack of access to community mental health supports for families make it difficult for students with high-risk behaviours to get the timely support they need.

The Ministry of Education has phased out its mitigation funding for declining student enrolment. In 2015, at least 14 public school boards received cuts to their special education grants. Elementary enrolment may be declining in some school boards, but the need for special education supports is not. Special education grants are based on a statistical model rooted in outdated census data; they do not reflect actual student need for special
education services and supports. School boards are forced to make difficult decisions about which students can access limited services, such as psychological assessments. The inability to access Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) therapy by children with autism who are over five years old is adding to the number of students who require additional supports in elementary schools.

To address the issue, the provincial government must increase its funding for educational assistants, psychologists, behavioural therapists, school support counsellors, child and youth workers and speech-language pathologists. It must update its funding model for special education to address the actual need for special education programs and supports.

**HEALTHY AND SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS**

Healthy and safe school environments are key to positive learning and working environments. Healthy and safety is an important union priority. The incidence of school violence takes a serious toll on school staff in terms of physical injuries, stress and overall mental health. Education workers have one of the highest levels of Lost Time Injuries caused by workplace violence according to WSIB statistics. Elementary teachers have more than twice the rate of Lost Time Injuries as secondary teachers.

In addition, according to Ontario Teachers’ Insurance Plan (OTIP) data, the rate of ETFO members filing claims for long-term disability has increased over the last three years from 1.36 per cent to 1.73 per cent of members enrolled in the plan. OTIP attributes the increase to “the additional pressure in the school environment over the last few years.” To cultivate healthier and safer school environments, the government must ensure school boards uphold the protocols for reporting incidents of school violence and provide health and safety training for all staff, including occasional teachers.

**CLASS SIZE**

Smaller classes improve student behaviour and peer relationships and increase student engagement and achievement in the early grades. The provincial government has made a significant investment in reducing class size in grades 1 to 3. The primary class size cap aligns with the view that investment in the early years is important to support early identification and intervention that results in savings over the longer term by reducing the need for later remedial intervention.

Class sizes in grades 4 to 8 should also be reduced. Secondary schools receive funding to support an average class size of 22 students; grades 4 to 8 classrooms are funded to support an average of 24.5 students. They are the largest in the K-12 system, with many having more than 30 students. There is no pedagogical rationale for this difference. ETFO made some progress on this issue during recent contract negotiations, but more needs to be done.

Reducing classes in these grades is necessary given the increasing number of students with special needs integrated into regular classrooms, often without the necessary supports.
Lowering class sizes in these grades would provide teachers with greater opportunity to develop strategies and interventions tailored to the learning needs of each student.

**KINDERGARTEN**

Full-day Kindergarten is an important initiative and one, which if adequately supported, could contribute significantly to supporting children with special needs and promoting student well-being. However, the potential of this important initiative will not be met if the government doesn’t address a number of issues, including class size; joint planning time for the teacher and designated early childhood educator (DECE); deployment of a DECE in all Kindergarten classrooms, and professional in-service to support both the educator team and the program’s play-based philosophy.

The current funding model, which provides for an average class size of 26 and an educator-student ratio of 1:13, is highly problematic. There are many Kindergarten classes with 30 or more students. Even those classrooms with 26 students are finding it difficult to set up play-based activities in the space provided. Many of the classrooms were purpose-built for 20 students. In schools with open areas and shared space for Kindergarten, ETFO members are reporting noise levels that are adversely affecting learning and working conditions.

The educator team cannot function without time being available during the instructional day for the teacher and early childhood educator to meet and plan together. Too often DECEs are assigned tasks outside the classroom or work that should be provided by an educational assistant. Additional funding is required to increase the instructional day of DECEs and to support the hiring of additional educational assistants.

**DESIRED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS**

1. Increase funding for educational assistants, psychologists, behavioural therapists, school support counsellors, child and youth workers and speech-language pathologists.
2. Adopt a comprehensive mental health strategy for children and youth.
3. Update the Grants for Student Needs to better address the actual demand for special education programs and supports.
4. Provide all school staff with regular workplace health and safety training, including occasional teachers.
5. Ensure school board compliance with health and safety legislative and policy requirements and protocols for reporting violent incidents.
6. Cap grades 4 to 8 class size at 24.
8. Assign a designated early childhood educator to every Kindergarten class.
9. Fund 30 minutes of preparation time per day for designated early childhood educators.
10. Allocate funding for professional development to support the full-day Kindergarten teacher-designated early childhood educator team and to support joint planning time.

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