

Response to the Ministry of Education's Consultation on Parent Engagement

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Parent Engagement Policy – Minister of Education’s Partnership Table

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Introduction

The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) supports the overall thrust of the Ministry of Education’s policy and initiatives on parental engagement. ETFO concurs that parental engagement plays a major role in children’s success at school and contributes to the overall public confidence in and support for publicly-funded education.

The federation welcomed the government’s decision to disband the provincial parental advisory group and focus on supporting effective parental involvement at the school board and school levels. The establishment of the ministry’s Parent Engagement Office and the grants awarded to school councils to foster parent engagement are important steps forward to support this grassroots approach. The federation also supports the proposal in Bill 177, the Student Achievement and School Governance Act, 2009 to require school boards to establish parent engagement committees. If truly reflective of the local community, these committees should provide valuable advice to school boards with respect to addressing particular barriers to parental engagement in their communities.

The quality of communication between school staff and parents¹ is at the core of fostering positive engagement on the part of parents in a child’s life. School-home communication must genuinely be two-way and respect the distinct roles of both the school staff and parents in supporting children through their formal schooling. To this end, the ministry has appropriately turned to faculties of education and teacher

¹ ETFO has adopted the ministry’s definition of “parent” to include parents, guardians, and caregivers.

induction programs to introduce the importance of effective teacher-parent communications at an early stage in a teacher's career.

Constructive, respectful two-way communication is key to teachers' understanding of parents' perceptions about intrusion of the school into the home sphere (e.g. extensive assignment of homework that interferes with parents' time with their children) and for there to be clear understanding and expectations about the appropriate role for parents at the school level. A significant portion of ETFO's legal intervention at the school level relates to incidents where parents have misunderstood classroom boundaries and teachers' professional responsibilities to serve the needs of all students in the class.

Through its resources and member training, ETFO promotes strategies that respect parents' role in supporting their children's education and acknowledge the importance of fostering inclusive and welcoming environments for parents. It is in our members' best interests to develop positive parental relations skills. Without them, considerable energy and resources can be spent solving problems that didn't need to develop in the first place. To extend ETFO's connections to parents, particularly those under-represented at the school level, the federation has increasingly developed resources in collaboration with parents and community partners.² We understand the importance to seeking out community contacts rather than expecting the community to come to teachers.

² A sample list of these ETFO resources is appended to this response.

1. Does the policy clearly identify a vision, strategic direction and action plan for parent engagement?

The ministry's parent engagement policy identifies clear direction for parent engagement. It is grounded in a vision that acknowledges parents as valued partners and active participants.

The discussion paper does an excellent job reviewing the history of provincial policies and initiatives related to parent involvement in education. Significant progress has been made in establishing a framework for fostering positive parent engagement at the board and school levels, which includes the recent policy on equity and inclusive education. An implied priority of the policy is to address issues related to cultural and class differences that have traditionally served as barriers to broad parental engagement.

2. Do the four strategies provide sufficient scope to assist boards, senior administration and school communities to support parents as partners with all education partners and contribute to student success?

The strategies establish a useful framework for school boards, schools, and school communities to support parents. They reflect what the ministry is doing currently to assist schools to foster welcoming environments for parents and to identify and address barriers to broader parental and community involvement.

3. Does the action plan articulate a clear role for schools, boards and the Ministry to create the conditions to enhance parent engagement in Ontario?

In addition to establishing the policy framework, the ministry has developed valuable resources to support parents and guide school interaction with parents. The ministry should continue to support research and resource development on the issue of parent engagement. To support the appropriate implementation of its policy and resources, the ministry should expand its role in providing training and in-service to parent engagement committees and school councils. School councils have been structured to represent the school community, including parents, members of the school staff, and representatives of the community. The school council is the logical forum for parents and school staff to communicate and foster broader understandings of their respective views and roles in supporting student learning and development.

4. Will the policy be meaningful to parents; would this be seen as an opportunity to enhance involvement across the province to support student success?

ETFO will defer to parents to respond in detail to this question. The federation hopes, however, that the ministry's definition of "student success" goes beyond student academic achievement. The ministry, school boards, and individual schools should be communicating to parents that their children's formal schooling is aimed at ensuring they graduate from school as lifelong learners with an understanding of the arts, healthy lifestyles, and a commitment to participate as full citizens of our democratic society.

5. What are the key strengths of the policy? How can the policy be enhanced?

The key strengths of the policy include the recognition of traditional barriers to inclusive parental engagement and the profiling of practical strategies to address these barriers. The ministry has identified a number of initiatives and strategies that address typical barriers to more extensive parental engagement. These include translating materials sent home into languages of parents in the community, translating key information on school board and school websites, providing on-site child care during parent council meetings, and reaching out and making personal contact with parents to invite them to participate in school-related activities. The ministry can enhance its policy by continuing to identify and promote practical strategies for increasing the participation of parents.

In communities with a high percentage of immigrants, school boards need to employ community relations workers to make connections to parents who may not feel comfortable being engaged at the school level or may not understand what the school's goals are for parent engagement. The ministry should provide specific funding support for this outreach work.

ETFO agrees that fostering broader and more effective parental engagement, where parents participate as valued partners in supporting their children's education, is an important goal for Ontario schools. The federation also supports the government's plan to phase in full-day kindergarten over the next five years. Research supports both this emphasis on parental engagement and early learning. But Ontario schools, particularly elementary schools, cannot sustain yet another major initiative without easing back from other government initiatives. As the Province prepares for full-day kindergarten and promotes greater system support for parent engagement, it is time to pull back from the intensive literacy and numeracy initiatives driving classroom activities. Now is the time to give school boards and teachers the opportunity to reflect and apply what they've learned from more than a decade of

EQAO testing and focus on assessment data and make way for these other reforms to take root and positively shape student learning and development.

VM:

Sample List of ETFO Resources That Promote Inclusive Classrooms and Link to the Community

Access without Borders – a workshop that informs members about visible and non-visible disabilities and that promotes strategies for combating physical, attitudinal, and societal barriers. The workshop is supported by resources that promote inclusion in the classroom.

Anti-racist Pamphlets - “Working in the Classroom”, “Working with Parents & Community”, and “Working with Students”.

Beyond the Breakfast Program – workshop that explores the stigma of being poor and issues connected to family poverty, self-esteem, and literacy problems.

Building Understanding about Classism – a pamphlet created to build understanding and awareness of issues that relate to socio-economic class, class bias, and classism. The resource is also designed to assist ETFO members understand how class issues impact students and families in their schools.

Responding to Homophobia and Heterosexism – A resource guide for teachers.

Let’s Talk About It – a planning guide to assist locals plan conferences for boys and young men which focuses on gender equity and eliminating violence against women. The conference is based on successful events organized by our Toronto local, the Elementary Teachers of Toronto who partnered with the White Ribbon Campaign.

Parent-Teacher Relationships – Putting the Pieces Together – a resource that provides information and advice on interactions with parents and creating positive relationships with parents.

Power of Story – a resource and workshop which encourage the consideration of ways to demonstrate acceptance, appreciation, and inclusivity in diverse Canadian communities.

Racism Hurts – a package of varied resources including posters, stories, and lesson plans that help to begin conversations about race and difference.

Roots of Equality – a resource document and workshop designed to foster students’ healthy, equal relationships, and raise awareness of violence against women. The themes covered include Family, Friends, School, Community Connections, and the Media. ETFO partnered with Springtide Resources and the Ontario Women’s Directorate to develop the materials.

We're Erasing Prejudice For Good – a school-wide resource that introduces social justice themes through monthly themes such as self-esteem, sharing our lives, and local and global citizenship. The resource contains monthly suggestions to engage parents in supporting students as they explore the topics.

ETFO PAMPHLETS/SUPPORT MATERIALS FOR PARENTS

- **Nurturing a Child's Self-Esteem**
- **Getting Involved in Your Child's Education**
- **Say No to Bullying**
- **Starting School: A New Beginning for Your Child** – introduction to Kindergarten
- **Studying Successfully**
- **Working Together to Help our Children Succeed**