

It's Elementary

■ by **Barbara Richter**

1998 – what a year to be born as a federation! It was the year of “the big ice storm” in Eastern Ontario and Quebec. Google was founded and Sesame Street turned 30. It was the year Swissair flight 111 crashed off Peggy’s Cove in Nova Scotia. Air Canada pilots went on strike for the first time in the company’s history. The Calgary Stampeders won the Grey Cup and the New York Yankees won the World Series. Bill Clinton was president of the USA. Jean Chrétien was the prime minister of Canada and Joe Clarke had been elected leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada again. Mike Harris was premier of Ontario. And the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) began.

.....
Barbara Richter recently retired after spending 30 years as a staff officer at ETFO and its predecessor organization, the Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario.

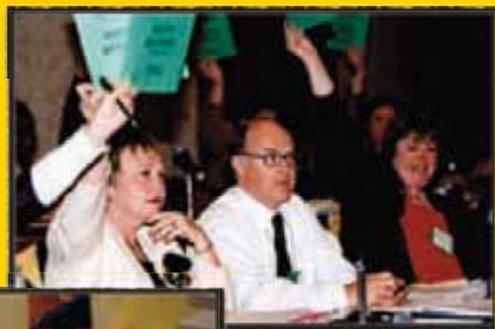
A brief history of Ontario’s public elementary teachers and their federations



This is the first of a four-part history of Ontario public elementary teachers and their federations.

We will learn about ETFO and its predecessor organizations, the challenges they faced and the victories they achieved. We will learn that:

- Federations work steadfastly to promote and protect the interests of their members
- Federations were and continue to be leaders in advocating for the rights of teachers and the broader society
- Funding for elementary education has been an issue since the 1800s
- Legal or collective agreement rights are never completely secure; the Federation and its members have had to be vigilant in keeping elementary education issues in the public eye and on the government agenda.



The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario was created by the amalgamation of two predecessor organizations, the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario (FWTAO) and the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation (OPSTF). When ETFO began operating as a federation on July 1, 1998, it continued the work of two federations that had worked to promote and protect the interests of public school educators for 80 years.

The year 1998 was a time of massive change in Ontario education. The provincial government forced Ontario's 129 school boards to merge into 72 organizations, 31 of them public boards. Some of these new boards were huge, covering, in one instance, an area the size of France.

New funding arrangements meant boards could no longer raise money from their local tax base. Teachers were brought under the *Ontario Labour Relations Act*. Occasional teachers became members of teacher federations but principals and vice-principals were removed. Thousands of veteran teachers and administrators took advantage of a new opportunity – the 85 factor – for early retirement. Added to this was a new curriculum (with no resources for implementation), new report cards (with none of the technical support needed to produce them), and the threat of ongoing teacher testing.

These were not ideal conditions in which to launch a new federation but elementary teachers proved once again they were up to the challenge.

The critical first year...

A hectic year of activity followed ETFO's inaugural Annual Meeting in 1998.

In collective bargaining the Federation and the newly configured school boards had to reconcile old agreements – sometimes six or more agreements had to become one. Many of the benefits teachers enjoyed were removed from the

This overview captures some of ETFO's more public achievements during the last eight years. ETFO also performs a great deal of work on behalf of members through professional relations services, equity and women's services, professional development, public relations, communications, collective bargaining, research, leadership development, and much more. There is outreach to equality-seeking groups, to community, labour, and social justice groups, in addition to the work ETFO does on the international scene. I will highlight some of that work in future installments. I will go back in history but will not leave ETFO behind: past issues remain relevant and ETFO continues to address them today.

It's Elementary

Education Act and had to be renegotiated. School boards, crying poverty in the face of the new funding formula, were eager to strip hard-won clauses on working conditions, staffing, and benefits. Their idea of reconciling salary grids was moving to the lowest wage.

It took tough bargaining, determined members, more than 20 takeovers, and three strikes (including one lockout), but ETFO locals prevailed. Salaries were reconciled up and working conditions preserved; in both cases some modest improvements were made. One local even managed to reinstate a retirement benefit lost in 1979.

But bargaining wasn't all ETFO did that first year. The programs and services that the two federations had offered also had to be merged. Education and training programs offered in that first year included a training program for local leaders, summer curriculum courses, professional growth workshops, and credit courses. Curriculum Connections and Presenters on the Road were launched.

There were workshops for Aboriginal and racial minority women members, and leadership, employment equity, and collective bargaining training for women. New curriculum resources were created, including the nationally acclaimed anti-bias curriculum, *We're Erasing Prejudice for Good*.

ETFO consulted members from equality-seeking groups to see how the organization could meet their needs. It created a program to welcome new members and made presentations to future members at the faculties of education.

To keep in touch with its members ETFO launched a new website and created *Voice* magazine, which was mailed to each member's home. Information packages sent to stewards at every school included the newsletters *Link* and *Women's Issues*.

ETFO responded to government initiatives, presented position papers, lobbied the govern-

ment, and developed relationships with the broader labour and social justice communities.

And ETFO also provided advice and assistance to hundreds of individual members. Not bad for a first year!

The 1999 spring election

Delegates to the 1998 ETFO Annual Meeting voted unanimously to work to defeat the Mike Harris government and to elect MPPs who would promote high-quality public education. During the provincial election held in June, ETFO worked with other teacher federations, unions, and community groups to raise the profile of public education. ETFO produced billboards, leaflets, radio ads, and co-sponsored TV advertising. The provincial organization and many locals released members to work in Liberal and NDP campaigns. Mike Harris's government was re-elected, but 17 Conservative incumbents lost their seats. These included three cabinet ministers, one of them former Education Minister David Johnson.

Teacher testing

When the government threatened to force teachers into a cyclical testing program to maintain their certification, ETFO took control of the issue, and, before any details were announced, released *Ensuring Professional Standards in Ontario Education: A Response to the Teacher Testing Proposal*. The document showed that teacher testing failed to assess teacher competency, wasted taxpayers' money, and had no precedent in Canada or the US. ETFO proposed alternatives that would benefit the education system, students and teachers.

The paper called for:

- Enhanced, government-supported teacher professional development
- Development of a provincial model for teacher evaluation and professional growth,

It took tough bargaining, determined members, more than 20 takeovers, and three strikes (including one lockout), but ETFO locals prevailed. Salaries were reconciled up and working conditions preserved; in both cases some modest improvements were made. One local even managed to reinstate a retirement benefit lost in 1979.



ETFO
Accountability YES
Recertification NO

- in partnership with education stakeholders
- Creation of a mentoring program for new teachers.

Funding for elementary education

When the 2000-2001 grants provided additional funding for secondary programs but no new money for the elementary panel, ETFO responded. *Out of Focus: How Student-Focused Funding Undervalues Elementary Education* detailed how each grant shortchanged elementary students. As a direct result of ETFO's actions, the next provincial budget included additional money for the reduction of primary class sizes, \$70 million in special education funding for junior kindergarten and primary students, and an additional \$70 million for early-years reading initiatives.

Keeping extra-curricular activities voluntary

Other problems were also brewing. The *Education Act* increased the course load of secondary teachers and, as a result, many refused to volunteer for extra-curricular activities. Bill 74, the *Education Accountability Act*, made extra-curricular activities mandatory anytime, any place, and any day in the school year for both elementary and secondary teachers. It also denied teachers the right to bargain conditions around extra-curricular activities.

ETFO fought back. With our partners in the Ontario Teachers' Federation, ETFO explored a *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* challenge to the bill and a complaint to the International Labour Organization (ILO).

ETFO consulted its membership. Over 99 per cent of them agreed Bill 74 represented an unwarranted intrusion into their professional role and was a direct attack on collective bargaining rights. With this strong mandate ETFO advised teachers not to take on extra-curricular

It's Elementary

activities during the 2000-2001 school year.

Keeping extra-curricular activities voluntary became one of ETFO's bargaining goals. ETFO's public relations campaign, *No More Bullying*, included radio spots, newspaper ads, and a special website that allowed members to fax their MPPs and put on the record their opposition to both Bill 74 and the recertification scheme. At the height of the campaign, the website attracted over 1,000 visitors a day, more than five times the normal traffic.

Teachers won. On June 12, the Minister announced she would not proclaim the part of Bill 74 that dealt with extra-curricular activities and, in the future, would deal separately with the elementary and secondary panels.

Building partnerships and presence

That summer delegates to the 2000 Annual Meeting voted overwhelmingly to join the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), making ETFO the largest teachers' organization in the country affiliated with the labour movement. ETFO recognized that participation in the labour movement would give the federation added power to advance the cause of public education, high-quality public services, and the rights of workers.

Capitalizing on the success of the ETFO media campaigns, delegates also voted to establish a provincial political action/public relations fund to support activities to reclaim the education agenda, forge alliances with parents and the public, and protect and improve the working conditions of teachers and the learning conditions of students.

Protecting teachers as professionals

On June 12, under the guise of improving education and ensuring teacher competency, the government finally unveiled its teacher recerti-

fication plan. Bill 80, the *Stability and Excellence in Education Act, 2001*, required members of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) to participate in a five-year recertification cycle during which they would have to successfully complete 14 professional development courses. The prescribed set of courses gave teachers little flexibility. It did not take into account students' learning needs, teachers' own professional development goals, or what stage they were at in their careers.

The OCT would administer this Professional Learning Plan (PLP) and would randomly select the first cohort of 40,000 practising teachers who would start their five-year cycle in September 2001. Those remaining would start the following year.

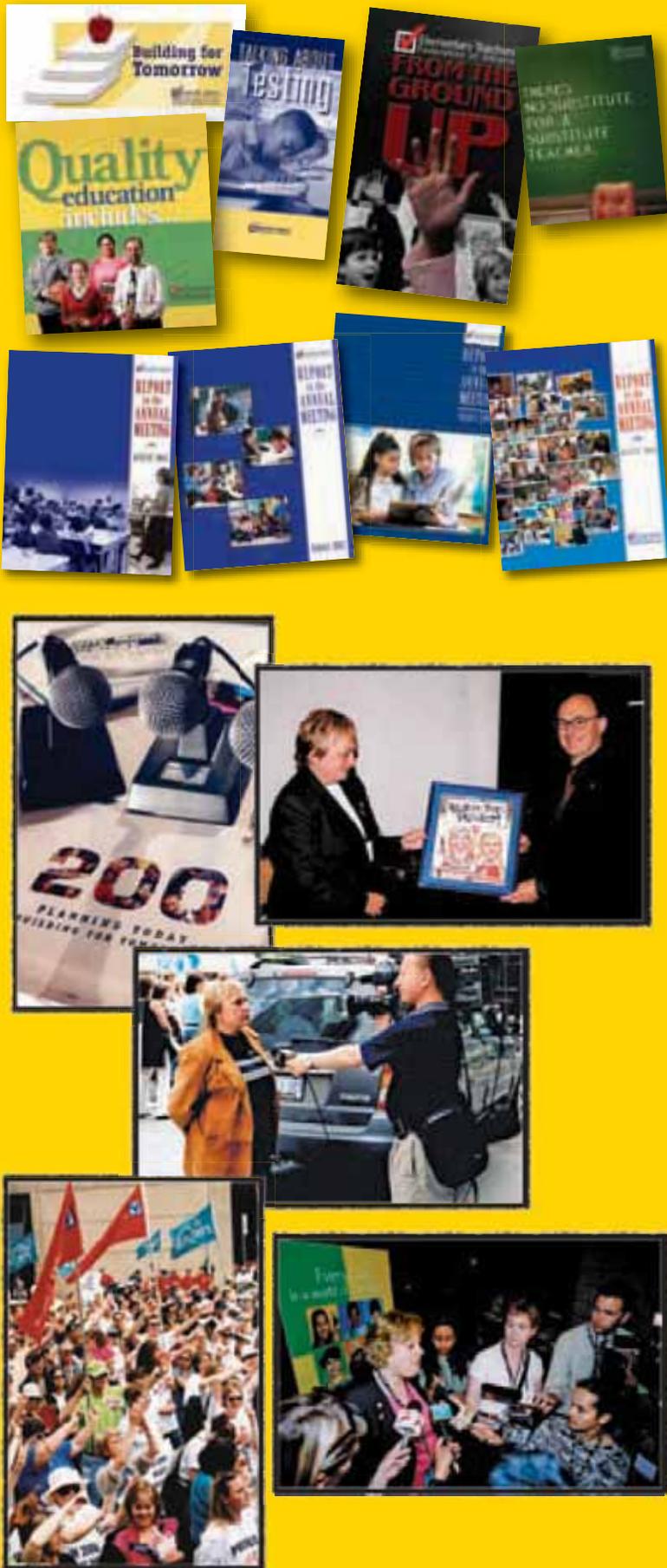
Fighting recertification was a challenge for teachers because many members of the public believed it would create greater accountability.

ETFO had to show that this was a myth: teachers were taking part in professional development; accountability mechanisms such as performance appraisal were already in place; and the Federation had a credible alternative plan. ETFO needed to educate members to ensure their support for strong and united action, and also win the support of parents and politicians.

ETFO's campaign – *Accountability YES/Recertification NO* – was a call to members to boycott the PLP plan while continuing to engage in and document their professional growth activities. It continued for three years and involved every service area, provincial and local leaders, and each individual member.

The campaign was a prime example of a multi-pronged approach to defeat a government initiative: legal action, data gathering to put an elementary face on the issue, swift consultation with members to get their support for action, partnerships with other stakeholders to strengthen the opposition, a media campaign that told the real story behind the legislation, and extensive public and private lobbying with government representatives.

The campaign was a prime example of a multi-pronged approach to defeat a government initiative: legal action, data gathering to put an elementary face on the issue, swift consultation with members to get their support for action, partnerships with other stakeholders to strengthen the opposition, a media campaign that told the real story behind the legislation, and extensive public and private lobbying with government representatives.



The results were outstanding. Fewer than 14 per cent of teachers complied with the PLP. But the government didn't budge. It was clear that winning this fight would require a change of government.

Fair funding – a member priority

Government underfunding of education was widely criticized: teacher federations, school boards, and parents all spoke out. In the spring of 2002, the government appointed Mordechai Rozanski to head the Education Equality Task Force which would review the funding model. ETFO told the Task Force what members had said: class sizes were too large and supports too few, specialist teachers and programs were lost, special education was in crisis, workloads had increased, and the difference in per capita funding for elementary and secondary students was not only unfair but illogical.

The Task Force reported in December and confirmed that public education in Ontario needed an infusion of \$2 billion. The government quickly announced more funding for salary benchmarks, somewhat easing the 2002-2003 collective agreement negotiations.

Despite the extra money, boards were still under extreme financial pressure. Three public boards – Ottawa-Carleton, Hamilton-Wentworth, and Toronto – refused to make the spending cuts required to achieve a balanced budget. The government response was swift and brutal: they stripped these boards of their powers and appointed supervisors to oversee them.

In the spring ETFO launched *Fair Funding for Public Education* with a full public relations campaign based on the message *Restore funding. Restore programs. Restore democracy.* The specific plea to the public was *Help us help your kids.* Though Toronto, Hamilton-Wentworth and Ottawa-Carleton were targeted, the campaign rolled out across the province prior to the anticipated provincial election.

It's Elementary

Keeping in touch with members

From its inception ETFO reached out to members, checking on their attitudes to and their knowledge of their union. Did they read ETFO publications? Were they satisfied with ETFO programs? The responses were overwhelmingly positive.

For several years ETFO also gathered information through school-based surveys completed by ETFO stewards. These responses told the real story of the impact of funding cuts – bigger classes, heavier workloads, more paperwork, fewer programs, and crumbling schools.

At the same time, ETFO professional relations staff detected some alarming new trends – more teachers under review; more stress-related LTD claims; increased workloads due to the loss of administrators, support personnel, and specialist teachers; lack of supply teachers to cover absences; inadequate training and supports for teachers in new positions.

ETFO distributed this information widely. More importantly, however, the Federation was able to develop strategies to address the issues members identified.

Analyzing the landscape – 2003

For four years ETFO worked with parents, the public, its locals, and opposition parties to make education a major focus of the next election campaign. Both the Liberals and the NDP gave ETFO written commitments that they would rescind the recertification legislation and reform the OCT to make it a truly self-governing body. Both parties adopted the ETFO class size policy.

All ETFO collective agreements were due to expire on August 31, 2004, creating both challenges and opportunities for the organization. Workload was a major issue – teachers were seeking improvements and boards wanted to strip workload provisions from agreements.

The funding formula was also a problem.

Although the *Education Act* provided for an average of 200 minutes of preparation time for elementary teachers, the formula only funded 137 minutes. There were no provisions for special programs, lunchroom supervisors, or other supports necessary to run an effective school.

All of these factors converged to lead to the launch of *Building for Tomorrow*.

Building for Tomorrow

Delegates to the 2003 Annual Meeting approved a multi-year initiative to enhance bargaining and revitalize the organization. *Building for Tomorrow* included hiring additional bargaining staff; additional training for local negotiating teams, stewards, and members; a public relations campaign; and putting in place enhanced technology to support bargaining.

Election 2003

When the Liberal party won the October 2 election it promised to bring peace and stability to the education system. It pledged to treat teachers with respect, to form a genuine partnership with education groups, to inject more money into the system, to do away with PLP, to make the OCT truly self-governing, and to reduce primary class size.

During its first five years ETFO proved that it could advance and protect the interests of members, negotiate sound collective agreements, mobilize against regressive legislation, provide professional development, train new leaders, advance social justice, partner with other unions and education stakeholders, and win the support of parents and the public. And it did all this in the face of a hostile government.

Now ETFO would demonstrate that it could work co-operatively with government while maintaining an unwavering commitment to its members and the issues that mattered to them.

Despite the extra money, boards were still under extreme financial pressure. Three public boards – Ottawa-Carleton, Hamilton-Wentworth, and Toronto – refused to make the spending cuts required to achieve a balanced budget. The government response was swift and brutal: they stripped these boards of their powers and appointed supervisors to oversee them.

It's Elementary

Campaign 200 – the campaign for more preparation time

Campaign 200 – Planning Today, Building for Tomorrow, the first public manifestation of ETFO's multi-year plan, was unveiled in February 2004. With a government committed to reducing the size of primary classes, ETFO could concentrate on other member issues. Its bargaining priorities for teachers and ESP/PSP members were 200 minutes of preparation time, a cap on supervision time, real salary increases, and improved leave and benefit plans. Occasional teachers' bargaining priorities included ensuring the occasional teacher got the same timetable as the teacher being replaced and improved daily rates of pay. The demand for increased preparation time addressed workload issues but it also meant more programs and more specialist teachers.

On June 2, all ETFO locals signed takeover agreements making the provincial organization their bargaining agent. Bargaining began in earnest in the fall of 2004. During the winter teachers voted overwhelmingly in favour of going on strike to back their bargaining demands.

ETFO forges a new approach to bargaining

ETFO's bargaining goals had a hefty price tag and paying for them would require a funding commitment from the province. ETFO took advantage of the Minister's invitation to teacher unions to explore the feasibility of establishing a provincial framework for negotiations. For four months the Federation worked with the minister and with the Ontario Public School Boards' Association to develop a provincial framework for salary, preparation time, and supervision time issues. Agreement was reached in April. The four-year accord included 200 minutes of preparation time by 2008, caps on supervision time, and a 10.6 per cent salary increase. The govern-

ment would fund the framework. Negotiations on the framework and on local issues proceeded with each district school board

ETFO paved the way for a unique form of bargaining. It secured funding from the province for common issues but negotiated local issues and the application of the framework with individual school boards. By the end of June, all teacher locals had successfully negotiated new collective agreements.

There's no substitute ...

Occasional teacher bargaining followed. Occasional teacher leaders received training and another public relations campaign was unveiled to support bargaining – *There Is No Substitute for a Substitute Teacher*.

By the end of the year all occasional teacher locals had collective agreements that included the bargaining demands: timetable of the teacher being replaced and gains in their daily rate, some in excess of 25 per cent, closing the gap between the highest and lowest rate significantly. In May the Near North Occasional Teacher Local staged a three-week strike before it was able to successfully conclude an agreement. As we begin a new school year all members are covered by signed collective agreements, an historic first.

Looking to the future

In the eight years of its existence, ETFO has served its members and won the respect of the public and recognition from the government.

But elementary education is still underfunded. Elementary teachers are still overworked. School boards and administrators are still trying to undermine collective agreements. Elementary students arrive at school each fall, eager to learn. But some are hungry, some are sick, and some need resources our schools aren't providing. So the work continues, as it has for the past 100 years.