# Submission to the Finance and Economic Affairs Committee

# Pre-budget Hearings

# December 2008

The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) appreciates the opportunity to participate in the pre-budget hearings conducted by the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. In the current context of economic slowdown and uncertainty, the fiscal policies adopted by the 2009 provincial budget will be particularly critical for Ontario’s future economic and social development.

At the national level and in Ontario, we have moved beyond the longstanding refusal to consider deficit budgets. Few are advocating that we simply wait for the market to correct itself or cut taxes and leave it to the private sector to solve the current crisis. Economists from all quarters are looking to government for investments that will stimulate the economy and protect citizens from the severe effects of job loss and economic restructuring.

ETFO believes that it is also important for governments to be activist in terms of investing in social or human capital. Now is not the time to withdraw from commitments to poverty reduction or to reduce investments in education or other social programs. The future legacy of the McGuinty government will rest on the extent to which it commits to improve the wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens and adopts social policies that build long term capacity and sustainability. At its recent provincial policy conference, the Ontario Liberal Party held workshops that posed the question: “How do we ensure that every child in Ontario comes to school ready to learn and leaves with skills and experiences necessary to compete in a knowledge economy?”[[1]](#footnote-1) ETFO believes a significant part of the answer lies in the government moving ahead with its commitment to poverty reduction and to targeted investment in elementary education.

# Poverty Reduction

ETFO congratulates the government on its recent announcement committing Ontario to reducing child poverty rates by 25 percent over five years. The plan, which includes a few targeted investments in education, represents a good start to addressing the structural issues and barriers at the root of poverty. As the government moves forward, the federation encourages it to build on the current initiatives by raising the minimum wage, increasing investments in child care, and expanding the availability of affordable housing.

Ontarians support an activist agenda on poverty. According to a recent *Environics* poll, 82 percent of Ontarians believe that during a recession it is more important than ever to reduce poverty.[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition to this moral stance, the Ontario Association of Food Banks (OAFB) has issued a report that makes a compelling economic case for poverty reduction.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to the economists who authored the report, “the federal and Ontario governments are losing at least $10.4 billion to $13.1 billion a year due to poverty.” The report further states that “when both private and public (or social) costs are combined, the total cost of poverty in Ontario is equal to 5.5 to 6.6 percent of Ontario’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Broad investment in education should be an integral part of any poverty reduction strategy. An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report showed that children from families with low socioeconomic status are unlikely to develop the same level of skills and “intellectual capital” as children from more advantaged backgrounds.[[5]](#footnote-5) The OAFB report states: “we all pay over the long run for the failure of poor children to reach their potential in school and to acquire the education and skills that our modern economy requires.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

# Closing the Funding Gap for Elementary Education

ETFO’s priority objective is to close the funding gap of $711[[7]](#footnote-7) per student between elementary and secondary education. This gap has a direct impact on both students’ learning conditions and teachers’ working conditions. It means that elementary education is short- changed in terms of funding for textbooks, computers, class sizes in Grades 4 to 8, specialist teachers, and teacher librarians. It also means that elementary teachers carry a significantly heavier workload than their colleagues in secondary schools. Closing the elementary funding gap would benefit all students, but would have particular benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Measures introduced since the Liberals formed government in 2003, such as capping primary classes and funding additional specialist teachers, have made a difference. Funding levels for elementary students remain significantly lower, however. In the federation’s recent discussions with government we have acknowledged the current economic challenges and indicated we are willing to look at longer timelines to address the gap. What remains unchanged is ETFO’s determination to work with government to ultimately eliminate the funding differential.

ETFO’s campaign to close the elementary funding gap is based on the growing body of research that points to the importance of investing in the early years of a child’s education. Successive provincial governments have attempted to increase the rate of high school graduation. The success of this goal depends, to a great degree, on the extent to which the government invests in early identification and intervention in elementary grades. It is considerably more effective and less costly to identify students’ special learning needs and to address behavioural issues in their elementary years. Students are less likely to drop out in secondary schools if they are helped to become successful learners at the elementary level.

Ontarians who understand the gap in funding for elementary education are likely to support ETFO’s goal to address it. A federation opinion poll conducted in February 2007 found that less than one in three Ontarians was aware that the per pupil grant for elementary students is lower than it is for secondary students. However, when advised of the differential, a significant majority of respondents expressed the view that it was not justified.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The federation’s objectives in closing the funding gap are focussed on achieving smaller class sizes in Grades 4 to 8; returning Design and Technology/Family Studies programs to Grades 7 and 8; staffing elementary schools with a full-time teacher-librarian; enhancing resources for English-language learners; and increasing access to specialist teachers in the arts, phys. ed., and guidance. These improvements to elementary education align with the government’s three education priorities: improving levels of student achievement, closing the gap in achievement between students who meet provincial achievement standards and those who don’t, and increasing public confidence in public education.[[9]](#footnote-9)

# Smaller Class Size

The Ontario government has made important investments to reduce class sizes in Kindergarten to Grade 3. Smaller classes of 20 students mean teachers spend less time on classroom management and have more opportunity to interact with each student and support individual learning styles. While primary classes are capped at 20 students and secondary classes are funded not to exceed board-wide averages of 22, average class size in Grades 4 to 8 is set by regulation at 25. Preliminary data from ETFO’s survey of public elementary schools indicate that some boards’ average class sizes in these junior and intermediate grades exceed 25 and that various individual classrooms have 30 students or more.

Smaller class sizes across the elementary grades are important in light of the number of students with special needs who are integrated into regular classrooms. According to preliminary 2006-2007 school board data, approximately 14 percent of the total student population are receiving special education programs and services. And approximately 79 percent of students receiving special education are placed in regular classrooms for more than half of the instructional day.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is not uncommon for elementary classrooms to include at least three students identified with special needs who require individual programs and more individual attention from their teacher. Teachers cannot adequately meet the needs of their students in large class sizes. Large classes also result in considerable workload issues for teachers in terms of assessment, reporting, and providing individualized instruction.

# Design and Technology/Family Studies

Seven percent of schools with Grades 7 and 8 classes have specialist Design and Technology teachers compared to 22 per cent in 1998-1999. Family Studies is available in only 5 per cent of schools, compared to 16 per cent in 1998 – 1999.[[11]](#footnote-11) The government could go a long way to meeting the needs of students who are traditionally at risk of dropping out by restoring Design and Technology and Family Studies courses in Grades 7 and 8. These courses particularly relate to students who are more successful learning in a hands-on environment. Engaging these students prior to their entry to secondary school would contribute to improved retention and graduation rates, a major goal of the Ministry of Education. Improved graduation rates and an increase in students who opt for the skilled trades are also important elements of Ontario’s future economic prosperity.

# Specialist Teachers

Over the last few years, improvements have been made to funding for specialist teachers at the elementary level, but the level of programs these teachers provide is still considerably below levels prior to the funding cuts introduced by the previous Conservative government. A recent Canadian research report indicates that the benefits of studying the arts include the development of the imagination, greater motivation to learn, increased student creativity, lower drop-out rates, and increased social skills.[[12]](#footnote-12) Despite the Ministry of Education curriculum expectations for the arts for elementary students, funding is not sufficient to provide all elementary students with access to specialist teachers in the arts. In 2008, for example, 48 percent of elementary schools had music teachers compared to 58 percent 10 years ago.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The current concern about rising child obesity rates and the government’s emphasis on promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles[[14]](#footnote-14), dictates that all elementary schools should be staffed with physical education specialists. Less than half of elementary schools, 44 percent, have a physical education teacher however.[[15]](#footnote-15) Physical education teachers play a key role in ensuring that schools meet the curriculum expectations for physical education and health. Their presence in the school also means there are more likely to be extra-curricular activities offered that introduce elementary students to skills-based sports programs that promote physical fitness, develop social skills, and build self-esteem.

Statistics Canada 2001 data point to higher rates of obesity among children who live in less affluent neighbourhoods. The percentage of overweight children varies from 24% in areas with high socio-economic status to 35% in low socio-economic neighbourhoods.[[16]](#footnote-16) All children benefit from robust physical education programs at elementary schools, but the children whose families don’t have the financial means to enrol them in organized physical activities outside of school such as sports and dance programs receive particular benefit from school-based programs.

Participation in higher amounts of physical fitness has also been linked to improved levels of academic achievement. An American longitudinal study of more than 5,000 children from Kindergarten to Grade 5 found that girls enrolled in higher amounts of physical education (70 – 300 minutes per week) achieved higher results in mathematics and reading.[[17]](#footnote-17) The study suggests the gender difference in the results may stem from the fact that young boys are more physically active, and therefore at higher basic fitness levels, than young girls.

# Teacher Librarians

The Ministry of Education has directed considerable resources and attention to improving elementary students’ achievement levels in literacy. In spite of this focus on literacy, only 60 percent of elementary schools have teacher librarians, most of them part-time, compared to 80 percent in 1997-1998.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to American research, school libraries and teacher-librarians have had a longstanding positive effect on student achievement, most notably in overall reading proficiency. More recently, the research has linked the role of school libraries and librarians with information literacy.[[19]](#footnote-19) Closer to home, a review of data from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) conducted by People for Education and Queen’s University found that Grade 3 and 6 students in schools with teacher-librarians are more likely to report that they enjoy reading. Schools with trained library staff are more likely to have a higher proportion of Grade 6 students who met or surpassed the provincial standard in EQAO reading tests. Furthermore, schools without trained library staff are more likely to have lower achievement on Grades 3 and 6 literacy tests in terms of overall average achievement and the number of students who met or exceeded the standard.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Well-stocked and well-staffed school libraries are also important in closing the gap in access to books, computers, and other learning materials that commonly exist between lower socioeconomic students and those from more affluent backgrounds.

# Full- Day Kindergarten

Other developed nations view universal early childhood education programs as an effective social policy to narrow the gaps in opportunity and achievement for children from low-income families. In Denmark, Finland, and Sweden high-quality early childhood education programs are made universally accessible through significant public investment and an affordable fee structure based on parental income. Universal programs for children three and under are also available in Belgium, Italy, and Portugal.

Ontario’s plan to introduce full-day Junior and Senior Kindergarten beginning in 2010-2011 is an important step towards building a more comprehensive and accessible system of early childhood education. Full-day kindergarten programs bring important benefit to the development of all children, but particularly to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A recent longitudinal study of Edmonton public schools concluded:

 “It is clear that a full-day kindergarten experience enables children, particularly those from educationally deprived backgrounds, to acquire the skills needed to become emergent readers at least to the point at which they are at par with children from more educationally advantaged communities.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Full-day programs are also central to the successful integration of immigrant or refugee children who are English-language learners.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The federation supports a full-day kindergarten model that is play-based in its pedagogical approach, staffed by qualified teachers, and located in publicly-funded elementary schools.

# CONCLUSION

In addition to the uncertain economic climate, Ontario is experiencing a period of declining enrolment among the elementary student population. It is more cost-efficient to address the elementary funding gap at a time of declining enrolment because the grants are per-pupil-based. Investing in smaller class sizes, Design and Technology programs, full-day kindergarten, specialist teachers, and teacher librarians, will enhance elementary school programs and mitigate the job losses among teachers. All these investments will also contribute to improved levels of student achievement, narrowing the achievement gap among students, and increased public confidence in our public education system. They will also have a particularly positive impact on Ontario’s most vulnerable students. It makes economic sense to invest in elementary education.

# RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the government expand its poverty reduction plan to include immediate increases to the minimum wage, increased investments in regulated child care, and more affordable housing.

That the government commit to closing the gap in per pupil funding between elementary and secondary education.

That the government allocate sufficient funding to ensure its planned full-day kindergarten programs are staffed by teachers certified by the Ontario College of Teachers, located in publicly-funded elementary schools, and supported by before- and after-school child care programs.

VM:

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4. Ibid., p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Ibid., p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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