



# **ETFO Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs**

## **2024 Pre-Budget Hearings**

January 2024

**Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario**  
**Fédération des enseignantes et des enseignants de l'élémentaire de l'Ontario**

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ETFO represents 83,000 elementary public school teachers, occasional teachers, designated early childhood educators, education support personnel and professional support personnel across the province. Its Building Better Schools education agenda can be viewed at **BuildingBetterSchools.ca**.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the 2024 pre-budget consultations. ETFO represents 83,000 public elementary school teachers, occasional teachers, designated early childhood educators, education support personnel and professional support personnel across the province. This submission complements ETFO's written submission to the Ministry of Education on education funding for the 2024-25 school year.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past six years, Ontario's public education system has experienced a significant decrease in per-student funding while at the same time facing unprecedented challenges, including a once-in-a-generation pandemic and the resulting impact on student learning and well-being. The chronic underfunding of public education, the disruptions to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lack of adequate resources during the post-pandemic recovery period have impacted everyone in the education system but have disproportionately impacted individuals and families from marginalized communities, including Black, Indigenous, racialized, disabled, and low-income. To alleviate these inequitable burdens, and build a more just and equitable province, Ontario must invest in public education.

The lack of adequate funding during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods has exacerbated pre-existing concerns about large class sizes, the poor physical condition of schools, insufficient and inequitable access to in-school supports, and the government's failure to meet the needs of all students, particularly students with special needs, English language learners, and those from marginalized communities. Yet, to date, the

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<sup>1</sup> ETFO (2023). Submission to the Ministry of Education: 2024-25 Education Funding Feedback. [etfo.ca/getmedia/210f79bf-0985-4a40-b94f-9e6f7105adf9/231027\\_EducationFundingSubmission.pdf](https://etfo.ca/getmedia/210f79bf-0985-4a40-b94f-9e6f7105adf9/231027_EducationFundingSubmission.pdf)

government's response to these challenges has been to continue to underfund public education. The government must change course.

Ontario's current fiscal position provides an ideal opportunity to adequately fund public services and close the growing funding gap for public education. The government must make the necessary investments to provide educators, students, families, and communities with the supports they need.

In this submission, ETFO puts forward recommendations for improvements to key areas of Ontario's public education system. It is ETFO's hope that the government seriously considers these recommendations and allocates the necessary resources to undo the damage caused by years of funding cuts. Ontario students deserve a high-quality, equitable, inclusive public education system. Investment in this world-class system is the key to Ontario's social and economic success.

## Provincial Economic Outlook

The current economic data suggests that Canada could be heading towards a recession. This recession would be largely due to the Bank of Canada's misguided strategy of targeting inflation through overnight interest rate adjustments. Higher interest rates will cause a policy-induced recession with job losses and lower wages that will make things even worse. Premier Ford agrees. He wrote to the Bank of Canada in September, echoing the call by British Columbia Premier David Eby, to stop rising interest rates. In a tweet announcing this letter, he wrote: "Ontario families and businesses are struggling to make ends meet and cannot afford the crushing costs brought about by repeated interest rate hikes."<sup>2</sup> There are other approaches to targeting inflation that can sustain an economic recovery and economic growth.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ontario Premier Doug Ford calls on Bank of Canada to halt rising interest rates.* (2023, September 4). CBC.

This would require a more focused monetary policy approach and an active role for government fiscal policy. The pandemic taught us that governments play a major role in supporting economic growth. The Government of Ontario must take these lessons and play an active role to avert a recession. This requires not just investing in transportation infrastructure, but also investing in workers through higher wages and in public services including public education.

Ontario is very sensitive to interest rate changes and recent projections by economists, including RBC, estimate drastic reductions to Ontario GDP growth projections. While Ontario’s economy was estimated to grow by 3.7 per cent in 2022, the current outlook for Ontario in 2023 and 2024 shows signs of a slowing economy (see Table 1). In fact, based on RBC estimates, the 2023 projection of 0.2 per cent real GDP growth for Ontario means it will be growing at the slowest pace compared to all other provinces.

**Table 1: Ontario’s Economic Growth, Real GDP (%)**

	2021e	2022e	2023p	2024p	2025p	2026p
2023 Fall Economic Statement <sup>3</sup>			1.1	0.5	2.0	2.8
2023 Ontario Budget <sup>4</sup>	5.2	3.7	0.2	1.3	2.5	2.4
RBC Economics <sup>5</sup>	5.2	3.6	1.1	0.2		
FAO Economic and Budget Outlook, 2023 <sup>6</sup>	5.2	3.7	0.8	2.0	2.0	2.0

Source: Ministry of Finance, Government of Ontario<sup>7</sup>. e = estimated. p = projected.

A recession would impact all Ontarians and would mean hundreds of thousands of lost jobs, rising bankruptcies and mortgage defaults, and a reduction in investments that create good paying jobs. As we are

[cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/doug-ford-letter-bank-of-canada-1.6956538](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/doug-ford-letter-bank-of-canada-1.6956538)

<sup>3</sup> Government of Ontario (2023). *Ontario’s Economic and Fiscal outlook in Brief, Fall 2023 Statement*. [budget.ontario.ca/2023/fallstatement/brief.html](https://budget.ontario.ca/2023/fallstatement/brief.html)

<sup>4</sup> Government of Ontario (2023). *2023 Ontario Budget*. [budget.ontario.ca/2023](https://budget.ontario.ca/2023)

<sup>5</sup> Royal Bank of Canada (2023). *RBC Economy and Markets*. [thoughtleadership.rbc.com/hitting-tipping-points/](https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/hitting-tipping-points/)

<sup>6</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2023). *Economic and Budget Outlook, Spring 2023*. [fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/EBO-SP2023](https://fao.on.org/en/Blog/Publications/EBO-SP2023)

<sup>7</sup> Government of Ontario (2023). *Ministry of Finance Website*. [ontario.ca/page/ministry-finance](https://ontario.ca/page/ministry-finance)

experiencing now, there is downward pressure on wages as inflation has increased dramatically, resulting in real wage cuts for workers.

Recessions are felt most by workers earning low-wages and those in precarious employment who are more likely to be women, Indigenous, racialized and recent immigrant workers. These workers—the same ones who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic—will again be hit the hardest. Many education workers are experiencing difficulty surviving on a single income, as their real wages have been drastically reduced by rising inflation. To avert a recession, the path to economic stability and growth requires the government of Ontario to increase spending in the public sector and in education and ensure real wages of workers are rising.

### **Government of Ontario’s Fiscal Situation**

The current government has a track record of inflating deficits to justify lowering spending in social programs. In August 2018, shortly after coming into office, the government claimed that the provincial deficit inherited from its predecessor stood at \$15 billion. Despite evidence that showed that this deficit number was grossly inflated, the government continued to misrepresent the province’s fiscal situation to justify its agenda of cuts to public services including public education. On October 17, 2019, Ontario’s Financial Accountability Office (FAO) released their assessment of the provincial deficit and found that the actual deficit for 2018-19 was \$7.4 billion, roughly half of what the government had claimed<sup>8</sup>.

While failing to increase funding for public education and other public services to keep up with inflation, the government decided to forgo additional revenue by providing billions of dollars in corporate tax cuts. By the

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<sup>8</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2019). *Understanding Ontario’s 2018-19 Deficit*. p. 1. [fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/understanding-on-deficit-2018](https://fao.on.org/en/Blog/Publications/understanding-on-deficit-2018)

fall of 2022, the annual corporate tax reductions stood at \$8.7 billion, with more than half of that going to large corporations.<sup>9</sup>

According to the FAO, Ontario has the lowest per capita revenue generation in Canada. Ontario also has the lowest per capita program spending in the country. The conclusion is clear: Ontario does not have a spending problem; Ontario has a revenue problem.

But despite the rhetoric of not having enough money, this Government has had no problem increasing government expenses when it serves its political agenda. According to the 2021 Fall Economic Statement, total government expenses under the Ford Government have grown from \$164.8 billion 2019-20 to a projected budget of \$189.5 billion in 2023-24<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, despite this additional fiscal capacity, the government has chosen not to make the necessary investments to maintain the public services Ontarians rely on, including public education.

In October 2022, the FAO released a report on Ontario's Economic and Budget Outlook<sup>11</sup>. The FAO projected increasing surpluses over the next few years driven by spending shortfalls across all sectors, including a \$6 billion shortfall in education over six years. At the same time, in this report, the FAO projected that the government would have a combined unallocated contingency funds totalling \$40 billion over the same six-year period.

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<sup>9</sup> Government of Ontario (2022). *2022 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review* [budget.ontario.ca/2022/fallstatement/pdf/2022-fall-statement-en.pdf](https://budget.ontario.ca/2022/fallstatement/pdf/2022-fall-statement-en.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Government of Ontario (2021). *2021 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review*. [budget.ontario.ca/2021/fallstatement/pdf/2021-fall-statement-en.pdf](https://budget.ontario.ca/2021/fallstatement/pdf/2021-fall-statement-en.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2022). *Economic and Budget Outlook, Fall 2022*. [fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/EBO-FA2022](https://fao.on.org/en/Blog/Publications/EBO-FA2022)



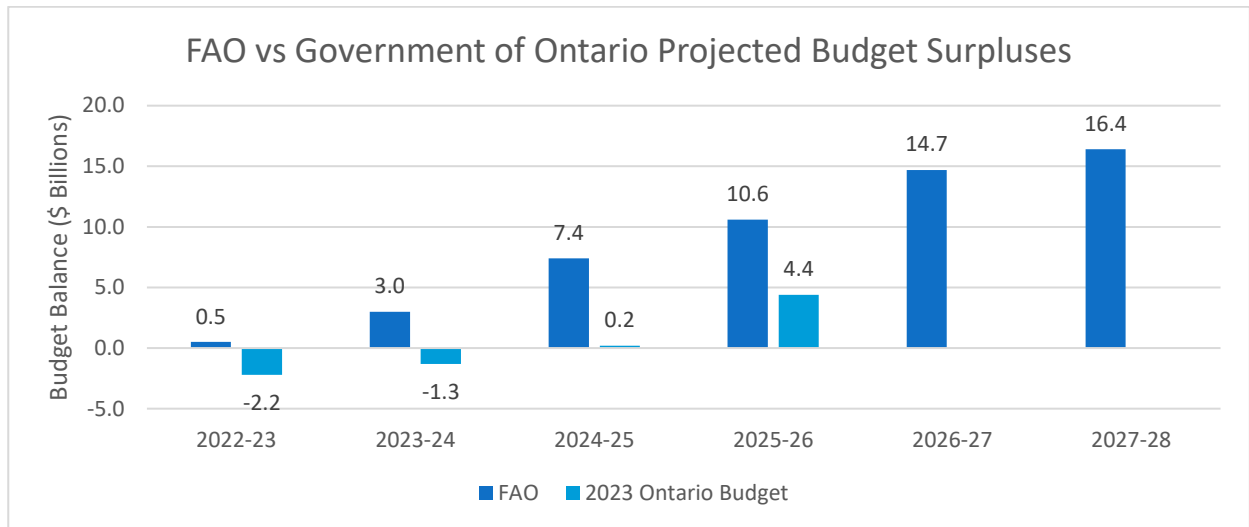
The 2023 Budget signalled further reductions to education spending, to the detriment of Ontario’s students and educators. For 2023-24, the budget showed an increase of \$1.35 billion in education funding—including childcare—when compared to 2022-23. Most of this funding – \$932 million – is for childcare, specifically funding from the federal childcare program. The remaining amount – only \$417 million – includes everything else: school board operations, ministry spending, and other programs, and represents an increase in funding of only 1.4 per cent compared to 2022-23. This nominal increase is easily outpaced when accounting for enrolment growth and inflation, which was 6.8 per cent in 2022.

More recently, in the FAO’s Economic and Budget Outlook 2023, the FAO continues to project budget surpluses (see Chart 1)<sup>12</sup>. This is in contrast to the government’s projections of deficits reported in its budget releases. Since 2021-22, the Government of Ontario has posted annual budget surpluses. The FAO projects growing budget surpluses for the next six fiscal years, growing from \$0.5 billion in 2022-23 to a staggering \$16.4 billion in 2027-28. The combined growth in projected budget surpluses over the six fiscal years totals to \$52.6 billion. Given the financial position of Ontario’s finances and the declining state of the economy, the time to restore funding to education is now.

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<sup>12</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2023). *FAO Economic and Budget Outlook, Spring 2023*. [fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/EBO-SP2023](https://fao.on.org/en/Blog/Publications/EBO-SP2023)

**Chart 1: Ontario Budget Surplus Projections**



Source: Ministry of Finance, Government of Ontario, FAO.

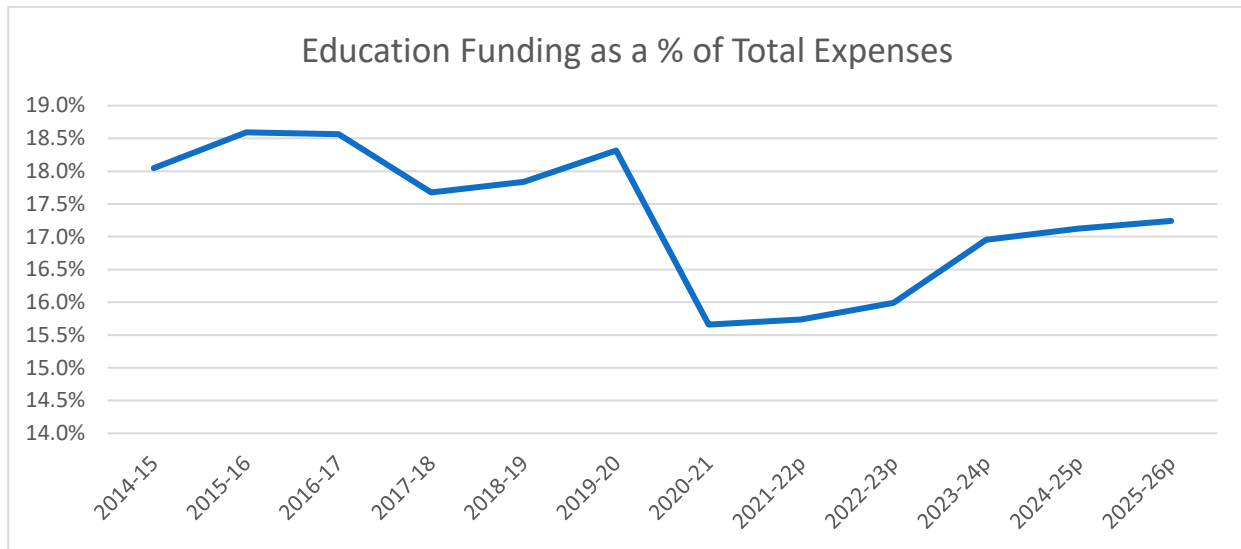
The government released its Fall Economic Statement on November 2, 2023. As noted in previous analysis of the government’s budgeting practices, the government overestimates on expenditures and budget deficits. According to the FAO Expenditure Monitor 2023-24: Q2 report, this government has spent \$2.0 billion less than what it had planned to spend<sup>13</sup>.

### Education Funding

Education as a percentage of total government expenses has fallen dramatically since the Ford government has taken office. Education funding fell from 18.3 per cent in 2019-20 and to 16 per cent in 2022-23 and will increase to a projected 17.2 per cent in 2025-26 (see Chart 2).

<sup>13</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2023). *Expenditure Monitor 2023-24: Q2*. [fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/2023-24-expenditure-monitor-q2](https://fao.on.org/en/Blog/Publications/2023-24-expenditure-monitor-q2)

**Chart 2: Education Funding as a percentage of total government expenses**

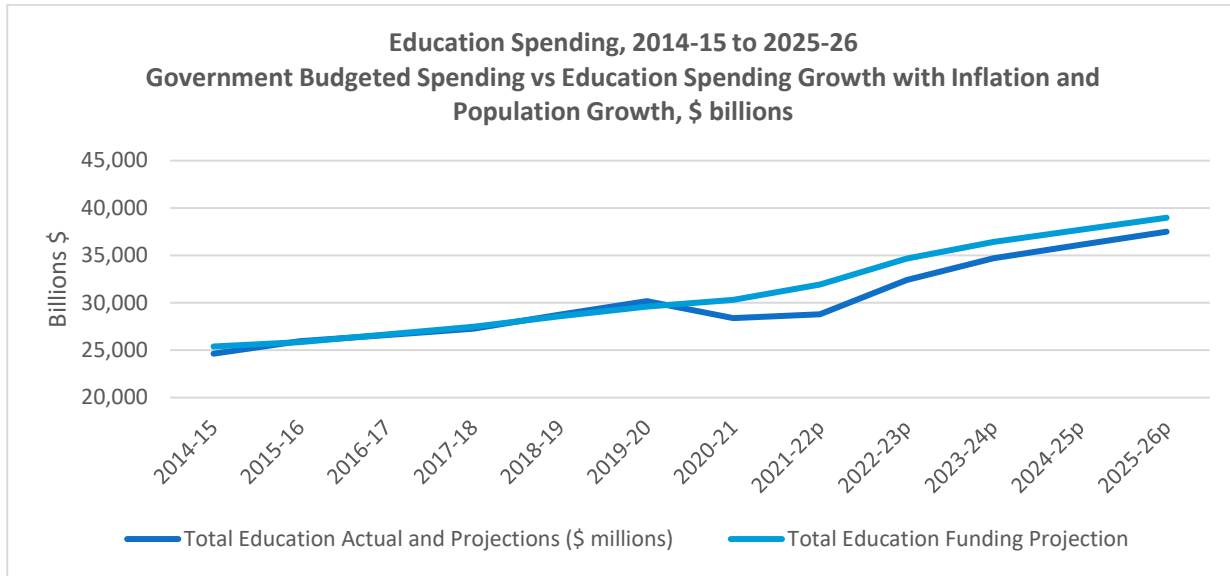


Source: Authors Calculation based on the Ministry of Finance, Government of Ontario

p = Ontario Ministry of Finance planning projection based on external sources.

In Chart 3, we compare the Government of Ontario’s budgeted spending on education versus what education funding would be if it had grown at the rate of inflation and population growth. Between 2014-15 through 2025-26, Chart 3 shows the impact of not funding education adequately with a cumulative education funding shortfall of \$20.7 billion. For the next fiscal year 2024-25, Ontario education funding would need to increase by \$2.1 billion to close the gap for this budget year.

**Chart 3: Education funding as a percentage of total government expenses**



Source: Authors calculation based on the Ministry of Finance, Government of Ontario  
 p = Ontario Ministry of Finance planning projection based on external sources.

Ontario’s economy is in the need of spending supports to avert an economic recession, but the current government has decided to take a short-sighted approach that makes a recession more likely. Budget 2022 implemented cuts to public education totalling \$12.3 billion over nine years, these cuts continued into Budget 2023, when the government ignored rising costs due to inflation and ongoing pandemic-related pressures on public schools, forcing many school boards to make cuts to services and student supports<sup>14</sup>.

Ontario has the fiscal capacity to restore funding and invest in public services. The FAO’s Economic and Budget Outlook 2023 report is projecting years of future budget surpluses and that the net debt-to-GDP ratio is expected to decline from 39.8 per cent in 2021-22 to 31.8 per cent by 2027-28<sup>15</sup>. As our recent

<sup>14</sup> ETFO (2023). *Ontario budget means more cuts to public education*. [etfo.ca/news-publications/media-releases/ontario-budget-means-more-cuts-to-public-education](https://etfo.ca/news-publications/media-releases/ontario-budget-means-more-cuts-to-public-education)

<sup>15</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2023). *Economic and Budget Outlook, Spring 2023*. [fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/EBO-SP2023](https://fao.on.org/en/Blog/Publications/EBO-SP2023)

economic experience with the COVID-19 pandemic showed, governments can ensure economic stability by increasing spending in social programs. ETFO strongly encourages this government to increase funding to public education and put this province on a path to prosperity.

## **Moving Forward**

Budget 2024 provides an opportunity for the Ford government to undo the damage it has done to our public education system. With rising budget surpluses and increases in government revenue, the time is now for the government to provide adequate funding to public education. Educators, parents, students, and the public at large will be paying close attention to the upcoming release of education funding parameters and will be looking for a change in direction away from damaging cuts and towards investment in our public education system and the other public services on which Ontario families rely.

Ontarians will be looking for: increased investment in special education programs and services, a strategy to address violence in schools that includes appropriate funding for much-needed student supports, class-size reductions, a commitment to address working conditions and increased workloads of teachers and education workers, and a real commitment to supporting our public education system.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Increase funding to public education to close the funding gap identified by the FAO.
2. Resume the practice of including the breakdown of funding allocations under the Education category in the provincial budget.

## **Reviewing the Education Funding Formula**

In its 2024-25 Education Funding Consultation Guide, the government focuses on reducing the complexity of the current education funding formula. This approach is simply misguided. The inadequacy of Ontario's

education funding formula can be traced back to its inception 25 years ago. The real issue is not its complexity, but rather the insufficient levels of funding it provides and its failure to tie funding to actual student need. In addition to establishing structural funding gaps when it was implemented, the funding formula has failed to keep up with rising costs due to inflation and enrolment changes over the past two and a half decades.

The last comprehensive review of the Ontario education funding formula was done by the Education Equality Task Force headed by Mordechai Rozanski in 2002. A full, independent external review of the education funding formula is long overdue.

The government's education funding consultations also focused on increasing transparency in how school board funds are used, which is an important objective. Equally important, however, is increasing transparency in how the government allocates funding to public education. Disclosing the change of education funding levels over the years in real dollars – accounting for inflation – would be a significant step in increasing transparency in the system. For example, while the government repeatedly claims to be making historic investments in public education, a closer look shows that between 2018 and 2023, the current government has reduced funding by approximately \$1,200 per student.

### **Recommendations:**

3. Establish an independent, external review of Ontario's education funding formula to ensure it reflects actual student needs.
4. Account for inflation when comparing provincial education funding levels with those of previous fiscal years.

## Class Size

Larger classes mean less one-on-one support for each student and disproportionately impact students with special needs. Frontline educators identify small classes as the most important factor in their ability to work individually with students and meet their diverse needs. Smaller classes improve student behaviour and peer relationships and increase student engagement and achievement in the early grades. Smaller classes mean educators have more opportunity to give students more individual attention. These factors, in turn, contribute to increased graduation rates and savings to the system from fewer students staying beyond the required four years of secondary school.

In 2019, the Ontario government announced its plan to increase the funded class size average in grades 4 to 8 from 23.84 students to 24.5 students. This change applied to all boards as of September 2019, whether or not they had been exempted in the past. The effects of these changes were felt differently from board-to-board and led to the loss of almost 1,000 teaching positions in Ontario's elementary schools.

Junior and Intermediate (grades 4 to 8) classes are the only divisions that do not have class size caps. Because of this, classes can vary significantly in size, with many of them well above 30 students and in some cases above 40. The government should allocate sufficient funding for reductions to Junior and Intermediate class size and establish class size caps for grades 4 to 8 of 24 students.

Class size is also an issue in Ontario's Full-Day Kindergarten program. This program has proven to be very successful. It has become a model for other jurisdictions and a fundamental part of our world-class education system. However, there are still many classes with more than 30 students and an even greater number of Kindergarten/Grade 1 split-grade classes, which are not supported by a designated early childhood educator. ETFO members consistently raise concerns about the challenges of setting up activity-

based programs for so many young children and managing classroom behaviour when many of the students are experiencing formalized learning environments for the first time. Overcrowded, noisy classrooms or open “pods” – where multiple classes share a room separated only by dividers – limit teachers’ and early childhood educators’ ability to take full advantage of the play-based program. These conditions are stressful for students and educators. The government should allocate sufficient funding to reduce Kindergarten class sizes and cap Kindergarten classes at 26 students.

### **Recommendations:**

5. Cap grades 4 to 8 class size at 24 students.
6. Cap Kindergarten class size at 26 students.
7. Ensure every Kindergarten class is staffed with a full-time certified teacher and a designated early childhood educator.

### **Support for Students with Special Needs**

Students with special education needs are not getting the front-line supports and services they need.

Inadequate supports have a bigger impact on students who face additional barriers, such as Black, Indigenous, and racialized students, students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and those who are English language learners.

These students need access to educational assistants, behavioural counsellors, child and youth workers, psychologists, and speech and language pathologists in school to help them learn and thrive.

Meeting the special education needs of students is a constant challenge for any government. A substantial portion of existing special education funding is currently based on a predictive statistical model tied to overall enrolment numbers. Unfortunately, this model fails to account for the increase in participation in special education programs and services that Ontario’s public schools have experienced over the past few



years. It also fails to account for the differences in needs among students requiring special education supports. For example, the current funding formula treats a student who may require occasional withdrawal support from a resource teacher to complete their work similarly to a student with more significant needs.

In 2013-14, the number of students receiving special education programs or services in Ontario was 340,562, or 16.3 per cent of all students. By 2021-22, this number had increased to 352,672, representing 17.4 per cent of all students. Special education funding has not kept up, either with inflationary costs, or with students' increasing need for special education supports. The government must increase special education funding to address this funding gap and ensure that special education grants are based on the actual education needs of students.

Creating inclusive and supportive learning environments for students with special needs also requires that occasional teachers and occasional education workers receive paid professional learning on teaching and educational strategies for supporting these students while in occasional roles without the benefit of day-to-day knowledge of the student and an ongoing rapport.

In the 2024-25 Education Funding Consultation Guide, the government proposes to “modernize” the Special Education Grant by making changes to the Special Incidence Portion (SIP) and Special Equipment Amount (SEA). The changes proposed are simply another step in de-coupling funding allocations from actual student needs.

Since the introduction of the Special Education Statistical Prediction Model (SESPM) in 2010-11, the portion of special education funding that has a direct link to identified student needs has systematically decreased. By the time SESPM was fully phased in in 2017-18, the vast majority of special education funding had no direct connection to identified student needs. This shift in how special education funding is allocated has

had disastrous consequences for students who require special education supports, their families, educators who struggle to help these students succeed in the classroom, their peers who may be affected by lack of supports, and school boards who are left without the ability to allocate the necessary resources due to the lack of provincial funding.

The SIP and the SEA allocations are components of the Special Education Grant that are meant to support extraordinary needs of students. In the case of SIP funding, it is meant to "help cover the cost of staff support to ensure the health and/or safety of students who have extraordinarily high needs and of others at school."<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile SEA "provides funding to school boards to assist with the costs of equipment essential to support students with special education needs."<sup>17</sup> This equipment could include technology and software, including some technical support and training, as well as non-computer based equipment, such as sensory support, vision support, hearing support, personal care support, and physical assists support equipment.

SIP funding is allocated based on claims submitted by school boards. These claims are made by school boards "on behalf of students who require more than two full-time equivalent (FTE) board-paid staff providing intensive support for the health and/or safety of the applicant student, other students and/or staff".<sup>18</sup> The current application-based process ties the amount and kind of staffing support required to an individual student's strengths and needs, which ensures that the funding is used for its intended purpose

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<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Education (2022). *Special Education Funding Guidelines, Special Incidence Portion (SIP), 2022-23*. Toronto, ON. [files.ontario.ca/edu-2223-sip-guidelines-en-2022-03-18.pdf](https://files.ontario.ca/edu-2223-sip-guidelines-en-2022-03-18.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Education (2023). *Special Education Funding Guidelines, Special Equipment Amount (SEA), 2023-24*. Toronto, ON. [files.ontario.ca/edu-2324-sea-guidelines-en-2023-04-21.pdf](https://files.ontario.ca/edu-2324-sea-guidelines-en-2023-04-21.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Education (2022). *Special Education Funding Guidelines: Special Incidence Portion (SIP) 2022-23*. Toronto, ON. [files.ontario.ca/edu-2223-sip-guidelines-en-2022-03-18.pdf](https://files.ontario.ca/edu-2223-sip-guidelines-en-2022-03-18.pdf)

and provides sufficient flexibility to school boards on how the application process is conducted to meet local priorities. The current process also provides important data related to students with high needs. Moving from an application-based model to a model based on school board's historical SIP funding will break the link between identified student needs and allocated funding and remove this important source of data. A process that is not directly linked to identified needs cannot account for future changes in the student population nor for changes in students' individual needs, which will inevitably leave vulnerable students without the support they need.

SEA funding is currently comprised of two components: a per-pupil amount meant for the purchases of computers, software, and computing related devices and a claims-based portion that provides funding for other non-computer-based equipment to be used by students including sensory support, hearing support, vision support, personal care support, and physical assists support.

Increasingly, students in grades 4 and above require the use of computers on a daily basis. The government should provide funding to school boards to support the purchase of technology devices on a 1:1 basis for all students in grades 4 and above. Adequately funding devices for all students who need them as a result of updates in the curriculum would allow the per-pupil portion of SEA funding to be focused on the specialized computers and computing related devices and tools that some students need in order to fully participate in the classroom.

The per-pupil portion of SEA funding has not kept up with the increasing costs of purchasing computer and computing-related equipment. In 2017-18, the per-pupil portion of SEA funding was comprised of a base amount of \$10,000 for each school board plus an allocation of \$36.10 per pupil, based on the board's day school average daily enrolment (ADE). In 2022-23, the government increased the allocation to a base amount of \$20,000 per school board and \$39.46 per pupil (based on ADE). While this was a welcomed

increase, the per-pupil amount was below what would have been status-quo funding compared to 2017-18 when accounting for inflation. For 2024-25, the per-pupil portion would need to increase to \$44.09 per pupil, just to bring it in line with what was provided in 2017-18.

Instead of further eroding current special education funding, the government should increase these allocations and strengthen the link between funding and actual student needs.

### **Recommendations:**

8. Base special education grants on actual student needs.
9. Allocate funding to school boards for the hiring of additional educational assistants, psychologists, behavioural therapists, child and youth workers, school support counsellors, and speech and language pathologists.
10. Allocate funding to provide occasional teachers and occasional education workers paid professional learning on teaching and educational strategies to support students with special education needs.
11. Maintain a claims-based process for the Special Incidence Portion of the Special Education Grant to ensure this funding continues to be directly linked to identified student needs.
12. Provide school boards with funding for the purchase of technology devices on a 1:1 basis for students in grades 4 and above.
13. Increase the per-pupil portion of the Special Equipment Amount to account for increasing costs due to inflation.
14. Maintain the claims-based portion of the Special Equipment Amount to ensure that funding is directly linked to identified student needs.

### **Addressing Violence in Schools**

In February and March 2023 ETFO commissioned national research firm Strategic Communications (Stratcom) to conduct a survey of its members about their experiences of workplace violence.<sup>19</sup> Almost

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<sup>19</sup> Stratcom (2023). *2023 Workplace Violence Survey. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario*. Toronto, ON. [etfo.ca/getmedia/78cffcdd-8e6f-4703-a8d1-9ef03ad97a5f/230602-ETFO\\_2023-Workplace-Violence-Survey-report-CONDENSED-rev2-appendix-B.pdf](https://etfo.ca/getmedia/78cffcdd-8e6f-4703-a8d1-9ef03ad97a5f/230602-ETFO_2023-Workplace-Violence-Survey-report-CONDENSED-rev2-appendix-B.pdf)

25,000 ETFO members responded to the survey. An alarming number of ETFO members (77 per cent) said they personally experienced violence or witnessed violence against another staff member in the 2022-2023 school year. Four out of five members stated there are more incidents of violence in schools now than when they started working in the Ontario public elementary school system. Two-thirds of members said the severity of violent incidents has increased and 72 per cent said the number of incidents has increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Forty-two per cent of members have suffered a physical injury, illness and/or psychological injury/illness as a result of workplace violence against them during the last school year. Approximately 30 per cent of ETFO members' injuries warranted a Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) claim, although those claims were not always submitted for a variety of reasons.

Increasing violence leads to an increasing number of traumatic mental stress claims, chronic mental stress claims, and physical lost-time injuries. The data shows that many injuries are underreported. This should be cause for financial concern since preventing injury and illness is proven to be cost-effective. Whether workers are using WSIB, long-term disability, or sick leave this is an expensive problem the government should address proactively. The health and safety of teachers and education workers should not be collateral damage as the public education system is starved of the funding it requires.

Learning is being disrupted and violence is being normalized in schools because the system is suffering from chronic underfunding, under-resourcing, and understaffing, creating environments where student needs are going unmet.

## Funding to Ensure Availability of Frontline Supports

Front-line supports are often not available to educators and students. A majority of ETFO members reported that educational assistants (61 per cent), social workers (56 per cent), and child and youth workers (53 per cent) were available only “some of the time,” “rarely,” or “never” when needed in the 2022-23 school year.

ETFO supports Ontario’s integrated model for education, which means that students, whenever possible, should be learning together with their same-age peers regardless of their needs. This, however, requires full funding and full support. The government should not look at inclusion as a way to cut costs. They must provide adequate funding for staffing, training, and resources.

Students who are struggling, and especially students with special education needs, have been chronically under-served by the government. School boards are not getting adequate funding to ensure students get access to timely assessments and front-line support workers. Providing funding to meet the actual needs of all students is, at its core, a human rights issue. Being understaffed and under-resourced adversely impacts students' access to education and is contributing to the rise in incidents and the severity of violence in schools.

Across the province last year ETFO members reported that positions were not filled due to absences – and many of those staff have responsibilities set out in safety plans. Without contingency plans in place for trained replacement staff, safety plans cannot be implemented and sometimes students are temporarily excluded from school until supports are in place. This, again, adversely impacts students' access to education and could be avoided with adequate staffing, appropriate safety protections, and adequate pay to help ensure that jobs do not go unfilled.

Adequate replacement staff and funding also needs to be provided to ensure workers are provided with release time from class (or time in lieu) for completing reports or attending safety related meetings (e.g., safety plan updates, debriefing, etc.). More than one in five ETFO members who did not complete reports indicated that it was because they did not have the time. Fulfilling reporting responsibilities takes considerable time, particularly when there are follow-up questions to investigate the root causes of an incident with an aim for prevention.

### **Recommendation:**

15. Provide adequate funding to school boards to ensure availability of appropriately trained staff, both regularly and to fill absences due to illness or coverage for staff to follow up on violent incidents.

### **Funding to Support the Work of the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety**

In order to adequately assist school boards in providing training to administrators and staff, the government needs to provide support for the work of the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety (PWGHS).

Historically, this group has provided the opportunity for the input of all public education sector stakeholders to be considered during the development of resources. To fulfil its mandate, the PWGHS needs the availability of staff in the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development for meetings and sub-committee meetings, and to ensure work is completed between meetings. The number of meetings should go beyond the minimum number currently outlined in the terms of reference and should not be interrupted due to collective bargaining since staff and students continue to be impacted by workplace violence. The government needs to allocate funding to ensure staff are dedicated to dealing with health and safety in the K-12 education sector, particularly in addressing workplace violence.

Smaller school boards particularly appreciate the resources created by the PWGHS. Developing the resources centrally is a more efficient use of time and resources, allows for proper vetting, and ensures

consistent expectations and training are provided. These resources are then provided to school boards for further input on implementation through local joint health and safety committees (JHSC) to ensure the training reflects the local structure and practices.

This training and resources for administrators should include, but not be limited to, an overview of legal responsibilities related to incident reporting, immediately responding to incidents, consulting and debriefing with staff, creating and updating safety plans and risk assessments, and notifying staff of the risk of violence.

To inform this work, the PWGHS also needs to analyze data collected from school boards and examples of best practices. Collaboration on a standardized province-wide incident reporting system is still needed to simplify the process for education workers, to facilitate information required by JHSCs, and to support adequate data collection for analysis and action by the provincial government. Given that there are still many barriers to workers reporting incidents in schools, ETFO's data is currently the most reliable indicator of the levels of violence because of the high number of respondents to both 2017 and 2023 surveys.

### **Recommendation:**

16. Allocate funding to the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development to support the work of the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety.

### **Funding to Train School Administration on Appropriately Responding to Violent Incidents**

According to the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, workplace violence continues to be the number one hazard and risk to workers in the education sector. The Violence in Education Initiative for Publicly Funded Schools included focused inspections in February and March 2023. Despite the school boards being visited in 2018 to remind them of expectations, support being



provided to school boards by their health and safety association, and advanced warning of the visits provided to school boards, a significant number of schools were found to be non-compliant with the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHS) - particularly OHS Section 32.0.3 requiring employers/supervisors to assess and re-assess the risk of workplace violence.

Although 58 per cent of members who experienced violence informed their administrators, only 41 per cent indicated that they always made a written/online report, meaning that administrators are aware of the significant underreporting of violence. At the same time, 63 per cent of ETFO members said that school administrators do not take the problem of violence in elementary classrooms as seriously as they should.

Only 36 per cent of ETFO members who reported incidents of violence indicated that there was follow-up or investigation “in all cases” or “in some cases.” This is a significant decrease from the 50 per cent reported in 2017. When there were follow-up actions to prevent the recurrence of violent incidents, only eight per cent of members rated those actions as effective.

School administrators need support in understanding their legal responsibilities related to incident reporting, immediately responding to incidents, consulting and debriefing with staff, creating and updating safety plans and risk assessments, and notifying staff of the risk of violence. Training for administrators should be developed in consultation with the PWGHS.

### **Recommendation:**

17. Provide funding to school boards to ensure all administrators are provided with training to prepare them to address workplace violence.

## Building More Inclusive Classrooms

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the deep-rooted socio-economic disparities that exist in our province. The negative impacts of the pandemic were disproportionately felt by already marginalized communities. Those communities have also been the most impacted by high inflation as they struggle to make ends meet. The government must take concrete steps to ameliorate the inequity experienced by these communities and build a more just Ontario for everyone, especially Black, Indigenous, racialized, and low-income communities.

To promote engaged and active learning among all students, classrooms and school libraries need textbooks and other resources that reflect the rich cultural, racial, and gender identities of students and their families. Ontario has adopted an Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. This policy provides an important framework for equity, but more needs to be done to ensure that the vision for equity is realized. Educators need culturally relevant classroom materials that reflect the diversity of their classrooms and school communities.

Teachers and other education workers also need professional learning that improves their ability to address racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism. These forms of discrimination affect our schools and permeate our society. This professional learning should take place within the instructional day.

The impacts of geopolitical conflicts affect Ontario classrooms daily. Educational professionals need both resources and guidance to feel supported important discussions on issues such as islamophobia and antisemitism specifically.

### Recommendations:

18. Provide culturally relevant classroom resources to support Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.
19. Provide professional learning for educators to help them address racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism.

### **Combatting Anti-Black Racism**

Over recent years, there has been widespread and unprecedented public recognition that systemic racism, particularly anti-Black racism, persists in our societies. ETFO recognizes the multiple and systemic ways that anti-Black racism is enacted and reproduced in all our institutions, including policing, health care, immigration, social services, and public education.

Anti-Black racism in education is long-standing and has harmed Black students, their families, and Black educators. In the past several years alone, several school boards have come under intense public scrutiny following the exposure of anti-Black racism in their practices. School boards, and the provincial government, need to be accountable for upholding existing policies aimed at eradicating anti-Black racism, reporting on progress, and making the changes necessary to address anti-Black racism in schools.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) recently held province-wide community consultations on anti-Black racism in education. ETFO made a submission to the OHRC with several policy proposals aimed at combatting anti-Black racism in Ontario’s public education system and beyond.<sup>20</sup> Some of those recommendations are also included in this submission.

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<sup>20</sup> ETFO (2023). *Ending Anti-Black Racism in the Public Education System and Beyond - Submission to the Ontario Human Rights Commission*. Toronto, ON. [etfo.ca/getmedia/ae39e628-fa90-4eac-9c89-9acadc334024/231025-Sept-2023-OHRC-submission.pdf](https://etfo.ca/getmedia/ae39e628-fa90-4eac-9c89-9acadc334024/231025-Sept-2023-OHRC-submission.pdf)

The Ministry of Education released the Board Improvement and Equity Plan (BIEP) in the fall of 2021. This planning tool is meant to support school boards in advancing equity and required school boards to collect voluntary student demographic data by September 2022. In January 2023, People for Education released a report titled *A Progress Report on Anti-Racism Policy Across Canada*<sup>21</sup>. The report found that 74 per cent of public schools in Ontario included the term “racism” in their equity policy documents, 40 per cent of schools have an anti-racism statement on their website, and 28 per cent have an anti-racism policy available on their website. While these are important steps in advancing equity and anti-racism, the question remains as to how schools are implementing anti-racism and equity strategies in their schools.

The concept of ‘critical mass’ is important if the potential of racialized and Black teachers and education workers is to be realized within the education system. They need to see themselves represented in the system as part of a welcoming and inclusive culture. This is also true for Black students.

There must be a concerted effort among all education stakeholders to address barriers in the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Black educators. Anti-Black racism training for all education leadership, staff, teachers, and education workers is key to achieving institutional and systemic change and to creating organizational cultures that are welcoming and inclusive of Black educators and students. The government must adequately fund and resource initiatives that address anti-Black racism within the public education system.

The government has acknowledged that anti-Black racism exists within the education sector and has stated that the well-being and mental health of Black communities is paramount. Without the necessary support

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<sup>21</sup> People for Education (2023). *A Progress Report on Anti-Racism Policy Across Canada*. Toronto, ON: People for Education [peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PFE-AntiRacismReport-EN-2023-v1d.pdf](https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PFE-AntiRacismReport-EN-2023-v1d.pdf)

for students and educators, students who have faced systemic barriers in the past will continue to do so.

The government must make good on its commitment and direct funding to the education sector and community organizations to eradicate anti-Black racism, and all other forms of racism, from Ontario's public education system.

### **Recommendations:**

20. Provide additional funding to school boards to hire more counsellors, social workers, and school nurses that would specifically assist families and students from Black, racialized, and Indigenous communities, as well as students living in low-income communities.
21. Provide funding to the public education sector and community groups for the purpose of eradicating anti-Black racism and other forms of racism.
22. Instruct all school boards to immediately begin collection of disaggregated race-based student and staff data.
23. Ensure that the collection of race-based data by school boards is standardized, includes all employees and their positions, respects employees' privacy, meets current best practices, and is made publicly available.
24. Implement mandatory ongoing training and professional development for all administrators, school board trustees, and teacher candidates on recognizing and addressing anti-Black racism, including microaggressions.

### **Supporting Truth and Reconciliation in Public Education**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' Call to Action #62 calls on the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to:

Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students.

Through Indigenous-led and designed courses, students in Ontario will increase their knowledge of the historical and cultural contributions of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, including their harsh realities past and present. Students also stand to gain a deeper understanding of what truth and reconciliation means, and what Canada's and Ontario's obligations are to Indigenous Peoples moving forward.

To support the implementation of the updated Indigenous education curriculum, educators need culturally relevant curriculum resources that have been co-created with Indigenous people. The government should provide adequate funding for the creation of these resources.

### **Recommendation:**

25. Allocate funding for the development of culturally relevant curriculum resources co-created with Indigenous people, to support the updated Indigenous education curriculum.

## **Addressing Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Ontario Schools**

The war in Gaza has impacted Ontarians through a dramatic increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic reported hate crimes since October 7, 2023. Ontario's schools are places that can provide safety and mitigate harm for Jewish and Muslim students. The government must provide supports in the form of professional learning that addresses antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-hate strategies for school board staff and administrators. Additional funding for resources that challenge stereotypes and affirm identities for Jewish and Muslims students would equip educators with the tools to create safer classrooms. The Ontario Human Rights Commission's statement *No Room for Hate in Schools* reaffirms the urgency of addressing hate and violence within Ontario's classrooms<sup>22</sup>. Additional supports for school boards to create strategies to that address the rise in hate crimes and their impact on students is highly encouraged.

### **Recommendation:**

26. Allocate funding for the development of resources that positively affirm Jewish and Muslim identities, challenge Jewish and Muslim stereotypes, and provide strategies for educators, school board staff and administrators to counter hate within learning communities.

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<sup>22</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission (2023). *OHRC Statement: No Room for Hate in Schools*. [ohrc.on.ca/en/news\\_centre/ohrc-statement-no-room-hate-schools](https://ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/ohrc-statement-no-room-hate-schools)

## Mental Health Supports

ETFO has repeatedly stated that the mental health of teachers, education workers, and students requires the urgent attention of the provincial government. In July 2023, the Ministry of Education issued Policy/Program Memorandum 169 on student mental health and, more recently, released a memo to school boards about new grade 7 and 8 mental health literacy modules. ETFO supports the government's stated commitment "to provide culturally responsive, evidence-informed student mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention services that respects students as complex individuals and provide appropriate support for their diverse needs," but this commitment must come with funding for the supports in schools and in the community that are necessary to ensure students' developmental, emotional, and behavioural needs are met.

In its 2022 Annual Ontario School Survey,<sup>23</sup> People for Education reported that:

- only 18% of elementary schools have guidance counsellors, with virtually all of those working part-time (98%)
- only 30% of elementary schools have regular access to psychologists
- only 49% of elementary schools have regular access to social workers
- only 36% of elementary schools have regular access to child and youth workers

In its latest survey<sup>24</sup>, based on responses from principals across the province, People for Education found:

- increased behavioural issues, students having difficulties with self-regulation, and a range of unaddressed mental health challenges

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<sup>23</sup> People for Education (2022). *2021–2022 Annual Ontario School Survey data handbook*. Toronto, ON: People for Education. [peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/PFE-AOSS-AnnualReport2022-EN.pdf](https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/PFE-AOSS-AnnualReport2022-EN.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> People for Education (2023). *Principals Sound the Alarm About Students' Mental Health*. Toronto, ON: People for Education [peopleforeducation.ca/report/principals-sound-the-alarm-about-students-mental-health/](https://peopleforeducation.ca/report/principals-sound-the-alarm-about-students-mental-health/)

- 28% of elementary schools have no access to a psychologist – nearly double the number reported in 2011
- 93% of schools reported a need for support staff such as educational assistants
- 95% of schools report needing some or more support for students' mental health and well-being

Additional funding must be provided to improve access to in-school supports, including guidance

counsellors, social workers, psychologists, and child and youth workers, especially in underserved areas.

Supporting students' emotional, developmental, and behavioural needs is critical so that ETFO members can focus on supporting students' learning needs.

### **Recommendations:**

27. Provide additional funding to improve access to in-school supports, including guidance counsellors, social workers, psychologists, and child and youth workers, especially in underserved areas.
28. Allocate funding for additional in-school and community supports necessary to ensure students' developmental and behavioural needs are met.
29. Develop and deliver – in consultation with mental health experts, teachers, education workers, unions, and other education stakeholders – long-term, fully funded, comprehensive, culturally responsive mental health supports for students.
30. Allocate ongoing, sustainable funding for high-quality professional learning for educators in the area of student mental health, to take place within the instructional day.

### **Retention and Recruitment**

Many school boards are experiencing staffing crises while at the same time many teachers have made the difficult choice to leave the profession. The government must focus on improving the working conditions of teachers and educators in order to improve retention and recruitment.

To improve working conditions in Ontario's public schools the government needs to provide funding for smaller classes, adequate front-line staffing to support students with special education needs, access to mental health supports for students and educators, and professional learning to support educators. It also



needs to respect teachers and other educators and work with the unions that represent them to improve Ontario’s public education system.

## Supporting Second Language Programs

An area that requires greater transparency and accountability from school boards, and where additional funding is necessary, is supporting children who enter Ontario schools without language proficiency in either English or French.

These students require appropriate support to ensure they progress well academically, socially, and emotionally. The number of students who speak neither English nor French when they register for school has increased significantly. As reported by the 2017 People for Education annual survey of public schools, 63 per cent of English elementary schools have English language learners (ELLs)<sup>25</sup> as compared to 43 per cent in 2002-03. These students face significant challenges in catching up to their peers, and schools do not have adequate resources to support them. The pandemic created additional challenges for these students, especially for those engaged in virtual learning.

The funding formula for ELLs who are not born in Canada is a guaranteed per-student amount – which is reduced over four years – rather than a lump sum divided among school boards, as is the case for Canadian-born ELLs. Furthermore, the grants assume that ELLs only require special language programs for up to four years, an assumption that is not supported by reports from teachers who work with these students or by research on language acquisition. Funding should be allocated based on students achieving a standard level

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<sup>25</sup> People for Education (2017). *Competing Priorities (Annual Report on Ontario’s Publicly Funded Schools 2017)*. Toronto, ON: People for Education. [peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/P4E-annual-report-2017.pdf](https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/P4E-annual-report-2017.pdf)

of language proficiency and not based on whether they were born in Canada or the number of years they have been in Canada.

There is currently no direct accountability for school boards to ensure that second-language grants are used for their intended programs. All too often, the overall shortfalls in the funding formula have led to school boards using their second-language grants for other purposes and shortchanging ELL students. The government should establish accountability measures by mandating that school boards spend English as a Second Language (ESL) grants on the intended programs.

### **Recommendations:**

31. Ensure all funding envelopes that have been established to support equity-related programs, special education programs, and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs be maintained.
32. Increase funding for English language learners (ELLs) programs and ESL teachers to meet the language acquisition needs of students requiring ELL support.
33. Establish accountability measures to prevent school boards from diverting ESL funding to non-ESL services and require school boards to spend ESL funding on its intended purpose.

FC:MG

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase funding to public education to close the funding gap identified by the FAO.
2. Resume the practice of including the breakdown of funding allocations under the Education category in the provincial budget.
3. Establish an independent, external review of Ontario's education funding formula to ensure it reflects actual student needs.
4. Account for inflation when comparing provincial education funding levels with those of previous fiscal years.
5. Cap grades 4 to 8 class size at 24 students.
6. Cap Kindergarten class size at 26 students.
7. Ensure every Kindergarten class is staffed with a full-time certified teacher and a designated early childhood educator.
8. Base special education grants on actual student needs.
9. Allocate funding to school boards for the hiring of additional educational assistants, psychologists, behavioural therapists, child and youth workers, school support counsellors, and speech and language pathologists.
10. Allocate funding to provide occasional teachers and occasional education workers paid professional learning on teaching and educational strategies to support students with special education needs.
11. Maintain a claims-based process for the Special Incidence Portion of the Special Education Grant to ensure this funding continues to be directly linked to identified student needs.
12. Provide school boards with funding for the purchase of technology devices on a 1:1 basis for students in grades 4 and above.
13. Increase the per-pupil portion of the Special Equipment Amount to account for increasing costs due to inflation.
14. Maintain the claims-based portion of the Special Equipment Amount to ensure that funding is directly linked to identified student needs.
15. Provide adequate funding to school boards to ensure availability of appropriately trained staff, both regularly and to fill absences due to illness or coverage for staff to follow up on violent incidents.
16. Allocate funding to the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development to support the work of the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety.
17. Provide funding to school boards to ensure all administrators are provided with training to prepare them to address workplace violence.
18. Provide culturally relevant classroom resources to support Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.
19. Provide professional learning for educators to help them address racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism.

20. Provide additional funding to school boards to hire more counsellors, social workers, and school nurses that would specifically assist families and students from Black, racialized, and Indigenous communities, as well as students living in low-income communities.
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22. Instruct all school boards to immediately begin collection of disaggregated race-based student and staff data.
23. Ensure that the collection of race-based data by school boards is standardized, includes all employees and their positions, respects employees' privacy, meets current best practices, and is made publicly available.
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30. Allocate ongoing, sustainable funding for high-quality professional learning for educators in the area of student mental health, to take place within the instructional day.
31. Ensure all funding envelopes that have been established to support equity-related programs, special education programs, and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs be maintained.
32. Increase funding for English language learners (ELLs) programs and ESL teachers to meet the language acquisition needs of students requiring ELL support.
33. Establish accountability measures to prevent school boards from diverting ESL funding to non-ESL services and require school boards to spend ESL funding on its intended purpose.

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