

# Submission to the Finance and Economic Affairs Committee

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## Pre-budget Hearings

February 1, 2010



Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario  
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The Elementary Teachers' Federation (ETFO) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the 2010 pre-budget hearings conducted by the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. The 2010 provincial budget will play a key role in determining how well Ontario continues to recover from the recent recession. It will also determine to what extent the province will be able to sustain public services and address the needs of those most adversely affected by the economic downturn.

ETFO recognizes that the province is predicting an annual deficit of \$24.7 billion and that the figure could increase if the pace of economic recovery is slower or shallower than anticipated. We commend the government's decision to incur a budgetary deficit last year rather than cut public services that are essential to Ontario's general welfare and future economic prosperity. We also applaud the government's increased investment in education at a time of declining enrolment. This investment is necessary to ensure that Ontario continues to graduate students who have the knowledge and skills to support an increasingly knowledge-based economy.

At the same time, ETFO recognizes that a responsible government must be mindful of the size of the budgetary deficit as the province moves towards full economic recovery and that it will be seeking savings throughout its various ministries. The federation has

some suggestions of where the Ministry of Education can make cuts without negatively affecting the quality of programs we offer our students.

## **PUBLIC SECTOR RESTRAINT**

To date, the government has wisely rejected the notion of targeting public sector salary compensation for restraint measures. Such a move would represent a flagrant disregard for collective agreements and for decisions of the Supreme Court on the issue. Furthermore, it is simplistic to suggest that public sector employees have been sheltered from the economic downturn. While they have not suffered the severe job losses that have hit the auto or forestry sectors for example, public sector employees have family members affected by private sector job loss, their savings have been depleted by the severe stock market slump, and many have faced job loss or had their hours of work cut back. In the education sector, as the result of a number of factors, we have experienced a modest reduction in the teaching force.

ETFO members have been particularly singled-out. The economic decline, which peaked last fall in the midst of our provincial framework discussions for collective bargaining, resulted in our members being forced to accept lower salaries than their secondary, Catholic, and French colleagues over the next four years. As a result, our contracts are providing annual savings to the government of approximately \$45 million.

## **FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN**

The decision to move ahead with full-day kindergarten is the right one for Ontario. Financial pressures mean that the program will be phased in more slowly than many families with young children would like. But, once fully implemented, the program will bring the province closer to jurisdictions in most industrialized nations which have well-established early childhood education programs that are recognized as critical for healthy development, improved student achievement, and supporting workplace participation on the part of young parents, especially women.

Full-day kindergarten will also contribute to economic growth and stability. A strong economy and rebuilding of the tax base depends on the creation of good jobs. Over the course of phasing in full-day kindergarten, the program will create an estimated 3,800 additional teaching positions and 20,000 positions for early childhood educators. These will be good jobs that support every community across the province. The new program should also assist in keeping some elementary schools open which otherwise might face closure. The program should also lead to schools with available classroom space evolving to becoming community hubs for children's services, a development that should mean cost efficiencies and more effective use of public dollars.

## **EFFICIENCIES WITHIN THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION**

If the Ministry of Education is being obliged by government-imposed restraint measures to find efficiencies, ETFO believes the focus should be on spending not directly related to classroom programs and resources. The federation recommends that the Ministry look for its cost savings within the operation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and the numerous initiatives funded through the Ministry's Literacy and Numeracy/Student Success Secretariat.

The EQAO has been administering provincial assessments in grades 3 and 6 since 1997. The testing culture in the province intensified with the establishment of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in 2004 and the launch of a series of initiatives focused on increasing the number of students who meet the provincial standard on the provincial assessments. Elementary teachers have gained some important professional knowledge about student assessment through Ministry in-service provided to support the literacy and numeracy initiatives. Classroom teachers across the province report, however, that the ongoing push for assessment data leaves them without sufficient time to reflect on the in-service, takes important time away from classroom instruction, and leads to a disproportionate time spent on literacy and numeracy to the detriment of other subjects. It is clearly time to take a break from the current assessment practices and allow teachers to apply what they've learned to date.

## **Education Quality and Accountability Office**

ETFO recommends that the government consider a number of options to find savings from the EQAO's \$34 million annual budget. These include

- adopting a two-year moratorium on the tests,
- eliminating the grade 3 or 6 tests,
- testing on a two- or three-year cycle,
- moving to random sample testing whereby only students in a few randomly selected schools participate in the tests each year.

None of these options would undermine provincial accountability for student achievement. Testing the system is achieved through Ontario's participation in a number of international assessments in reading, mathematics, and science administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Ontario students' results place them among the top performing OECD nations which participate in the tests. Furthermore, there are other assessment tools and strategies that can provide teachers, parents, and school boards with pertinent information about how students are learning in reading, writing, and mathematics. The focus should be on supporting teachers as they provide ongoing feedback on student progress. Report cards and informal reports from teachers should be viewed as the most important source of data on student learning.

Scaling back on the EQAO assessments would also place Ontario in line with other jurisdictions with a history of administering large-scale assessments. Scotland and Wales abolished their national assessments in 2001 and 2003 respectively. In 2008, Northern Ireland cancelled the assessments its students wrote for acceptance to

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grammar schools and England ended its national assessments for 14-year-olds. Within Canada, Manitoba abolished its grade 3, 6, and 9 tests beginning in 1999 and New Brunswick cancelled its high school provincial assessments in 2005. In Alberta, the government is working with the provincial teacher union to develop classroom assessment tools to replace its grade 3 tests.

### **Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat**

The Ministry of Education allocates \$77.5 million to the work of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. The Secretariat has been engaged at the school level for over five years in a number of initiatives aimed at boosting student achievement scores on the EQAO tests. The Ministry could achieve considerable savings by eliminating, temporarily suspending, or dramatically reducing the various initiatives. The Ministry allocates \$14.1 million to support more than 80 Student Achievement Officers who are sent into the field to work with school boards and schools. ETFO believes these individuals duplicate work done by school board consultants and that the positions should be eliminated. Ministry staff should be working at the provincial not the school level.

A major part of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat budget, more than \$33 million, goes to a program entitled Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP). The program targets schools where results on the EQAO tests have been low or have remained static over time and provides intensive support in the area of literacy and

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numeracy. The program has been in place for three years. Now is an appropriate time to end the program, and a similar program – Schools in the Middle – and give teachers in these schools the opportunity to apply what they've learned from the programs without the interruption and intrusion of the intensified intervention. Once the economy recovers, the Ministry should allocate the OFIP funding through the Learning Opportunities Grant which helps school boards to provide additional resources to schools where a significant portion of the students are English language learners or are living in poverty.

ETFO also recommends that the Ministry of Education eliminate the School Effectiveness Framework to achieve savings of \$11.4 million. The program is the result of an over-emphasis on literacy and numeracy achievement levels. Cutting this program, along with other measures suggested above, would allow elementary schools to provide a more balanced program that recognizes that students also learn important skills and knowledge through subjects such as social studies, the arts, music, and phys. ed.

### **ELEMENTARY FUNDING GAP**

In the longer term, as Ontario recovers from the recession, the government must address the ongoing funding gap for elementary education. The fact that the per pupil grant for elementary education is several hundred dollars lower than the grant for secondary students means that elementary education is short-changed in terms of funding for textbooks, computers, class size in grades 4 to 8, specialist teachers, and

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teacher-librarians. It also means that elementary teachers carry a significantly heavier workload than their colleagues who teach at the high school level.

## **ANTI-POVERTY AGENDA**

ETFO commends the government for its commitment to reduce child poverty by 25 per cent over five years. Recessionary times make the commitment more challenging, but it's the period when people living in poverty are most in need. The federation urges the government to follow through with the promise to review Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Supports Program. It is also important to increase investments in affordable housing and expand the dental care program to low-income adults as well as children. The minimum wage has received modest improvements, but it still fails to provide a liveable income for recipients. Ontario should continue to press the federal government for reforms to the Employment Insurance program in order to increase the number of Ontarians who qualify for EI benefits.

## **CHILD CARE CRISIS**

The Ontario government has known for some time that the federal funds it received through the cancelled federal-provincial/territorial child care agreements would expire at the end of March 2010. This year, the federal funds amount to \$63.5 million on the provincial child care budget. Until there is a change in government at the federal level, there is no hope for a reinstatement of federal funding or a national framework for child

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care. The provincial government cannot sit back and allow child care programs across the province to close. Thousands of Ontario families rely on high quality child care to provide nurturing, educational, and safe environments for their children and to enable them to work, retrain, or attend school.

In 2003, the Liberals campaigned on a promise to restore the \$130 million that was cut from child care by the Tory government. Since being elected, the Liberal government has relied on the short-term federal funds to support child care expansion through its Best Start initiatives. Now is the time to deliver on the original promise of restoring the child care funds cut by the previous government.

## **CONCLUSION**

ETFO commends the government for avoiding the mistakes made by previous governments faced with an economic recession. Cuts to public services or targeting public sector compensation will do nothing to rebuild the economy. Ontarians are relying on the government to sustain essential services, assist those most severely affected by economic dislocation, and invest in ventures that will produce the highly-skilled, well-paying jobs the province needs to prosper.

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