

Submission to the Finance and Economic Affairs Committee

Pre-budget Hearings

January 31, 2011



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The Elementary Teachers' Federation (ETFO) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the 2011 pre-budget hearings conducted by the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. The 2011 Ontario Budget will set the stage for public discourse on key policy areas leading up to the October general election. It will also indicate the extent to which the government is prepared to protect important public services such as education and move forward on its anti-poverty agenda.

Ontario has a strong public elementary and secondary school system. ETFO commends the government for continuing to increase funding for education in the context of declining enrolment and the challenges related to a fragile economic recovery. Much of the additional funding for elementary education since 2003, when this government first took office, has gone to support important new programs such as the reduction in primary class sizes and the introduction of the Early Learning Program. In spite of the consistent investment in public education since 2003, elementary schools are still feeling the effects of the education funding cuts of the previous government and the historic gap in funding between elementary and secondary education.

In the fall, ETFO launched an election platform, entitled *Building Better Schools*. The platform identifies areas where the government could achieve some expenditure efficiencies and where, during the next term in office, additional resources should be

allocated to ensure that Ontario elementary schools provide a more balanced and engaging education that is necessary to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed. Some of these proposals will be highlighted in this submission.

ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The provincial government is now projecting a lower deficit but slower annual growth over the next few years than anticipated by the *2010 Ontario Budget*. The government reports that 75 percent of the jobs lost in the 2008 recession have been restored. However, these jobs may not all be comparable to the full-time, high-paying manufacturing jobs that were so badly decimated during the recession. Following the Ministry of Finance's recent report that Ontario has completed its fifth consecutive quarter of growth, there are grounds for optimism for returning to a stronger economy. However the recovery is fragile and there remains a strong role for the provincial government to support job creation and programs that assist the working poor and the unemployed.

PUBLIC SECTOR RESTRAINT

The Fall Economic Statement indicates that there will be no funding for "incremental compensation increases for the first two years of future collective agreements" in the public sector. This policy is problematic on a number of accounts. It suggests that public sector workers aren't affected by economic downturns and that they should be

singled out for public expenditure efficiencies. This ignores the fact that public sector salaries tend to lag behind economic changes and that there will be a natural downward pressure on public sector negotiations without government intervention. Public sector salaries may have increased at a faster rate than private sector salaries since 2003, but public sector salary increases lagged behind increases in the private sector between 1993 and 2001.¹ We can anticipate a similar trend as we look ahead. The most recent federal labour statistics indicate that Ontario wage adjustments slowly decreased throughout 2009. By the last quarter in 2009, wage adjustments were averaging 1.9 percent. While public sector settlements were slightly ahead of those in the private sector, public sector wage adjustments are also declining in response to economic trends.

Economic recovery depends on consumer spending. Taking money out of the pockets of public sector workers is counterproductive. It also flies in the face of market forces that will likely see a return to the cycle where private sector agreements once again surpass those in the public sector.

The government's expectations for a two-year salary freeze are particularly problematic for ETFO members who were forced to accept a provincial framework agreement for

¹ Hugh Mackenzie, *Steering Ontario Out of Recession: A Plan of Action*. OAB Technical Paper. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 2010.

their four-year collective agreements expiring in August 2012 that gives them 2 percent less in salary adjustments than their counterparts employed in the Catholic and French-language school systems. ETFO will be looking for pay equity for our members in the next round of bargaining. The federation is also lobbying the Ministry of Education to amend the education grants so that the amount boards receive for occasional teacher compensation is more in line with that of contract teachers and better reflects their qualifications and experience.

EDUCATION FUNDING

The government has made increasing student achievement in literacy and numeracy a priority. This focus has led to Ontario students doing well on international standardized tests, but it has also led to many schools being over-taken by data collection initiatives that leave teachers with insufficient time to teach all areas of the curriculum. It means that elementary students are often short-changed in terms of studying history and geography, learning about design and technology, experiencing the arts, or benefiting from robust physical health and education programs.

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), which administers the grade 3 and 6 provincial tests, has a \$33 million budget. The Ministry of Education spends approximately \$78 million on the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (now within the Student Achievement Division). It spends a further \$14.1 million to support 80 Student Achievement Officers who duplicate the work of school board consultants. There is a

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plethora of other Ministry-driven and board-sponsored literacy and numeracy initiatives for which it is difficult to calculate the overall expenditure because no one within government seems to have a handle on the extent of these initiatives at the school level.

- **Specialist Teachers and Smaller Classes**

ETFO believes the funding for the EQAO-related initiatives would be better spent on strategies and programs that focus on engaging students and giving teachers more time to spend with individual students. This means increasing the number of specialist teachers in the arts, guidance, design and technology, and phys. ed as well as teacher-librarians who can contribute more to a school's focus on literacy than the myriad of data-related initiatives imposed on our schools. It also means reducing class sizes in grades 4 to 8 and in the new full-day kindergarten programs. Class sizes in these grades are the highest among elementary and secondary grades. Primary grades are funded for a class size of 20 and secondary grades are funded to support a class size average of 22 students. Grades 4 to 8 are funded to support a class size average of 25. In reality, many grade 4 to 8 classes have more than 30 students.

- **Early Learning Program**

Along with Quebec, Ontario is leading the way within Canada in terms of early childhood education. The new Early Learning Program (full-day kindergarten) reflects what a solid core of research tells us about early intervention and support for child

development. If supported with the necessary resources, the Early Learning Program will play a key role in improving longer term student success and well-being; it will contribute to significant longer term savings through reduced academic and social interventions in higher grades.

The Early Learning Program funds one teacher and one designated early childhood educator in classes that average 26 students. The new program is based on a well-researched play-based curriculum, but the number of students in the class and the physical space of many of the classrooms being used do not support the activity-based learning that forms the basis of the program. The program also includes children who do not turn four-years-old until the end of December. Our teacher and designated early childhood educator members report that these younger children often need some quiet time during the day that requires a separate rest area within the classroom. With 26 or more students in the class, many classrooms cannot accommodate this need.

As Ontario moves forward to fully phase in this important program, it will need to bring class size in line with other primary grades and provide the capital for building new classrooms that accommodate the activity-based program that is at the core of its philosophy. The funding also needs to support higher salaries for the designated early childhood educators in order to reflect the qualifications and experience they bring to Early Learning Program.

- **Technology**

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in how students learn and how teachers teach and perform their assessment and reporting responsibilities. The applications of technology to the classroom also continue to change at a rapid pace.

In order to keep up with the changes and do their jobs effectively, teachers and other education personnel need greater workplace access to up to date technology, technological support, and more regular professional in-service regarding changes and upgrades. The Ministry of Education grants to school boards need to be increased to support these technology concerns.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

Two recent reports shine light on the need for more training in the area of occupational health and safety, an issue of great concern to ETFO members. The Expert Advisory Panel on Occupational Health and Safety, which reported to the Minister of Labour in December 2010, made three specific recommendations with respect to training. The final report recommended that:

- The Ministry of Labour should create a mandatory requirement for training of Health and Safety Representatives.
- The Ministry of Labour should require health and safety awareness training for all workers.

- The Ministry of Labour should require mandatory health and safety awareness training for all supervisors who are responsible for frontline workers.

More specific to the education sector, the Auditor General of Ontario devoted a chapter in his 2010 annual report to the subject of school safety and found a number of shortcomings related to the training provided at the board and school levels to support new safe school legislation designed to address incidents of bullying and other violent behaviour on the part of students. The Auditor General recommended that the Ministry of Education work more closely with school boards to evaluate the success of its safe schools training initiatives. The reports from ETFO members indicate that, overall, the training was superficial, inconsistent, and haphazard.

The provincial budget needs to provide more funding to support provincial health and safety legislation, particularly in the area of training. To ensure an appropriate balance between management and employees on central health and safety committees, ETFO also recommends that there be direct funding to provide release time for Health and Safety Officers representing teachers and other school board employee groups.

CHILD CARE

The recent transfer of responsibility for child care programs from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to the Ministry of Education opens the door to better integration of children's services and education. It also provides more opportunities for schools with unused classroom space to accommodate child care and other programs such as

parent resource centres. ETFO regrets the recent government decision to amend legislation that mandates school boards to provide extended day programs for children enrolled in the Early Learning Program. The federation believes that school board provision of extended day programs is essential to maximizing the potential benefits of the program and should not be left to third-party providers. We are looking to the government to provide financial incentives to school boards that will encourage them to assume responsibility for the extended day.

Access to high quality, licensed child care is essential for parents who are working, studying, or participating in job-retraining programs. It is more important than ever given the connection between workforce participation and economic recovery. With the expiration of the federal-provincial/territorial child care funding agreements and the move of many four-and five-year-olds from child care to the Early Learning Program, many child care programs are struggling to remain viable. A revised funding scheme for child care programs serving children aged 0 to 4 and older school-aged children is urgently required.

SUSTAINING THE ANTI-POVERTY AGENDA

Following the 2007 provincial election, the government committed to adopting an anti-poverty agenda aimed at reducing the incidence of poverty by 25 percent over a five-year period. While child poverty rates were recently on the decline, the 2008 recession turned the trend-line upwards. The provincial government has established a welcome

review of social assistance, but those families currently living in poverty need immediate interventions and an indication of a broader policy response. In addition to the supports for child care discussed above, ETFO supports the call on the part of anti-poverty activists for a long-term affordable housing strategy, including a monthly housing benefit for low-income tenants.

Recent reports based on Statistics Canada data point to a widening gap between rich and poor and the spectre of a disappearing middle-class. At a national level, the data indicate that Canada's richest – the 246,000 whose average income is \$405,000 – took almost a third (32 percent) of all income growth between 1997 and 2007.² This is a disturbing trend and should raise alarm bells for governments across the country. While the provinces and territories share taxing power with the federal government, Ontario should do what is within its means to introduce a fairer income tax regime that more equitably distributes income among taxpayers.

CONCLUSION

ETFO encourages the government to stay the course in the 2011 provincial budget in terms of a willingness to reduce the deficit at a slower pace in the interests of sustaining

² Armine Yalnizya, *The Rise of Canada's Richest 1%*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, December 2010.

an investment in key public services such as health and education and programs that cushion the worst effects of a fragile economy on low-income and unemployed Ontarians. Investing in a strong and vibrant education system remains central to achieving longer term economic growth and stability. The government should shift some of its education spending from the intense focus on student assessment initiatives to core programs that will make more lasting contributions to the quality of public elementary education. These core programs include smaller classes, specialist teachers and teacher librarians, and the new Early Learning Program.

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