



ETFO Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

***Bill 269, Protecting the People of
Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2021***

April 2021



Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario
etfo.ca | communications@etfo.org



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

The union represents 83,000 elementary public school teachers, occasional teachers and education professionals across the province. Its Building Better Schools education agenda can be viewed at **[BuildingBetterSchools.ca](https://www.buildingbetterschools.ca)**.

Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
136 Isabella Street, Toronto, ON M4Y 0B5
416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836
[etfo.ca](https://www.etfo.ca)

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 ETFOprovincialoffice

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INTRODUCTION

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs on Bill 269, *Protecting the People of Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2021*. ETFO represents 83,000 elementary public school teachers and education professionals across the province and is the largest teacher federation in Canada.

Ontario is facing its worst public health crisis. The government's failure to prevent a third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has left the public health care system on the brink of collapse; with ICU admissions now at the highest point during the pandemic, non-urgent and scheduled surgeries cancelled, and physicians being forced to make impossible choices about who will get life-saving treatment.

The government's refusal to adequately fund safety measures in public schools continues to place students, educators and our communities at risk. School boards across the province have been forced once again to close in-person learning to protect students, educators and their families. More than one in four public schools in Ontario currently have active COVID-19 cases and it has become increasingly clear that the current third-wave, being driven by more infectious variants of the virus, is out of control.

Budget 2021 presented the government with an opportunity to correct course and provide the investments that our public services, including public education, need to sustain Ontarians through the rest of the pandemic and to begin the recovery process. Unfortunately, the government has chosen to double down on its refusal to follow expert advice and continue its ideologically-driven attack on public education. This approach not only places students, educators and our communities

at further risk now, but also ensures that those communities most-impacted during the pandemic will continue to face mounting challenges without the support of their provincial government.

We urge the government to reconsider this approach, reverse the budget cuts to public education, provide the necessary funding and support to public schools to weather the rest of the pandemic, and make the necessary investments in public services to support Ontario's recovery in the months and years ahead.

Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The government has too often ignored the expert advice of medical professionals and others in its response to COVID-19. Over the past few months, the government decided to ignore the advice provided by its own COVID-19 Science Advisory table, which predicted the exact scenario playing out in overwhelmed hospitals across the province and continued to ease restrictions hence contributing to further spread of the virus.

The government's failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic has already resulted in thousands of unnecessary deaths, particularly in long-term care facilities, during the first and second wave. The government's continued refusal to heed the advice of medical professionals is now threatening the full collapse of Ontario's public health care system which could result in thousands more unnecessary deaths.

Ontario is now amid a third wave of this pandemic driven by more infectious COVID-19 variants and poor decisions made by the provincial government. The government has prioritized economic activity and appeasing business interests over the need to reduce the spread of the virus and protect the health of Ontarians.

Community spread of the virus has grown dramatically in certain parts of the province. The virus is propagating in workplaces and schools in many communities. More than one in four schools in the province currently have active COVID-19 cases. The incidence of cases in schools is likely much higher, but because the government has failed to provide sufficient access to asymptomatic testing, we simply do not know to what extent.

The government's vaccination plan has failed to protect educators and other front-line workers and has failed to prevent the increase in cases. Yet, despite the mounting evidence that schools are contributing to the spread of the virus, the government continues to refuse to implement adequate safety protocols in schools including smaller class sizes to allow for sufficient physical distancing, improved ventilation and air filtration, mandatory masks for all students including Kindergarten, enhanced PPE such as N95 masks for educators, and access to asymptomatic testing across the province.

ETFO members know that in-person learning is what is best for students when it can be done safely. For in-person learning to resume safely in schools across the province the government must provide immediate access to the COVID-19 vaccine for educators and other front-line workers. Once vaccines are available to educators and begin to take effect, the government must ensure that additional protections are in place prior to resuming in-person learning.

The government must also address the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on Black, Indigenous, racialized, low-income and other marginalized people in our province. Increasing access to testing, improving contact tracing capacity, providing additional income supports and providing paid sick leave to all workers would alleviate these inequities and help control the spread of COVID-19 in workplaces and communities.

Recommendations:

1. That educators and other front-line workers be given immediate access to the COVID-19 vaccine across the province.
2. That funding be immediately made available to public school boards to reduce class sizes in Kindergarten to Grade 8 to ensure two metres of physical distancing.
3. That mandatory caps on class size for Kindergarten to Grade 8 be established to ensure that two metres of physical distancing can be maintained.
4. That funding be immediately made available to school boards to make necessary improvements to ventilation and air filtration in classrooms.
5. That masks be made mandatory for all students attending school in person, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.
6. That school-based asymptomatic testing be implemented in all regions of the province.
7. That N95 respirators be provided to all educators working at schools in person.
8. That additional funding be provided to school boards to increase support for students engaged in virtual learning; including access to appropriate devices, internet connectivity and other supports.
9. That additional funding be provided to school boards to increase support for students with special education needs.
10. That paid sick leave be immediately implemented for all workers in Ontario.

Funding Cuts to Public Education

Despite the dire situation public schools are facing because of the government's failed response to the pandemic, the government has phased out most of the additional funding allocated in response to COVID-19 with only \$59.3 million allocated for 2021-22, resulting in an overall reduction in education and childcare spending of at least \$800 million.

While the direct effect of this reduction in funding on the Grants for Student Needs (GSNs) will not be known until the details are released in the coming weeks, there will be a negative impact on students and their families, particularly those most heavily affected by the pandemic.

The reduction in education funding is concerning, not only because it means that school boards will not have access to sufficient funding to maintain current safety measures, let alone implement new ones in the new school year, but because it will inevitably place school boards in a difficult fiscal position this coming year. Many school boards would have depleted most, if not all, of their funding reserves during the 2020-21 school year to implement safety measures in response to COVID-19. The additional fiscal pressures resulting from the decrease in education funding in the 2021 budget risk funding cuts at the school-board level, at a time when additional supports will be needed to provide the necessary support for students. There are too many unknowns right now for the government to project what schools need next year. For this reason, the government should plan for all COVID -19 scenarios and avoid making cuts that will negatively impact the quality of public education in Ontario or place students and educators at additional risk.

The long-term projections for education funding contained in the budget show significant funding gaps in the coming years. The 2021 budget projects an increase in the base education and childcare funding of only \$100 million for 2022-23 and similarly for 2023-24. The Financial Accountability Office (FAO) has projected that to maintain status quo service levels, accounting for inflation and enrollment changes, the education budget would have to grow by 2.9 per cent annually¹.

Without considering the COVID-19 related funding, the annual increase in base funding for education and child care is 2.3 per cent in 2021-22, 0.3 per cent in 2022-23 and 0.3 per cent in 2023-24. This means that base education funding will be well below the levels required to maintain status quo service levels. Using the FAO growth benchmark, the long-term projections contained in

¹ Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2021). *Economic and Budget Outlook Winter 2021 - Assessing Ontario's Medium Term Budget Plan and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. p. 13. [fao-on.org/web/default/files/publications/EBO%20Winter%202021/EBO-2021Winter-EN.pdf](https://www.fao.on.org/web/default/files/publications/EBO%20Winter%202021/EBO-2021Winter-EN.pdf)

the budget show a gap in overall education funding that grows to more than \$6 billion by 2029-30 between projected funding and status quo funding.

These long-term projections show the current government's plan includes education cuts not only for this coming fiscal year, but for the years ahead. Ontario's world-class public education system needs investment not only to weather the rest of the pandemic but to recover from years of underfunding. The government should withdraw these funding cuts and provide funding to support students and educators through the months and years ahead.

The government must also tackle long-standing issues in public education. Additional funding should be allocated to reduce class sizes in Kindergarten to Grade 8, establish class size caps in grades 4 to 8, implement a strategy to address violence in schools, and provide adequate special education supports.

Earlier this year ETFO provided a detailed submission to the Ministry of Education including many recommendations needed to sustain and continue to improve our public education system. We urge the government to implement these recommendations. For additional details please see [ETFO's submission to the Ministry of Education regarding education funding for 2021](#).²

Recommendations:

11. That the government withdraw its proposed cuts to public education and continue to provide COVID-19 related funding to school boards.
12. That the government fund and implement a class size cap of 24 students for grades 4 to 8.
13. That the government fund and implement a strategy to address violence in schools.

² Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2021). *ETFO Submission to the Education Labour and Finance Division - 2021 Education Funding Feedback*. Available at: etfo.ca/AboutETFO/Publications/BriefstoGovernmentAgencies/BriefstoGovernmentAgenciesDocuments/SubmissionEducationLabourFinanceDivision.pdf

14. That the government allocate additional funding to provide adequate supports to students with special education needs.
15. That the government provide additional funding to implement the recommendations provided by ETFO to the Ministry of Education for the 2021-22 school year.

Government's Plan to Expand Online and Remote Learning

Ontario's public education system and everyone connected to it has experienced unprecedented stress this past year. The move to virtual learning was never intended to be permanent; it was a temporary measure designed to deliver emergency instruction during a global health crisis. That virtual learning continues during this pandemic is, in large part, due to this government's failure to take the necessary measures to make in-person learning safe.

Now, amid the third wave of the pandemic, the government has revealed that since at least the fall of 2020 — when it should have been focused exclusively on protecting and supporting everyone in our schools and communities — the Ministry was working behind closed doors with unidentified “stakeholders” on a plan to fundamentally change and undermine our public education system and outsource and privatize online learning.

Under the pretext of giving families the luxury of choosing between fully synchronous remote learning or in-person learning, the government's *Expanding Student Access to Online and Remote Learning* plan essentially proposes an entirely new online education system that would function in parallel to the current public education system. This parallel online education system would be funded by redirecting resources away from an already underfunded public education system.

The government has put forward this plan without any foresight on its impact or implications; without any evidence or research to support that this plan is in the best interests of students; and without any transparent, meaningful, and good faith consultations with the actual stakeholders in

Ontario's public education system — not just private interests who stand to profit from the government's plans.

The Ministry's proposal will negatively impact students' health, well-being and learning outcomes, deepen existing inequities, undermine student privacy, lower standards in publicly-funded education, erode public confidence in Ontario's public education system and put us firmly on the path to the privatization of public education.

ETFO firmly believes that the daily, in-person model of instruction and support best meets students' educational, developmental, and social needs, provides the best learning experience, and is the most equitable learning model for all students. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen that remote learning and the hybrid model of learning have detrimental impacts on student health and well-being. In-person learning is critical to the social and emotional health of students. The government has repeatedly relied on this perspective to support their decision to keep schools open, even during the height of the pandemic, when the government failed to provide the appropriate safety protocols to protect students and educators.

This year has provided further evidence that students thrive in an in-person environment where they learn collaboratively and where their learning is assessed daily through formal and informal observations and assessments. While in-person learning is best for all students, it is especially imperative to those in elementary where so many of teachers' assessment methods are based on observation and can simply not be replicated in a virtual setting.

ETFO does not support the outsourcing of online learning to TVO, TFO or any other external organization. Giving this broad mandate to TVO and TFO effectively outsources education delivery to an agency that, although experienced at creating content, does not have the expertise to meet the complex and varied needs of Ontario students.

Attempts to introduce a standardized programming approach to online learning devalues the responsive nature of education. Educators carefully plan and respond to students' individualized needs every day in authentic and culturally responsive ways. School boards are best positioned to make well-informed, thoughtful decisions based on consultation and dialogue with board staff and community stakeholders and are accountable to the communities they serve. The oversight of public education, including any online learning should remain with school boards.

ETFO is deeply concerned that redirecting funding from school boards to TVO, TFO or any other third-party agency will result in funding cuts that will impact elementary students. When facing fiscal pressures, school boards have often taken resources away from programs aimed at students in the elementary panel to fund budget shortfalls in the system at large. Those funding cuts will hurt students, particularly the most vulnerable students.

ETFO echoes the concerns raised by education stakeholders such as OPSBA, which stated pointedly in its March 25 statement on the government's proposed plan for remote learning that the plan "is not in the best interest of students" and "prioritizes cost-cutting or revenue generation over student success and wellbeing."³

Ontarians have a right to ask if the expansion of permanent online learning for elementary students' is in their best interest; pedagogically, physically, emotionally and socially. Instead of using the global pandemic to make sweeping changes to the public education system, the government should be focused on investing in additional safety measures so that all students can resume in-person learning, which provides the best experience for learning, quality delivery, and is the most equitable model for all students.

³ OPSBA. (2021, March 25). OPSBA statement on the government's proposed plan for remote learning [Media release]. Retrieved from: opsba.org/SitePages/OPSBAstatement_remotelearningMarch21.aspx

The government should withdraw its proposals and engage in meaningful, good-faith consultations with stakeholders about how to best support Ontario's public education system.

Recommendation:

16. That the government withdraw its proposals to expand online and remote learning.

CONCLUSION

While Ontarians continue to feel the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, investments in public education, public health care and other public services are desperately needed.

Unfortunately, Bill 269 shows that even amidst an unprecedented public health crisis the government is more interested in providing tax relief to large corporations than investing in the public services Ontarians rely on.

Ontario's economic recovery in the coming months and years will depend on the strength of its public services, including public education. While the government has accepted that running a deficit at this time is necessary, it has decided to cut funding to public education at a time when students, educators and their communities need additional supports. The budget's medium- and long-term projections suggest not only a lack of public investment now, but in fact, an agenda of future cuts to public education.

ETFO calls on the government to implement the necessary measures to protect students and educators including providing immediate access to the COVID-19 vaccine to educators and other front-line workers. Once vaccines are available to educators and front-line workers, and begin to take effect, ETFO urges the government to ensure additional safety measures are implemented to allow for a safe return to in-person instruction. Without access to vaccines and additional safety measures in place, this simply cannot take place safely in many communities across the province.

The government should take this opportunity to change course, start listening to public health and medical experts and make the necessary investments to keep students, educators, their families and all our communities safe, now and in the future.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

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10. That paid sick leave be immediately implemented for all workers in Ontario.
11. That the government withdraw its proposed cuts to public education and continue to provide COVID-19 related funding to school boards.
12. That the government fund and implement a class size cap of 24 students for grades 4 to 8.
13. That the government fund and implement a strategy to address violence in schools.
14. That the government allocate additional funding to provide adequate supports to students with special education needs.
15. That the government provide additional funding to implement the recommendations provided by ETFO to the Ministry of Education for the 2021-22 school year.
16. That the government withdraw its proposals to expand online and remote learning.

SELECTED SOURCES

Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2021). Economic and Budget Outlook Winter 2021 - Assessing Ontario's Medium Term Budget Plan and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic. p. 13. fao-on.org/web/default/files/publications/EBO%20Winter%202021/EBO-2021Winter-EN.pdf

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