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PRE-BUDGET BRIEF

Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

January 2020

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Teachers**
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The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) represents the 45,000 passionate and qualified teachers in Ontario's publicly funded English Catholic schools, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.01** The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input for the development of the 2020 provincial budget.
- 1.02** Over the past year, it has become abundantly clear that the government's agenda is guided by ideology rather than evidence. Time and again, the government has made policy decisions with little thought, foresight, or genuine consultation with Ontarians. In most cases, the only discernable motivation for the government's actions, other than to reverse decisions taken by the previous government, is to cut spending. The consequences for Ontarians, particularly the most vulnerable, have already been tremendous; if the government continues on this course, things will undoubtedly get worse.
- 1.03** The government has been trying to justify its plans by claiming Ontario's finances are in crisis. However, it has been revealed that from the beginning, the government has been misleading Ontarians by wildly inflating the provincial deficit. In 2018-19, the official, recorded deficit was about half what the government originally claimed (Dhanraj 2019). Furthermore, had the government continued to use widely accepted practices regarding the accounting of pension assets, the deficit number would have been significantly lower (Cohn 2019). Meanwhile, despite the government's rhetoric and misrepresentations about out-of-control spending, Ontario continues to spend more than \$2,000 less per capita than the national average on government programs, while remaining the lowest per capita collector of revenue of any province (FAO 2019).
- 1.04** The hallmarks of the government's approach – fiscal austerity, haphazard decision-making, and false or misleading statements to the public – have been nowhere more apparent than in education. Since the release of the 2019 provincial budget, the government has repeatedly claimed it is making unprecedented investments in publicly funded education. The truth is that the core per-pupil funding grant for elementary and secondary education has been cut by more than \$600 million. In addition, funding for programs and supports for vulnerable students has been cut by \$230 million.

1.05 The government regularly claims it has made a \$700 million investment in education this year. But nearly \$690 million of this is for the so-called attrition protection fund, which is a short-term solution meant to mask the loss of teaching positions that would result from the government's planned class size increases and mandatory e-learning regime over the next four years, until the next election. Furthermore, nearly \$400 million in education funding budgeted for this year is for the government's new child care tax credit, which has nothing to do with elementary and secondary education. The government's own documents show that the plan is to essentially freeze education spending over the next four years, which means that as costs inflate and enrolment rises, government funding will be increasingly inadequate (Ministry of Finance 2019). According to calculations by the independent Financial Accountability Office (2019b), by the end of its term, the Ford government plans to be underfunding core elementary and secondary education costs by more than \$1 billion.

1.06 It is simply not possible to reduce spending in education, health, social services, and other areas without negatively affecting the well-being of individuals and families. There is also considerable evidence to show that these investments pay dividends in the short and long term for the broader society and economy. Based on Catholic teachers' professional experience, as well as a wide body of research, this submission will call for a balanced approach to the province's finances, including a progressive taxation system that will support continued investments in public goods and services. While we recognize the government's ideological preferences, we will continue to point out that their mandate and responsibility is to ensure the long-term health and prosperity of all Ontarians.

2. EDUCATION FOR ALL

2.01 Although the government is portraying Ontario's world-class education system as failing, the reality is that by almost any measure, Ontario's students and graduates continue to be international leaders. According to the latest results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), among all participating jurisdictions, Ontario's 15-year-olds performed sixth in reading, thirteenth in math, and tenth in science (CMEC 2019). The five-year graduation rate is now at 87.1 per cent, almost 20 percentage points higher than in 2003-04. Along with other Canadian provinces,

we have been recognized for our commitment to equity and inclusivity, with relatively low gaps in performance and expectations between high- and low-income students, and foreign- and Canadian-born students (Schleicher 2019).

2.02 Making our schools the best they can be does not require dramatic upheaval. School communities across the province have been clear and consistent that the most helpful course of action would be to provide safe, supportive, well-resourced environments for teachers and students to work and learn. **Although the government has signalled its desire to make significant cuts to the education budget, we must remember that a strong, stable, publicly funded education system is not only the most equitable and efficient model, it is a top priority for most Ontarians.** Rather than going backward, we should be building on our solid foundations, and asking whether current levels of investment are sufficient to create quality working and learning conditions that will fully meet students' diverse needs.

2.03 Consultation and Collaboration

The successful reform of Ontario's publicly funded education system since 2003 has been due in large part to the way evidence and experience have guided education policymaking, and the important investments that have been made in programs with well-established, long-term benefits. The co-operative professional relationship between policymakers and teachers in Ontario has been held up as a model for others to follow, providing further evidence that education systems work best when education policy is developed collaboratively (Schleicher 2018; OECD 2011).

2.04 As the frontline workers in the field of education, teachers have firsthand knowledge and experience of how education policy is implemented in the classroom, and which practices and methods are most conducive to student success. Genuine consultations with teacher unions and other education stakeholders could help to guide decisions about education policy in a way that would minimize disruption for students and ensure positive outcomes over the long run.

2.05 Unfortunately, the government has chosen a much less constructive route. For example, while the government regularly refers to the "largest public consultation on education in the province's history," it was evident to anyone who participated

that the discussions were not meant to elicit genuine feedback or rigorous data. The biased, leading questions were focused on only a few topics; online submissions were permitted a limited number of words; the tele-town hall sessions involved only pre-screened comments, with no responses from the Ministry or opportunities for discourse; and there were no checks in place to prevent individuals from participating on multiple occasions. Even if this exercise had been meant to address legitimate concerns or priorities, nobody could have confidence in the validity of the results.

- 2.06** To make matters worse, it has now been revealed that while the government spent nearly \$1 million of public funds to conduct these consultations, the government has gone out of its way to hide the results, despite having previously promised to share them. Perhaps this is because, despite the government's best efforts to torque the process and get the desired responses to support their pre-determined agenda, the public overwhelmingly rejected the government's preferred positions, such as increasing class sizes (Dhanraj 2019b).
- 2.07** When the government has met directly with teachers and other education stakeholders, the primary purpose appears to have been to circumvent the collective bargaining process. OECTA and other teacher affiliates have been called to one-sided meetings and presented with questions about possible reforms to class sizes, the fair hiring process, and compensation, despite the fact that all of these are issues for collective bargaining. The government then moved to introduce regulations and legislation prior to the bargaining process even beginning, which provides further evidence that the government's positions on these matters were decided before any input from stakeholders was sought or received.
- 2.08** **Moving forward, it will be a far better use of everyone's time and resources for the government to engage in regular, open, and constructive dialogue with teachers and education workers, while leaving matters that should be dealt with through collective bargaining at the negotiating table where they belong.**

2.09 Mental Health

There is broad consensus among teachers, students, parents, and health care professionals that significant investments are needed in mental health supports. Unfortunately, whereas the previous government had announced a broad mental health strategy that committed \$2.1 billion over four years, the Ford government's plan only includes \$1.9 billion over ten years. In October 2019, the government announced a \$40 million investment in mental health funding for students, with a majority of that funding dedicated to creating 180 new positions for mental health workers in secondary schools. While investment is always a positive step, this number falls well short of the 400 new positions that had been announced by the previous government.

- 2.10** The previous government had also earmarked funding to hire 450 guidance counsellors for Grade 7 and 8 students, to prepare students for the transition to high school and provide career counselling. These teachers were to be given specific training to identify students experiencing mental health issues and help them access the support they needed. Although the Ford government maintained the funding amount, they lifted the requirement that school boards use these funds for the dedicated hiring to the elementary panel. If the Ford government wants to make good on its commitment to support mental health and addiction programming for students, additional funding is required to address persistent systemic issues.
- 2.11** Up to 70 per cent of mental health issues emerge by adolescence, but young people remain the least likely of any age group to receive adequate care (Government of Canada 2006). The government is aware that, according to recent data, almost 20 per cent of students in Grades 7 to 12 in Ontario report their mental health as fair or poor. In addition, nearly a third of students who wanted to speak to a professional about their mental health issues over the past two years did not know where to turn, and approximately 80 per cent of these students will not receive the treatment they need (MHASEF 2015; Boak et al. 2017). More than 12,000 children and youth are waiting to access mental health services, many of whom are having to turn to emergency services through clinics and hospitals (CMHO 2018; MHASEF Research Team 2017).

2.12 Beyond the stress this causes for families and households, not to mention the strain on the health care system, it is also well established that undiagnosed or untreated mental health issues are a significant impediment to student engagement and achievement. **Providing more mental health supports in schools, where children and youth spend much of their time, reduces stigma, connects students to their communities, and delivers more responsive, cost-effective service, leading to better health outcomes and improved academic performance.** Progress has been made through programs introduced by the previous government, such as School Mental Health ASSIST and Mental Health and Addiction Nurses in District School Boards, but we are still not moving fast enough in developing a comprehensive, adequately resourced approach that strikes an appropriate balance between prevention and intervention, especially early and ongoing intervention.

2.13 Naturally, the mental health needs of students, and the accessibility of services, varies in accordance with the population and geography of our school communities. We must ensure that rural schools and/or schools with lower student populations are not disadvantaged in terms of access to services. To ensure the most efficient and effective services, there should be co-ordination between the Ministry of Education and other ministries, further exploration of the community hub model, and regular consultation with frontline workers, which for Catholic teachers would be their duly elected representatives at OECTA.

2.14 Special Education

Increased funding for special education over the past decade has paid dividends. For example, according to EQAO data, in 2009-10, 27 per cent of Grade 3 students with special education needs were at or above the provincial standard in reading; in 2018-19 it was 47 per cent. For Grade 6 students with special education needs, the percentage of students at or above the provincial standard increased from 34 per cent in 2009-10 to 53 per cent in 2018-19 (EQAO 2019a). Despite this, the Ford government has cut vital resources for students with special education needs, and has mismanaged the autism file to the detriment of students.

- 2.15** Schools across the province are having difficulty providing for all students' special education needs. It has been reported that more than 80 per cent of school boards are spending more on special education than they are allotted by the province, and some students are being asked to stay home because their school is not able to provide appropriate services and supports on a daily basis (McQuigge 2018; Rushowy and Ferguson 2015). Only 72 per cent of rural elementary schools report having a full-time special education teacher, and the average ratio of students receiving special education support to special education teachers is 38:1 in elementary school and 77:1 in secondary school (People for Education 2019). School boards require sufficient resources to provide services for all students with special education needs, as well as proper resources and guidance around class size and class composition to facilitate integration into the classroom (Froese-Germain and Riel 2012).
- 2.16** Catholic teachers were particularly disappointed by the government's decision to cancel the planned increase to the Special Incidence Portion (SIP), which was capped for two decades at \$27,000, and has been increased recently by less than \$700 (Ontario 2019). This amount is well below the salary grid for educational assistants and is not nearly enough to cover the increasing costs of specialized staff and necessary materials. In response to advocacy from OECTA and others, the previous government had finally planned to increase the SIP by \$30 million, which would have enabled schools to hire an additional 500 educational assistants to support students with special education needs, improving the learning environment for everyone. Instead, the Ford government cut \$2 million from the original announcement and reallocated the remaining \$28 million to the Special Education Per-Pupil Amount Allocation, with no indication of hiring any new educational assistants. While Catholic teachers recommend a variety of investments in special education, **at the very least the planned increase in dedicated SIP funding that students, families, and schools were counting on should be immediately restored.**
- 2.17** The government has also taken a problematic approach to autism funding, which has threatened to put additional strain on students and publicly funded schools. When initial changes to the Ontario Autism Program were announced in February 2019, they were met with widespread condemnation from parents and health advocates (Sharkey 2019). OECTA and other education stakeholders noted that by providing

a fixed amount of money for children with autism, based only on income and age, many families would no longer be able to afford specialized services. The result would be more students with autism attending publicly funded schools, despite the fact the government provided no ongoing funding for student supports (CBC 2019). Although the government walked back this plan and announced its intention to adopt a needs-based program, the recent decision to delay implementation has left many families feeling betrayed (Rushowy 2019). **Catholic teachers urge the government to immediately implement and properly fund a needs-based autism program, and include education funding to ensure publicly funded schools can provide the necessary resources and supports for students with autism.**

2.18 Safer Schools for All

For several years, our Association has been discussing the increasing frequency and severity of violence and harassment against teachers, especially at the elementary level. In our 2017 survey of classroom teachers, 85 per cent of respondents said the incidence of violence against teachers is increasing, while 80 per cent said incidents are becoming more severe. This has repercussions for everyone in the school community. More than three-quarters of respondents said violence in schools makes teaching more difficult, and more than a quarter have had to take time away from work due to the physical or mental toll of a violent incident (OECTA 2017a).

2.19 In recent months, we have also seen renewed attention on bullying. However, the government's response leaves a great deal to be desired. Bullying is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted, proactive response. Rather than tinkering around the edges with measures such as reviewing the definition, the government should be encouraging collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Education and other ministries, such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services.

2.20 Some progress has been made over the past few years in terms of standardizing and enforcing reporting procedures for violent incidents, but there is still a long way to go to fully implement the solutions outlined in our *Safer Schools for All* platform (OECTA 2017b). For example, full implementation of the online reporting tool remains an ongoing issue, as a number of school boards have been non-compliant with

implementation requirements. Most importantly, **more child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and other professional services are required to help students deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs.**

These investments will help students manage their behaviours and achieve academic success in the short and long term, while enabling teachers and the rest of the school community to focus on making learning happen in a safe and secure environment.

2.21 Education Quality and Accountability Office

There are serious and well-founded concerns about the stress that high-stakes testing causes for students, teachers, and administrators (Kempf 2016). Although EQAO tests are supposedly not meant to be used to rank schools, we know they are often employed as a basis for comparison. Trustees and superintendents feel nervous about how their schools will measure up, which leads to pressure being exerted on principals, who pass it on to teachers, who then have to spend weeks focusing on the specific types of questions and answers that will be found on the tests. If results in one year are deemed unsatisfactory, the anxiety is only heightened the following year. We also know that some boards and schools are diverting resources away from supports for delivering curriculum and toward test preparation materials.

2.22 Students most especially feel the pressure to perform well on EQAO tests – and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test is a requirement to graduate. The stress and anxiety exacerbates learning challenges, mental health issues, or other issues that students are experiencing, and often negatively affects their performance.

2.23 To make matters worse, province-wide standardized testing does not give an accurate reflection of student ability, because it only captures a moment in time and fails to account for the range of skills and factors that affect achievement. While some argue that standardized testing is necessary to provide essential information to improve student achievement and ensure the education system is accountable to taxpayers, the reality is that teachers already use our professional judgment to conduct assessments for, as, and of learning. We use the results of these assessments to modify our instruction and provide individual attention, as well as to complete provincial report cards (OTF 2017).

2.24 The previous government appointed a set of advisors to undertake a comprehensive study of Ontario’s assessment regime. The advisors made a slew of recommendations, including phasing out the EQAO test in Grade 3 (Campbell et al. 2018). This report should have been the starting point for a wide-ranging discussion about how to move forward. Unfortunately, the Ford government appears to have discarded this advice, in favour of an ideology that views standardized testing as inherently useful. Where once the Chair of the EQAO was a part-time position, the government has created a full-time job and appointed a defeated Progressive Conservative election candidate. This is on top of the costly bureaucracy at the Ministry of Education that exists to deal with EQAO initiatives. The government has also expanded the mandate of the agency to conduct hastily devised, poorly considered assessments for pre-service teachers, despite the fact that the EQAO itself found that “the fundamental goal of these tests – to improve student learning – is often not met” (EQAO 2019b; Alphonso 2019).

2.25 Teachers are assessing students for, as, and of learning every day, and communicating these results to school boards and parents. Standardized testing is not a good use of education resources. Given how far EQAO has strayed from its original mandate, Charles Pascal, a former Deputy Minister of Education and Chair of EQAO, recently argued that the government should suspend EQAO testing (CBC 2020). **If the government still believes some sort of province-wide testing is necessary, they should at least move toward a random sampling model, as is used by PISA and others.** This would produce statistically valid results at a fraction of the current costs, while reducing the level of student anxiety and allowing most teachers and students to remain focused on genuine learning activities and more meaningful classroom assessments.

2.26 Full-day Kindergarten

Parents, teachers, early childhood educators (ECEs), administrators, and researchers agree that Ontario’s full-day Kindergarten (FDK) program is preparing children socially and academically, leading to better outcomes in later years (Alphonso 2017; Janmohamed 2014). New longitudinal research provides more evidence of self-regulatory and academic gains, with benefits being apparent in all academic areas at the end of Kindergarten and remaining significantly greater to the end of the primary division (Pelletier and Corter 2019).

- 2.27** However, there are still some issues that are keeping the program from being fully effective for all students. For example, although the previous government took some action to address the problem, more still needs to be done to reduce the number of large and/or split classes.
- 2.28** It is also imperative that we continue to respect and support the functioning of the teacher/ECE teams. When the FDK program was developed, the teacher/ECE teams were recommended based on pilot tests in Ontario and elsewhere, in which teams were found to add to the professional preparation and skillset of each team member (Pascal 2009). ECEs bring specialized knowledge about early childhood development, which is valuable for fostering emotional regulation and social skills. Meanwhile, certified teachers bring high levels of skills and training related to teaching methods, planning, and assessment. We are able to structure the play-based curriculum in a way that optimizes learning, and to individualize instruction when necessary. We understand the whole child and are best equipped to prepare students and integrate them into the next stages of their learning.
- 2.29** Research has shown that Ontario’s FDK staff teams are uniting around the mission to support children and families (Pelletier 2014). Moreover, the current dynamic enables the teacher and ECE “to capitalize on children’s individual needs and inquiries. They have the time to know their students very well and to identify problems and intervene early before a child becomes too frustrated and discouraged to try” (McCuaig 2019). Rather than disrupting this effective dynamic, the government should provide sufficient resources to ensure that a certified teacher and an ECE are present in all FDK classrooms at all times during the instructional day.
- 2.30** Ontario’s FDK program is a ground-breaking, world-leading initiative. The investment will continue to pay dividends long into the future for students, families, the economy, and society. **The government should continue to support and strengthen the FDK program so it can honour its original promise.**
- 2.31 Indigenous Education**
The 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission drew attention to a number of issues pertaining to Indigenous youth and education. While much of the focus has been on students attending on-reserve schools, it is important to note that

in Ontario the majority of Indigenous students attend a provincially funded school. In fact, there are Indigenous students in almost every community: 92 per cent of elementary schools and 96 per cent of secondary schools have at least some Indigenous students (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013).

- 2.32** By now, most Ontarians recognize the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. This year, 81 per cent of elementary schools and 95 per cent of secondary schools report having offered at least one Indigenous learning opportunity, a substantial increase from 2014 (People for Education 2019). However, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators still need support and resources to ensure they are properly reflecting Indigenous histories and knowledge in the classroom. This is why Catholic teachers and others across Ontario were so disappointed that one of the government's first actions upon taking office was to abruptly pause planned curriculum resource writing sessions.
- 2.33** There are also significant resource gaps in schools with high proportions of Indigenous students compared to other schools in the province, including lower than average access to guidance teachers, teacher-librarians, and music and physical education programs (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2013). **These resource gaps must be overcome if we are going to address the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.** The previous government was making significant steps in this regard, increasing funding and collecting data on a voluntary basis in order to provide appropriate programs and supports. The new government should not turn its back on these efforts, especially as the need will only become more urgent, given that Indigenous children are the fastest-growing child population segment in Canada (UNICEF Canada 2018). Integrating Indigenous students into their school communities and enabling them to realize their full potential will reduce marginalization and pay significant social and economic dividends over the long term (Sharpe and Arsenault 2010).
- 2.34** In the years prior to the current government taking office, the Indigenous Education Grant had increased substantially, in response to a nationwide call for a renewed effort toward reconciliation. But this government has shown time and again that this is not an area of priority. After having been cut in the revised Grants for Student Needs for 2018-19, the grant received only a modest increase for 2019-20.

Indigenous education is also an area that has been affected by the government's failure to recommit to the Local Priorities Fund. Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is one of the most urgent and fundamental issues for Ontarians. Rather than looking for areas to trim and save costs, the government should be actively supporting progress.

2.35 English Language Learners

Currently, funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) programs is based on census data and immigration statistics. While these figures provide an estimate, they do not accurately reflect English Language Learners' needs based on actual proficiency. This problem was noted 15 years ago by the Education Equality Task Force, which also condemned the inadequacy of the duration of supports, a sentiment echoed more recently by the Auditor General of Ontario (2017).

- 2.36** The current funding formula also "fails to recognize the additional costs associated with higher densities of ESL needs in areas with high levels of immigration," while a lack of oversight and transparency mechanisms means some school boards might not be spending the funds on programming for students who need support (Mackenzie 2017). For instance, English Language Learners often require additional supports to acclimate to a new school and culture, especially those who have recently arrived to Canada. These resources help English Language Learners connect to their schools and communities, which in turn contributes to their academic success. **Investing more in English language supports, including properly trained teachers, will ensure students are able to interact with their peers, achieve academic success, and ultimately contribute in our society.**

2.37 Adult and Continuing Education

Adult and continuing education programs are funded at roughly two-thirds the level of regular day school credit programs, which has previously been calculated to result in annual underfunding of \$112 million (Mackenzie 2015). In June 2017, the government announced \$185 million in funding over four years, as part of Ontario's Lifelong Learning and Skills plan, but this is not enough to close the gap. At the same time, funding allocations from Special Purpose Grants are directed only toward students in the regular day school program, even though in many cases adult and

continuing education programs are being delivered to new immigrants or students who have been marginalized from the regular day school credit program.

2.38 As a result, students who have significant needs are often dealing with large class sizes, different classes being delivered in the same room, and a lack of early intervention processes, while teachers are often employed from contract to contract, with substandard salaries, working conditions, and rights. **Funding is required so that school boards can provide the necessary supports to improve language skill assessment. At the same time, adult learners require additional and specific mental health supports to improve chances for successful completion of their respective programs.**

2.39 Across Canada, one in five working age adults lack basic literacy and numeracy skills (Drewes and Meredith 2015). Research has shown that raising literacy skill levels would yield an annual rate of return of 251 per cent, with savings of \$542 million across the country on social assistance alone (Murray and Shillington 2011). Furthermore, by improving basic language proficiency, fostering notions of citizenship and social engagement, and encouraging healthier lifestyles and relationships, we can reduce the need for later interventions in these areas and enhance the well-being of our democracy and society. Proper funding for adult and continuing education programs will undoubtedly provide value for money in the short and long term.

2.40 Professional Development

Teachers are dedicated lifelong learners, who continually upgrade our knowledge and skills, often on our own time and at our own expense, to ensure that we keep abreast of what is current and effective in our classrooms. Thousands of teachers have taken advantage of opportunities over the past few years to upgrade and refine our skills in math and technology (OCT 2017). The government has recently moved to implement a math test for incoming teachers, but a more fruitful method would be to ensure that teachers have the resources and supports necessary to deliver math content in the classroom.

2.41 A prime example of this type of professional learning is the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP). In the final report on the 2017-18 program, a group of

respected education researchers once again found that “by providing the conditions (funding, training, and ongoing support) for a self-selected and self-directed professional development effort, the TLLP facilitates active, collaborative learning that is embedded in teachers’ work, informed by evidence, and provides opportunities for authentic leadership experiences.” The benefits of this learning are enjoyed not only by the teams involved, but also by the broader school community. “TLLP projects have a positive effect on students’ engagement, attitude, and learning experience” the researchers found, and “some TLLP projects help develop better connections with parents and local communities as well” (Campbell et al. 2018).

2.42 Teachers across the province were greatly disappointed to learn of the government’s decision to cancel funding for TLLP projects for the 2018-19 school year. We are still awaiting news about the continuation of the program. **Especially given the changes that are being made to curriculum, it is imperative that more resources be provided for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development – the most efficient and effective form of professional learning.** This will ensure that teachers’ knowledge is relevant and up-to-date, based on the current, job-embedded experiences of our colleagues, and designed to address the needs of our students (CEA 2015; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995).

2.43 Holding School Boards to Account

While we believe our students and schools deserve greater investments, teachers are also concerned about how resources are allocated, and whether school boards are held accountable for their decisions. For example, our Association has for many years been raising the issue of how school boards are using Special Purpose Grants, such as the Learning Opportunities Grant or funds for English as a Second Language programs. With an overall education budget that does not match student needs, and legal pressure to balance their books, school boards are compelled to use these grants to fill gaps in funding for core programs and expenses (Queiser 2017; Brown 2013; Casey 2013). The Toronto District School Board attracts most of the media attention in this regard, but Catholic teachers report similar problems elsewhere in the province.

2.44 It is imperative that new funds for mental health services, special education programs, professional services and supports, and other initiatives are spent as intended. Rather than scaling back reporting requirements, we should be strengthening the process by which funds are distributed and allocated. In many cases, there is still no clear process to determine how allocations are made until after funding has been distributed. To hold school boards to account, **there should be an annual process of consultation with teacher representatives at each school board regarding locally determined expenditures, as well as prompt reporting with real-time transfers of data where possible.**

2.45 OECTA members believe that as much as possible, school boards should be directing funding toward the fundamental ingredient in a successful education system: the interaction between a well-trained teacher and a well-supported student. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. We are particularly troubled that a number of school boards are turning to organizations such as School Boards' Co-operative Inc. (SBCI) to advise them on issues of worker's compensation, health and safety, and attendance management, despite the fact that boards already employ staff for these purposes in schools and central offices. SBCI hides its data and methodology from the public, making it impossible to verify findings. This is especially problematic given that SBCI profits by promoting these unverified findings and selling one-size-fits-all solutions. This is a poor use of education funding, which is not in the interests of students or school communities.

2.46 Publicly Funded Catholic Education

Publicly funded Catholic schools have made significant contributions to the overall excellence of Ontario's world-renowned education system. In addition to teaching literacy, math, science, and other skills, we are developing students' character and commitment to the common good, encouraging them to be discerning believers, creative and holistic thinkers, self-directed learners, caring family members, and responsible citizens. There are almost 650,000 students attending publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario, including many non-Catholic students whose parents have chosen the system's high standards and well-rounded methods for their children.

- 2.47** There is a common misconception that merging Ontario’s school systems could save a significant amount of money, but history and scholarship suggests the opposite is true. Dr. John Wiens, former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, put the matter succinctly: “If it's about money, I think there is actually no evidence to show at all that anybody has saved money by [consolidating boards]” (CBC 2016). In Alberta, a study of the restructuring of the school system in the late 1990s found that the implementation costs associated with the mergers exceeded any resulting savings (Pysyk 2000). Ontario’s experience with school board amalgamation in the late 1990s led to hundreds of millions of dollars in costs for transition and restructuring. Even conservative organizations like the Fraser Institute have found that amalgamating large organizations almost always results in high transition costs and limited long-term savings (Miljan and Spicer 2015).
- 2.48** At the same time, there are opportunities to make more efficient use of education resources, by using provincially funded buildings in more collaborative ways and incentivizing inter-ministerial and municipal co-operation. One potential avenue is shared facilities, specifically for co-terminus boards. In its 2014-15 Pre-Budget Consultation Summary, the previous government noted that “co-locating the schools of coterminous boards in the same facility was an idea with fairly broad support” (Ministry of Education 2014). Naturally, this would have to be done while protecting each school system’s unique framework and structures, but there are significant opportunities to make efficient use of resources while ensuring that more communities have access to important public services.
- 2.49** There are several successful examples of such arrangements in Ontario. The Humberwood Centre houses Holy Child Catholic School, Humberwood Downs public school, a branch of the Toronto Public Library, the Humberwood Community Centre, as well as the 280-space Macaulay Child Development Centre. In Brantford, St. Basil's Catholic Elementary School and Walter Gretzky Elementary School each have a wing in the 90,000-square-foot shared facility. These sorts of shared facilities can be helpful in maximizing cost efficiency, specifically in rural areas where enrolment declines have raised the specter of school closures.

2.50 In addition to co-location, Ontarians can also benefit from shared services agreements. A feasibility study of 11 Ontario school boards revealed that shared services in areas such as energy and transportation could produce ongoing annual savings of \$3 to 8 million per year, which would represent a 13 to 28 per cent savings on these boards' annual total expenditures (Deloitte 2012). Ultimately, **exploring options for shared services agreements and co-locating schools is a far more effective approach than board amalgamation, not only in meeting the needs of students and communities, but also in making efficient use of school space.**

3. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

3.01 A commitment to equity and the alleviation of suffering is at the centre of Catholic teachers' worldview. We also see the consequences of poverty and inequality every day in our classrooms. The evidence clearly shows that by providing adequate social assistance, decent work and working conditions, and efficient and effective public services such as child care, the government can enable everyone to realize their full potential, participate in their community, and contribute to the economy.

3.02 Dignity and Fairness for the People

Poverty and inequality hurt people across Ontario every day, and hamper the long-term health and prosperity of our society. According to the latest data from Campaign 2000 (2018), one in five children, and one in seven families with children, continue to live in poverty. These families are making difficult decisions about how or whether to access housing, child care, transportation, or food. Teachers see the effects in our classrooms, as students arrive at school tired, hungry, and anxious. We also meet many parents who are part of the growing number of Ontarians who find themselves in precarious work. Rather than cutting back and forcing our fellow Ontarians to fend for themselves, we should be strengthening our social safety net to ensure it meets the realities of the modern economy.

3.03 Even conservative, market-oriented voices are concerned about rising inequality. For example, researchers at the International Monetary Fund have found that lower inequality is "robustly correlated with faster and more durable [economic] growth" (Ostry, Berg, and Tsangarides 2014). Canadian economists have warned that

inequality threatens social mobility and long-term prosperity (Alexander and Fong 2014). The World Economic Forum (2017) cites inequality as a key risk to the global economy, as the growing gap in income shares is leading to political polarization and the fraying of social institutions.

3.04 The problem has been particularly acute in Ontario. From the 1980s to 2010, Ontario experienced the largest percentage change in income inequality of any Canadian province (ICP 2013; Osberg and Sharpe 2011). In the time since, there has only been a further “hollowing out” of the economy for the lowest-earning households, with the top half of Ontario families now taking home 81 per cent of all earnings (Block 2017).

3.05 The government claimed it would be implementing a policy agenda “for the people,” but rather than levelling the playing field, most of the actions taken since the election are only making the things worse. To name just a few examples:

- Despite an explicit campaign promise to continue with the project, the government abruptly cancelled the Ontario Basic Income Pilot. This not only denied researchers in Ontario and around the world the ability to study a potentially promising social policy initiative (Monsebraaten 2018a), it betrayed the trust and harmed the well-being of the people and communities who were participating in the project (Ingram 2018).
- The government cancelled a planned increase to the minimum wage and replaced it with a tax credit, despite the fact that a wage increase would have made recipients better off, and there is no evidence to support the claim that higher minimum wages have reduced employment in Ontario (Crawley 2018a; Crawley 2018b; Herrera 2018).
- With Bill 47, the government rolled back crucial new labour standards in areas such as scheduling, equal pay, and paid sick leave that had been legislated by the previous government after years of careful study and consultation with labour relations experts, employers, and working people.

- The Ministry of Labour has been directed not to conduct proactive employment standards inspections, which have been widely recommended as the most fair and effective means of ensuring that employers are following the law (Ladd and Gellatly 2016).
 - The government announced changes to Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program that will make it harder for some people to enrol and/or stay on social assistance. This is after planned increases to social assistance rates were reduced by half.
- 3.06** The government has argued that its policies will increase choice, flexibility, and opportunity, while reducing the responsibility and burden on government, but the real effect will be to leave millions of Ontarians in precarious, potentially unsafe conditions (Saul 2018). Ontario’s working poor and other vulnerable citizens need immediate assistance to ensure they can live in safety and dignity. At the very least, **the hard-won employment standards that have been cut over the past few months should be restored, and there should be immediate, substantial increases to assistance rates for Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Plan.**
- 3.07** The government has also demonstrated a troubling disregard for organized labour and the collective bargaining process. This has included intervening to end or prevent strike action, making it easier for public sector organizations to hire non-union employees, and reforming arbitration processes. In June 2019, the government introduced Bill 124, the *Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act*. The legislation, which imposes a wage cap on public sector salary increases, was introduced before bargaining with teacher and education worker unions began. This legislation violates teachers’ and education workers’ constitutional rights to engage in unrestricted collective bargaining activity, which is guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The legislation is now the subject of multiple constitutional challenges, including from OECTA and the teacher affiliates.
- 3.08** The government’s willingness to impose unconstitutional legislation that tramples workers’ rights should concern all Ontarians. There is a popular misconception that unions are bad for business, but evidence from Canada and around the world shows that in reality, organized labour reduces inequality and improves economic

performance (Jaumotte and Buitron 2015; Fortin et al. 2012). Furthermore, the Supreme Court of Canada has recently affirmed the rights to unionize (Fine 2015a), to bargain collectively (Zussman 2016), and to strike (Fine 2015b). Moving forward, the government must show due respect for workers' rights, organized labour, and the collective bargaining process.

3.09 Publicly Funded Child Care

The government will surely receive a number of submissions detailing the need for public investments in health care, infrastructure, job training, and other vital public goods and services. However, as teachers, we feel a particular responsibility to highlight the utility and wisdom of public investments in early childhood education and care (ECEC).

- 3.10** Affordable, accessible, high quality ECEC increases equity in learning outcomes, reduces poverty, and creates a strong foundation for lifelong learning (McCuaig, Bertrand, and Shanker 2012). It also improves labour force participation, particularly among women, and helps to boost household incomes. These benefits are shared by society and the economy as a whole. According to one recent analysis, every dollar the public spends expanding enrolment in early childhood education and care yields close to six dollars in economic benefits (Alexander et al. 2017).
- 3.11** Quebec's child care model, which has now been in place for 20 years, offers ample evidence of the tremendous benefits and cost-effectiveness of this type of program. The government spends roughly 0.6 per cent of GDP on the program, which is equal to the average spending among advanced economies for early childhood education and care. In return, the labour force participation rate of women in Quebec has increased to 85 per cent, compared to 80 per cent elsewhere in Canada. The rate for mothers of children up to age five has increased to 80 per cent, compared to 71 per cent elsewhere in Canada. Furthermore, using 2008 data, it has been calculated that the total increase in revenue exceeded the total increase in expenditure by \$919 million (Fortin 2018).
- 3.12** Unfortunately, this government's ideological opposition to public services has put an abrupt end to the progress Ontario had been moving toward a more robust child care system. The government has removed the cap on provincial funding for private child

care, and cut funding for fee subsidies for low-income families. This runs counter to all of the available evidence about the high cost of child care, and the importance of supporting licensed, not-for-profit options as the best way of ensuring accessible, high quality care (Cleveland 2018; Mahoney 2018; Macdonald and Friendly 2017). The government also loosened regulations on carer-to-child ratios in unlicensed child care spaces, just a short time after these regulations were enhanced in response to tragic deaths (Reddekopp 2018).

3.13 There are currently licensed child care spaces for just over 20 per cent of children under the age of 12 (Friendly et al. 2018). And in many cases, child care workers and early childhood educators work for low wages in poor conditions (AECEO 2017; Halfon and Langford 2015). The government's tax credit will only exacerbate these problems. Despite the fact that it will cost roughly \$70 million more per year than the government projected, it is unlikely to help low-income recipients, as only 0.1 per cent of families will be eligible for the full credit (FAO 2019c). With the value of the credit being significantly lower than the actual cost of child care, many parents may be forced to opt for lower-cost, lower-quality care, which will ultimately lower the quality of care overall, and cost all Ontarians more in the long run (Cleveland 2019; Monsebraaten 2018b).

3.14 Despite the government's ideological opposition, **the fact remains that an affordable, high quality, publicly funded, and universally accessible system of child care would be the most efficient and effective program for all Ontarians.** Ontario had been making slow but steady progress toward this goal, and Catholic teachers strongly urge the government to recommit to this path.

4. A BALANCED APPROACH

4.01 When the budget is in deficit, the natural impulse is to look to reduce spending in the public sector. Tax cuts also carry obvious intuitive appeal, as they are believed to finance increased private investment and consumer spending. However, a more sensible and balanced approach would ask everyone to contribute their fair share toward investments with long-term benefits for our society and economy.

- 4.02** A government is not a household, and it is a mistake for the government to approach its finances like a family budget. Government spending not only serves to spur the broader economy, create jobs, and fund vital public services, it is directly correlated with government income, through increased tax revenues (Fatas and Summers 2018; Somerville 2017; Kelton 2017). This pooling of resources and sharing of benefits provides tremendous value and improves quality of life for everyone (Mackenzie and Shillington 2009).
- 4.03** Ontario's relatively low per capita spending on government programs is partly due to the economies of scale that are possible in our more densely populated communities, but it also means there are inevitably areas in need of more support. And contrary to what consultants or business leaders often claim, it is certainly not possible to make drastic cuts without negatively affecting frontline services (Macdonald and Hatt 2014). Continuing to make efficient use of public funds by investing in a strong public sector – including fair compensation and good working conditions for public sector workers – will pay dividends in the short and long term, increasing equity and opportunity while providing an economic lifeline for communities across Ontario (Tranjan 2018).
- 4.04** The government also has a responsibility to consider the revenue side of the equation. Because of personal and corporate tax cuts that have been implemented since the 1990s, Ontario now has a structural revenue problem (Ruckert, Caldbick, and Labonté 2015). Unfortunately, the government has committed to exacerbating the issue. According to the independent Financial Accountability Office, policies announced since Budget 2018 will reduce revenue by \$4.2 billion in 2019-20, and by an average of \$3.4 billion per year from 2020-21 to 2023-24. The report also notes that government projections suggest future, as-yet-unannounced tax policy changes that would lead to even lower revenues (FAO 2019d).
- 4.05** The government may have thought it had a mandate for a slash-and-burn agenda, but the strong pushback from Ontarians has surely shattered this illusion. Furthermore, with the province's population growing at 1.8 per cent per year, one of the highest rates in Canada, the pressure on our public transportation systems, affordable housing supply, and other infrastructure and services will only increase (Ministry of Finance 2018b). As we move into a new decade, Ontarians are looking

for mature leadership and forward thinking. This means the government must finally be honest and upfront about the province's finances, and take a balanced approach to deficit reduction. **This will involve careful consideration of both spending and revenues, with a goal of maintaining and enhancing investments in vital public infrastructure and services.**

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.01** All Ontarians share the same basic values and priorities: we want a healthy, prosperous, and sustainable society and economy in which everyone has a fair chance to participate. Most Ontarians also believe the government has a critical role to play in achieving these ends.
- 5.02** While we all agree that making efficient and effective use of public resources is important, a fixation on cutting spending and reducing taxation is short-sighted and counterproductive. By investing in services like publicly funded education and child care, combatting poverty and respecting workers' rights, and taking a balanced approach to deficit reduction, the government can properly respond to the needs of Ontarians.
- 5.03** Catholic teachers are encouraged that the government has reconsidered some of its policy proposals in response to outcry from the public. We believe that despite the turmoil that has been created over the past 18 months, there is still time for the government to rethink its overarching agenda and methods of operation. There is still time to abandon the reckless cuts, engage in real consultation and dialogue with Ontarians *before* making major policy decisions, and help build a province that works for everyone. We strongly urge the government to seize this opportunity.

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