

BUILDING BETTER SCHOOLS

AN EDUCATION AGENDA FOR THE 2011 PROVINCIAL ELECTION



Elementary Teachers'
Federation of Ontario

Fédération des enseignantes et
des enseignants de l'élémentaire
de l'Ontario



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PLATFORM HIGHLIGHTS – FIVE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BETTER SCHOOLS

- 1 MORE MEANINGFUL STUDENT ASSESSMENT –**
Reduce standardized testing and place more focus on teachers' classroom assessment to provide more effective ongoing support for student achievement.
- 2 GREATER ACCESS TO SPECIALIST TEACHERS –**
Ensure access to teacher librarians and specialist teachers in the arts, design and technology, and physical and health education in order to provide an enriched and engaging program for all elementary students.
- 3 SMALL CLASSES FOR ALL ELEMENTARY STUDENTS –**
Reduce class sizes in grades 4 to 8 and in full-day early learning kindergarten to provide classroom environments that support activity-based learning, positive social interaction among students, and individual attention from teachers.
- 4 MORE RESOURCES FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS –**
Expand opportunities for all students to reach their learning and development potential by providing greater support for students with identified special needs and students who are English language learners.
- 5 GREATER FOCUS ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND INCLUSION –** Support equity and inclusion in Ontario schools by providing more support for children living in poverty and children whose families are marginalized and by using schools to expand children's services.



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INTRODUCTION

SAM HAMMOND, PRESIDENT

In anticipation of the October 2011 provincial election, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has prepared this education platform to contribute to the public discourse about how to make our public schools the best they can be. Ontario faces many challenges. Few are as important as ensuring that our public schools are able to fulfill their responsibility to teach more than basic skills but also to foster creativity, innovation, a love of learning, and a commitment to full participation in our democratic society. Public education is also about creating equal opportunity so that all students can be successful learners and reach their full potential.



In Ontario we are fortunate to have a strong public school system. Our students are among the top-scoring performers on international and pan-Canadian assessments in reading, mathematics, and science.

The difference in achievement levels between students from affluent backgrounds and those from less economically-advantaged households is small compared to the difference that exists in most other countries that participate in international assessments.

Ninety-five percent of school-aged children attend publicly-funded as opposed to private schools, evidence of strong public support for our education system.

ETFO—representing more than 76,000 teachers, early childhood educators, and educational and professional support personnel—is committed to building an even stronger public education system.

ETFO believes the system can do a better job of addressing the learning needs of our diverse student population and ensuring that graduating students are well-prepared for higher education, training, and citizenship. Strengthening the education system will contribute to a healthy, vibrant society in the future.

ETFO's platform proposals are aimed at profiling those issues our members believe would have the most significant impact on improving the quality of programs, enhancing inclusiveness and equity in our elementary schools, and engaging all students to become happy and productive lifelong learners. ■

EQAO-DRIVEN EDUCATION

THROUGHOUT ITS TWO TERMS IN OFFICE, THE CURRENT LIBERAL GOVERNMENT HAS FOCUSED ON INCREASING THE ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS IN LITERACY AND NUMERACY AS MEASURED BY THE GRADE 3 AND 6 TESTS ADMINISTERED BY THE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (EQAO). THE POLITICAL IMPERATIVE TO SEE 75 PERCENT OF GRADE 6 STUDENTS ACHIEVING AN ABOVE AVERAGE LEVEL 3 IN THESE TESTS HAS LED TO A DISPROPORTIONATE AMOUNT OF CLASSROOM TIME AND RESOURCES BEING ALLOCATED TO TEACHING LITERACY AND NUMERACY.

Teachers are spending increasing amounts of time collecting assessment data related to EQAO to feed the government's insatiable appetite for evidence that its myriad top-down initiatives are leading to improved student test scores. Consequently, not all students receive a balanced curriculum that pays sufficient attention to social studies, science, the arts, or health and physical education. Scaling back on the literacy and numeracy assessment initiatives is the top concern identified by ETFO members.

The EQAO testing regime has been in place since 1998. Changes have been made to reduce the length of the tests and to schedule them later in the school year.

However, the extent to which the tests drive what teachers teach and the time devoted to EQAO-related data collection has increased not diminished over time. EQAO test results are being used by organizations like the Fraser Institute to rank schools and by the government's on-line School Information Finder to compare schools. This is socially divisive and a misuse of the results.

There are alternatives to Ontario's testing regime that tests all grade 3 and 6 students every year. Finland, a top-performing nation on international assessments conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development uses random sample tests to occasionally check to see if its curriculum and teaching approaches are appropriate. Ontario should adopt the same approach.

The most effective assessment of student progress is the assessment that teachers do every day in the classroom. Teachers strive to balance their instruction with assessment that provides students with immediate feedback about their own progress and helps them to work more productively on their own and with other students. Teachers use this process of ongoing assessment to reflect on their teaching, improve their teaching strategies, and respond to individual student needs.

If the government is truly interested in improving the levels of student success, it should put its focus on supporting teachers' skills in ongoing classroom assessment rather than on the limited measurement of EQAO tests. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Establish a two-year moratorium on EQAO testing to allow for public consultations on the uses, value, and impact of the current provincial testing regime.
- Consider adopting a random-sample model to measure the appropriateness of the curriculum and the effectiveness of teaching strategies.
- Place more emphasis on the role of ongoing teacher assessment of student progress.

A HOLISTIC ELEMENT

THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM MANDATES THAT ELEMENTARY STUDENTS RECEIVE INSTRUCTION IN THE ARTS AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION, BUT THE FUNDING FORMULA DOES NOT PROVIDE SUFFICIENT FUNDING FOR SPECIALIST TEACHERS IN MUSIC, PHYSICAL EDUCATION, VISUAL OR PERFORMING ARTS, OR DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY. STAFFING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS WITH TEACHERS WHO HAVE SPECIALIZED TRAINING IN THESE SUBJECT AREAS GREATLY ENRICHES THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS, OFTEN LEADS TO A BROADER RANGE OF EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL, AND PROVIDES THE TIMETABLING FLEXIBILITY TO ALLOW REGULAR CLASSROOM TEACHERS TO HAVE THE PREPARATION TIME THEY NEED.

Identified benefits of arts education include greater motivation to learn, improved self-esteem, communication and social skills, increased creativity and innovation, and a lifelong appreciation for the arts.

Health and physical education is critical to children's healthy development. The general health of children and youth is becoming a national concern as the incidence of obesity and childhood diabetes increases. Only 14 percent of Ontario children and youth meet the physical activity guideline of 90 minutes of daily activity established by Health Canada.

Despite the importance of design and technology to our future economic prosperity, design and technology programs have almost disappeared from Ontario's grade 7 and 8 classrooms. These programs are particularly important for students who learn best through hands-on learning.

The number of specialist teachers at the elementary level has significantly declined since 1997-1998 as the result of a funding formula that was originally designed to narrow the focus of education grants and reduce the overall government expenditure on elementary and secondary schools. Recent modest enhancements to funding for specialist teachers still leave elementary students significantly short-changed in terms of their access to quality programs in the arts and health and physical education.

The shortfall is magnified in smaller and more remote schools that have less access to specialist teachers and programs because the funding is based on per pupil grants rather than grants per school.

Funding for teacher-librarians is inadequate at the elementary level. The 2010-11 elementary foundation grant provides for 1.31 teacher-librarians for each 1,000 students. Teacher-librarians play a critical role in developing student literacy and supporting teachers' classroom programs. Studies conducted by the Ontario non-profit organization People for Education document the extent to which trained teacher-librarians have a positive effect on student literacy achievement and on children's enjoyment of reading.

The provincial government allocates \$100 million to support the administration of EQAO tests and a vast number of data-driven literacy and numeracy initiatives at the board and school level. The government would get greater return on its investments if it shifted its allocation of resources away from these initiatives and increased support for teacher-librarians.

Funding for guidance counsellors is also inadequate. Elementary guidance services are funded at 0.2 guidance counsellors per 1,000 students. Guidance counsellors play an important role in supporting a safe school environment, addressing student behaviour issues, and helping students plan for their transition to secondary school. ■

TARY PROGRAM



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Establish more balance between literacy and numeracy and other subjects including science, social studies, the arts, and physical and health education.
- Increase the elementary foundation grant to provide all elementary schools with specialist teachers in the arts, and health and physical education.
- Increase the elementary foundation grant to provide all grade 7 and 8 students with access to design and technology programs.
- Increase the elementary foundation grant to provide at least one qualified teacher-librarian per elementary school.
- Increase the elementary foundation grant to provide at least one qualified guidance counsellor per elementary school.

TEACHING FOR DEEP UNDERSTANDING

IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF RAPID CHANGE AND THE INCREASING ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY, IT'S A GIVEN THAT STUDENTS NEED TO BECOME CREATIVE THINKERS AND INDEPENDENT LEARNERS WHO HAVE STRONG COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND THE ABILITY TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH OTHERS. TO FOSTER THESE SKILLS, STUDENTS MUST RECEIVE A BALANCED PROGRAM THAT PROMOTES THE BENEFITS OF ALL SUBJECT AREAS.

It is equally important to reduce the number of prescribed elements of the elementary curriculum. On average, the Ontario curriculum establishes about 500 specific expectations for each elementary grade.

Teachers need more opportunities to delve more deeply into specific areas, take advantage of open-ended enquiry, plan for experiential learning, and develop activities that are both student- and teacher-directed.

It is important to move away from a highly-prescribed set of expectations and to identify broad, core educational outcomes. Such an approach would retain a framework based on standards but give teachers greater flexibility to meet the range of abilities and learning styles of students, many of whom are children with special needs.

This is even more important for the increasing number of elementary teachers who teach one, two, or even more grades in one classroom.

Experiential, activity-based learning is also an important aspect of teaching for deeper understanding. The government's new full-day kindergarten program is centred on a play-based philosophy that stresses the importance of children learning through "intentional" or "guided" play. This activity-based philosophy should not end when students enter grade 1 classrooms. All elementary students should continue to be engaged through experiential learning supported by classroom manipulatives, hands-on activities, and outdoor education. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Reduce the number of prescribed student outcomes and identify instead a set of core learning goals.
- Provide all elementary classrooms with resources that support hands-on, experiential learning.

THE BENEFITS OF SMALLER CLASSES

THE RECENT INVESTMENT IN SMALLER CLASSES IN PRIMARY GRADES (JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN THROUGH TO GRADE 3) HAS HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT ON ONTARIO CLASSROOMS. ONTARIO-BASED RESEARCH DEMONSTRATES THAT SMALLER PRIMARY CLASSES HAVE ENABLED TEACHERS TO PROVIDE MORE INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION TO STUDENTS AND USE A GREATER VARIETY OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES. SMALLER CLASSES HAVE ALSO CONTRIBUTED TO IMPROVED STUDENT BEHAVIOUR AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS. ALL THESE OUTCOMES HAVE LED TO IMPROVED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE EARLY GRADES.

The research also indicates that small classes can have an even greater impact if there is a more systematic adoption of teaching strategies and classroom practices that take full advantage of the benefits of smaller classes. Teachers need opportunities to share and collaborate on best practices in smaller classes.

The benefits of small classes need to be extended to grades 4 to 8. Currently primary grades are funded for a class size of 20 and secondary grades are funded to support a class size average of 22. By comparison, funding for grades 4 to 8 supports a class size average of 25. As a result, these grades have the largest class sizes in the system. Many junior and intermediate classes in elementary schools have more than 30 students. Class size reduction requires considerable investment, but implementing the policy is less costly during a period of declining enrolment such as Ontario is currently experiencing.

The new full-day early learning kindergarten (ELK) program is an exciting, bold initiative. The average class size of 26, however, is problematic. The integrity of the program depends on having adequate classroom space to provide for a number of activity-based learning centres and the ability of the teacher and early childhood educator to promote self-discovery and positive social interaction among the children. These factors require a large physical space and small group sizes. Like the junior and intermediate grades in elementary schools, the identified average for the ELK has resulted in a number of classes having more than 30 students.

School boards are required to report class sizes to the Ministry of Education based on attendance lists as of October 31 of each year. These are the numbers that the government uses to base its annual reports on class sizes to the public. The reality, however, is that class sizes often increase after the October 31 reporting date and there is no requirement for school boards to take action to address the situation. The government should implement a process that better tracks actual class sizes and requires school boards to create additional classes where necessary to ensure that class size targets are met throughout the school year. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Extend the benefits of smaller classes to grades 4 to 8.
- Reduce the average class size of the full-day early learning kindergarten program to align with other primary grades.
- Establish a process to better track class size and maintain class size targets throughout the school year.

PROMOTING EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

SMALL CLASSES AND A BALANCED PROGRAM BOTH CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT. TO ADDRESS THE CURRENT ACHIEVEMENT GAP, HOWEVER, MORE MUST BE DONE TO SUPPORT SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS, ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS, AND CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY.

Meeting the needs of special education students is a constant challenge for any government. The Ministry of Education's core grants for special needs students, (Special Education Per Pupil Amount) are tied to overall enrolment. As total student enrolment declines across the province, school boards therefore receive less money for special education. However, the number of students being identified through the special needs identification process is increasing, not decreasing. There is a particular increase in the number of students with autism spectrum disorder.

Other elements of the province's special education funding don't match the growing costs of programs required by special needs students. As a result, most school boards spend more on special education than they receive in grants. This means that boards take funds from other program areas to support special education. As recommended by the government's Declining Enrolment Working Group in 2009, special education grants should be revised to better reflect the needs of special education students.

To support teachers to successfully integrate special needs students into regular classrooms, it is important to provide additional professional support. There must be greater access at the school level to educational assistants, counsellors, and child and youth workers. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Base the special education grants on the educational needs of students.
- Increase the funding allocation for educational assistants, counsellors, and child and youth workers.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND STUDENT DIVERSITY

THE DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF ONTARIO HAS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY OVER THE PAST DECADE. THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO SPEAK NEITHER ENGLISH NOR FRENCH WHEN THEY REGISTER FOR SCHOOL HAS INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY.

As reported by the 2010 People for Education annual report on public schools, 67 percent of English elementary schools have English language learners (ELL) compared to 43 percent in 2002-03.

The provincial grants for ELL students are based on census figures related to immigrants who speak languages other than English or French; they don't reflect the number of students born in Canada who don't learn either official language at home before enrolling in their neighbourhood school. The grants also assume that ELL students won't require special language programs for longer than four years, an assumption that is not supported by reports from teachers who work with these students.

Finally, there is no direct accountability for school boards to actually spend their second-language grants on the intended programs. All too often, the overall shortfalls in the funding formula have led to school boards using their second language grants for other purposes and short-changing ELL students.

To promote engaged and active learning among all students, classrooms and school libraries need textbooks and other resources that reflect the rich cultural, racial, and gender identities of students and their families.

Ontario has adopted an Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. This policy provides an important policy framework for equity, but more needs to be done to ensure that the vision for equity is realized.

Teachers need classroom materials that reflect the diversity of their classrooms and school communities. Teachers and other education workers also need professional learning that improves their ability to address racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and classism, elements that affect our schools and permeate our broader society. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Revise the English as a second language (ESL) grants to more accurately reflect the number of students who don't speak English when they enrol at school.
- Revise the English as a second language grants to increase the capacity of schools to extend ESL programs to students who need the support beyond four years.
- Provide classroom resources to support the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.
- Provide professional learning that addresses discrimination and oppression of marginalized students.

CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY

PERHAPS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FACTOR CONTRIBUTING TO THE DIFFERENCE IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IS SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS.

The fact that the achievement gap among Ontario and other Canadian students is less than in a number of other countries that participate in international student assessments reflects our social programs that provide a safety net for the disadvantaged.

These social programs, however, do not go far enough to overcome the disadvantages that children living in poverty bring to the classroom or to compensate for the effect that school fundraising has on providing schools in affluent communities with additional resources that enhance student experiences and opportunities.

Schools can address poverty-related issues to some extent—for example, with Ministry of Education support, ETFO has developed a number of programs to increase teacher and community awareness about poverty issues and promoted school nutrition programs—but the root causes of poverty must be addressed at the macro level.

The education funding formula must be revised to more effectively provide disadvantaged students access to resources and experiences that more affluent students take for granted. Additional funding is required to expand library resources and access to computers and to increase the number of field trips and in-school arts performances. These additional educational resources would increase student engagement and student success.

Beyond the school level, Ontario must also live up to the commitment and timelines of its poverty reduction strategy and address income levels, social housing needs, and access to early intervention programs. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Provide specific compensatory grants for schools in disadvantaged communities to support additional learning materials, field trips, and in-school arts programs.
- Reaffirm the provincial plan to reduce child and family poverty by 25 percent by 2013.

EXPANSION AND INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

ONTARIO'S FIVE-YEAR PLAN FOR FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN AND EXTENDED DAY PROGRAMS DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR IS A SIGNIFICANT STEP TOWARDS A BROADER GOAL OF INTEGRATING EDUCATION AND OTHER CHILDREN'S SERVICES. EXPANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS IS IMPORTANT FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT. IT ALSO CONTRIBUTES TO ONTARIO'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BY CREATING ADDITIONAL JOBS IN THE SECTOR AND INCREASING THE ABILITY OF PARENTS, ESPECIALLY WOMEN, TO PARTICIPATE IN TRAINING, EDUCATION, OR THE WORKFORCE.

The recent decision to bring responsibility for child care programs under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education opens the way to an even greater integration of children's services. School boards' mandate to provide extended day programs during the school year should be extended to include year-round services and to cover all school-aged children. In schools where declining enrolment has resulted in excess classroom space, these child care services could be extended to include pre-school children as well.

Where space is available, schools should be used as community hubs to coordinate access to parent resource programs, speech and language pathologists, and other services that provide early intervention supports to children and their families. Such integration and use of vacant school space should realize considerable savings. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Mandate school boards to provide child care services before and after school and during school breaks.
- Where space is available, use schools to establish community hubs.

CONCLUSION

THIS ELECTION PLATFORM HAS BEEN WRITTEN IN THE CONTEXT OF A RECOVERING PROVINCIAL ECONOMY AND A GOVERNMENT FOCUS ON FISCAL RESTRAINT.

Some of the ETFO proposals—scaling back on large-scale testing, integrating children’s services, and taking advantage of vacant school space—should result in cost efficiencies.

Others, like reducing the number of curriculum expectations and giving more authority to teachers’ classroom assessment, are cost neutral.

Overall ETFO’s proposals for creating classrooms that more successfully engage students and serve the needs of all students amount to a significant additional investment in elementary education.

This investment is long overdue and would contribute to narrowing the differential in funding between per pupil grants for elementary and secondary education.

ETFO does not apologize for advocating for an increased investment in public elementary schools. While recent initiatives like class size reduction in primary grades and the full-day kindergarten program are important enhancements for elementary schools, other aspects of elementary education remain short-changed by the government’s funding model.

While the government can correctly claim that it has increased education funding during its two terms in office, the additional funding has come largely from additional programs, not from keeping up with inflation in other aspects of the education grants. Core aspects of elementary education require additional investment and should be part of the government’s plan for long-term economic renewal.

ETFO’s platform proposals are focused on retaining a framework of provincial standards for curriculum and assessment, creating a more engaging program and learning environment for students, establishing a more effective and supportive working environment for educators, and expanding the public role in supporting the development and well-being of children.

In the coming election campaign, we look forward to participating in the public discourse about the public schools Ontarians need and deserve. ■



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Establish a two-year moratorium on EQAO testing to allow for public consultations on the uses, value, and impact of the current provincial testing regime.
- Consider adopting a random sample model to measure the appropriateness of the curriculum and the effectiveness of teaching strategies.
- Place more emphasis on the role of ongoing teacher assessment of student progress.
- Establish more balance between literacy and numeracy and other subjects including science, social studies, the arts, and physical and health education.
- Increase the elementary foundation grant (EFG) to provide all elementary schools with specialist teachers in the arts, and health and physical education.
- Increase the EFG to provide all grade 7 and 8 students with access to design and technology programs.
- Increase the EFG to provide at least one qualified teacher-librarian per elementary school.
- Increase the EFG to provide at least one qualified guidance counsellor per elementary school.
- Reduce the number of prescribed student outcomes and identify, instead, a set of core learning goals.
- Provide all elementary classrooms with resources that support hands-on, experiential learning.
- Extend the benefits of smaller classes to grades 4 to 8.
- Reduce the average class size of the full-day early learning kindergarten program to align with other primary grades.
- Establish a process to better track class size and maintain class size targets throughout the school year.
- Base the special education grants on the educational needs of students.
- Increase the funding allocation for educational assistants, counsellors, and child and youth workers.
- Revise the English as a second language (ESL) grants to more accurately reflect the number of students who don't speak English when they enrol at school.
- Revise the ESL grants to increase the capacity of schools to extend ESL programs to students who need the support beyond four years.
- Provide classroom resources to support the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.
- Provide professional learning that addresses discrimination and oppression of marginalized students.
- Provide specific compensatory grants for schools in disadvantaged communities to support additional learning materials, field trips, and in-school arts programs.
- Reaffirm the provincial plan to reduce child and family poverty by 25 percent by 2013.
- Mandate school boards to provide child care services before and after school and during school breaks.
- Where space is available, use schools to establish community hubs.

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