



Submission to the Discussion Document: Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to provide valuable advice and insight into Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education. This submission is hopefully the start of collaboration with the Advisory Council on Student Well-Being as the development of the Well-Being Strategy moves forward.

OSSTF/FEESO is a trade union that represents 60,000 members across the Province of Ontario. The union works to protect our diverse membership in over 150 bargaining units in elementary and secondary schools, private schools, and universities. Our members include public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, continuing education teachers and instructors, early childhood educators, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, university support staff, and many others in education.

It is clear that the impetus for the development of the Well-Being Strategy for Education is to address this complex and important issue. The understanding that "children and students who have strong relationships with a positive sense of self are best positioned to reach their full potential" is in part the result of the growing awareness of the significance of mental health in Ontario.

OSSTF/FEESO acknowledges that the promotion of well-being is an important factor in overall student success. Our union has worked hard to support our members' understanding of the importance of the four key components identified as foundational supports of well-being. Since 2004, we have developed and offered professional development to give front-line teachers and educational workers the tools they need to address bullying, homophobia and transphobia. In recent years, we have also offered PD workshops to support our at-risk populations, embed equity in education and most recently, understand and better support mental health.

Our union agrees that positive learning environments that contribute to students "overall sense of self, spirit and belonging" are key component of student well-being. In reviewing the Discussion Document, the role of the school is clear; roles of parents, families and communities are not. Factors such as poverty, inadequate housing, domestic violence, and in remote communities, access to potable water are not mentioned. To simply state well-being as a goal of education, does not make it achievable in some circumstances.

In recent years, we have seen the important roles in guidance and student success eroded. There have been cuts to many guidance departments with reductions in the numbers of guidance counsellors as well as the office support that is essential in these office areas that are often separate from the main office area. Student Success teachers report being overwhelmed with the number of referrals; the underlying factors behind the referrals often stem from mental health needs that cannot be addressed with available resources.

We caution against a belief that the promotion of well-being will negate the need for valuable services for those children and youth whose mental health may be suffering. We also caution that any framework is developed and implemented within the limitations of physical and human resources available in schools. The education of students remains our fundamental priority. We agree that learning must occur in environments that are safe and healthy where equity and inclusion are embedded in the school system.

The 2014 OSSTF/FEESO Submission to the Ministry of Education - *Building The Next Phase in Ontario's Education Strategy* stated the following:

OSSTF/FEESO believes strongly in public education as the key to Ontario's future. Our schools must continue to equip our students with the knowledge, skills and sense of community that will make our province prosperous and dynamic. Our dedicated staff must be provided with the resources to accomplish those important objectives. Our students must be supported by a caring society in order to achieve the ability and confidence necessary to meet the new challenges of the 21st century.

Specifically, we agree that too many First Nations, Inuit, Metis learners, children and youth in care, learners with mental health issues and those who require the support of special education are still struggling within the current system of education. The need to present those learners with the greatest opportunity for success and achievement necessitates commitment to increased awareness, improved understanding and enhanced supports and services that will see all learners become healthy, well-rounded and resilient young adults.

As evidenced by our earlier submission, OSSTF/FEESO understands and supports the need to promote well-being. In fact, in that same year, we provided a proposal to partner with the Ministry of Education on the subject of well-being, committing to the development and delivery of a resource and workshop on *Building Resilience*. We hope that our proposal will still be considered as the government moves forward on its commitment to student well-being.

With the recent commitment to Collaborative Professionalism, OSSTF/FEESO offers the Ministry of Education an opportunity to utilize the knowledge and experience of professional support staff members such as psychologists, social workers and other support staff who have tirelessly worked in schools to support student well-being. Together with the resources such as School Mental Health Assist, we believe much would be accomplished by working towards the development of professional learning opportunities to enhance the capacity of the system to promote well-being.

In George Zegarac's May 4, 2016 memorandum, a commitment "to engaging with all of our partners to learn from and build on the outstanding efforts already in place across the province to help better understand what promoting well-being means for education" was made. Yet, the memorandum was not directed to the affiliates whose members are working every day with students. We respectfully submit that an initiative of this importance must involve the organizations who represent teachers and educational workers across the province.

On May 31, 2016, the Ministry of Education issued Policy/Program Memorandum No. 159. According to the P/PM, "collaborative professionalism is defined as professionals – at all levels of the education system – working together, sharing knowledge, skills and experience to improve student achievement and well-being of both students and staff".

However, the August 24, 2016 memorandum regarding Funding to Promote Well-Being: Safe, Accepting and Healthy Schools and Mental Health overlooked the directive to collaborate in the development of professional learning,

The school is, and will continue to be a place where children are exposed to conditions and supports which create positive learning environments. OSSTF/FEESO agrees that early years and school settings are places that will help children and students become resilient. Our focus must be on those efforts. To lose sight of the goal of promoting well-being by instead focusing on how to measure it is problematic.

OSSTF/FEESO welcomed the additional goal of promoting student well-being as outlined in *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. It is essential that the resources and supports created as the Well-Being Strategy is implemented and advanced, are directed primarily towards the goal.

Until such time that the larger issues of access to affordable housing, violence and poverty are addressed, the well-being of some students will certainly remain compromised. Measurement of student well-being will only serve to further disenfranchise the children and families who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

The ministry has made a bold commitment to promoting the well-being of students. Any move towards the development of a measurement that will be reported on in a fashion similar to the reporting of EQAO literacy and numeracy scores will only serve to undermine the well-being of students and staff in areas of the province that are affected by significant factors such as those that are known to impact learning.

OSSTF/FEESO calls upon the ministry to ensure that the funding for school based supports that are currently available are maintained, if not further enhanced with the implementation of the Well-Being Strategy. We also remind the Ministry to provide a full spectrum of services for children and youth whose mental health and well-being are compromised. With the Inter-ministry collaboration that is taking place between Children and Youth Services, Health, Housing and Infrastructure, it is essential that a patchwork approach to service provision is not continued. This too, jeopardizes the health and well-being of children and their families.

As the Engagement process begins with mental health agencies, public health and other service providers, the ministry is asked to reinforce the policy direction outlined in P/PM No. 149 with school boards. This will provide clarification of roles and minimize duplication of valuable and currently, insufficient resources.

Our membership has always been committed to supporting the well-being of students. The implementation of this strategy is important and must be carried out using our recent commitment to collaborative professionalism.

Recommendations:

1. THAT in the short term, the ministry maintain funding for teachers and support staff who are known to work with the students whose well-being is compromised by issues related to mental health, poverty or violence.
2. THAT the OSSTF/FEESO proposal to develop a resource on Building Resilience be considered for approval.
3. THAT District School Boards and Provincial Schools are reminded of the directives of relevant policies such as PPM 149 and PPM 159.
4. THAT the Well-Being Strategy is developed and implemented in consultation with education partners including unions.