



OSSTF/FEESO Submission to the Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services

OSSTF/FEESO understands that the Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services will be providing advice to the Provincial Government on how to deliver public services as efficiently as possible while finding cost-savings within the public sector and that the Commission will report its findings to the provincial government in time to inform the 2012 Ontario Budget. For some time, OSSTF/FEESO has been examining how to best deliver services in the education sector without sacrificing the public education system and the opportunity for all Ontarians to build a better future through access to education and training. OSSTF/FEESO offers the following information and recommendations to the Commission and the Provincial Government.

OSSTF/FEESO is a trade union which represents over 60,000 members across the province of Ontario. We work to protect our diverse membership which is represented in over 140 bargaining units across the province. OSSTF/FEESO bargaining units represent both English and French members in public and separate elementary and secondary school workplaces, private schools and consortia, offering support services to school boards and universities.

Key issues in both Ontario and globally, are the availability of public services and job creation. A delicate balance must be struck between fiscal conservatism and promoting the recovery and further growth of the fragile economy. Nothing will stop Ontario's economic growth faster than a public that does not spend because of a fear of the future.

Education workers, beyond the extraordinary service they provide young Ontarians and their families, are a sector of workers that are a part of virtually every community in the province. While our members are public sector employees, they are also taxpayers and consumers. The salaries that they earn in their various roles are a staple that support local economies from Moosonee to Windsor. Local small businesses, municipal committees and councils, sports and arts programs, all depend on education sector workers for both financial and hands-on support.

The areas where OSSTF/FEESO believes changes would result in positive gains are:

Community Participation

For the foreseeable future, the school is and will continue to be the hub of the community. The school is considered the safe, comfortable centre of activity in a small community, or in a neighbourhood. In many cases, the economic viability of the area is directly reliant on the existence of the school. The school is often the most appropriate location for facilities that the greater community depends upon. To that end, the community or municipality should expand their financial participation in the school. This reliance on the school is magnified in the northern and

rural communities of Ontario. The school is the *centerpiece* of the municipality and without it; traffic to the core of the community is dramatically reduced.

Many municipalities are in the position to underwrite construction, maintenance or service costs. Forgivable loans or partnership agreements with a municipality to provide everything from meeting rooms to sports fields can ensure that there is less duplication of facilities as well as a maximum utilization of existing assets. This broad use of facilities can expand well beyond direct community use.

Other government ministries and agencies can tap into the school as a central location and as a convenient service point for members of the broader community. It should be noted that with expanded use of the facilities, safety of the students and staff, along with maintenance and upkeep must be factored into the equation. In addition, work space for school board employees must be guaranteed. Information gathered by the Ministry of Education could be the basis for determining which services should be provided to school-age children and their families in a particular location.

School as the Hub for Delivery of Mental Health Services and Other Community Services

With the number of students who require mental health services increasing, there is a need to consider new ways of meeting the needs of children and youth. The current service delivery model, with services that come from community and social agencies, hospitals and other organizations must be enhanced to address current gaps in delivery. The development of an optimal spectrum of service will not lead to greater expenditures.

The delivery of mental health services from the school and with school board based personnel would improve access, reduce duplication, lessen complicated transitions from school support to agency support, and would also be more economical in the long term. School based services coordinated by a mental health professional who is employed by the school board would also assist in breaking down current service delivery silos that exist between different ministries and currently increase wait times and costs.

Student Distribution and School Configuration

In an era of declining enrolment, school boards and the government must not avoid the obvious answer to enrolment pressure in a revenue-limited system. Student distribution and school configuration must be considered above political, religious and union demands to provide a sound education for all students. One school board having access to all schools in a geographical area and the freedom to create configurations that respond to enrolment and demographic shifts is essential to responding to this dramatic enrolment drop. A school of JK to Grade 8 students may be the best fit in one area of a school board, and a Grade 7 to Grade 12 school may best serve the board in another area. The influx of younger students into the early years of formal education puts pressure on the facility when enrolment declines in the intermediate years.

Current curriculum increasingly requires particular equipment and teachers with specialized education and training, consequently making grades 7-12 schools attractive. The current practice of bussing a student past one half full school to attend another half full school must end. Rising heat and hydro costs require school boards to balance enrolment in schools before spending capital dollars on expanding existing space.

Does this spell the end of school boards as we know them? The trend is moving away from the traditional decision-making role of school boards. Policy development and curriculum, literacy and numeracy are under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Transportation and purchasing are moving to regional consortiums.

Some school board information technology services are now shared by other ministries and municipalities, while collective bargaining with employee groups is being centralized.

School boards however, are left with the unpleasant responsibility of closing schools as enrolment shifts or declines. This duty severely challenges the school board trustee's political ability. Having been elected by a constituency that is based on a school community means trustees voting to close a school would undoubtedly result in their removal from office, in the next election.

The government must provide an arm's length agency to determine the viability of a school once it is determined to be under a minimum enrolment threshold. The board or regional ministry office would use standard criteria to identify a school for investigation of closure due to enrolment. From that point forward, the decision is taken out of the school board's hands. The agency would investigate the requirements and future enrolment forecast, conduct a community needs analysis and examine the redistribution of students if a closure were to occur. The result would be a decision to close a school or to keep a school open based on a careful analysis of data. If the agency were to decide that a school should be kept open, a series of funding supports would apply that would allow the school to function at full service levels and not be restricted by limited financial support.

Adult Education

"The social and economic importance of encouraging adults to engage in continuous learning throughout their lives is undisputed". (Canadian Policy Research Network)

"Despite considerable rhetoric about the need for a learning society and the importance of lifelong learning for Canada to remain or become a competitive knowledge-based economy, the progress in effectively supporting adult and older learners has been disconcertingly slow". (Kirby Report 2009)

Ontario is committed to helping Ontarians achieve higher education, lowering unemployment, more quickly integrating new Canadians into the economy, and increasing the number of children who arrive at school ready to learn.

A strong adult education system can help achieve these economic and social goals. OECD studies indicate that adult education and training can contribute directly to the goals of higher performance for underachieving students in the K to 12 system when the adults in their lives gain the language,

literacy and numeracy skills that they need to effectively participate in their children's education. In 2011, Ontario suffers from significant job losses within various sectors.

Many of these employees would benefit from a combination of retraining and education that would open doors to versatile employment opportunities. Adding adults to partially filled school board owned buildings is a cost effective way to provide an important service and expedite their return to the active workforce. Many of our most successful adult secondary programs are offered in conjunction with alternative programs for students who are at risk of dropping out.

If Ontario truly believes that students should stay in school until 18 or until graduation, then co-operative education, apprenticeships, support systems for troubled teens, welcoming environments in community schools, and specialist teachers and programs are needed. Many of the needs of an adult re-entry student are the same as the needs of a vulnerable 17 year old, and combining their programs can offer a cost-effective delivery of secondary education to both groups. Of the adults that are in these types of programs, 83% of the graduates go on to jobs or further education. Access to this opportunity is equally important.

Community based secondary schools are the convenient cost effective model for these re-entry programs. The commute to a community college is enough of a disincentive to drive many adults away from this opportunity.

OSSTF believes that this government can fulfill this commitment, support Literacy and Numeracy and Learning to Age 18 initiatives and revitalize adult education programs in Ontario by implementing a mixed model, where at risk students, who are under 21 years of age, are placed in mixed model programs with adults 21 and over.

The job-focused and skills-focused approaches of Learning to Age 18 initiatives such as the High Skills Majors are ideally suited to adult education. A mixed model enriches programs for adult students, and youth in alternative programs benefit from job-focused adult curriculum. The current funding levels for adult education are a fraction of what is provided for students under 21 years old.

The GSN grant allocation is based mainly on enrolment and therefore programs need a critical mass of funding to be able to operate. Providing adequate funding levels for adults in a program results in more diverse educational opportunities that can be developed, especially in more remote or outlying areas where the need is great. The more we help adults return to school and graduate, the more Ontario's economy benefits. Restoring funding to these programs saves taxpayers money in the long run. As the economy moves to more knowledge based industries, a secondary diploma is the necessary stepping stone to the education or training needed for a productive workforce.

It is essential that the Ontario government make this training both cost effective and available to all whose education and skills must be upgraded to meet the new demands of the job market.

University Funding

More enrolment-based funding for infrastructure and support staff is required in the university sector. As government initiatives attract more students into the university system, the result is the necessity of more capital expenditures to support research and enrolment. Currently, more students have not equalled more funding, and as a result, the services have not been able to be maintained. Universities are not adding support staff at a rate anywhere near their enrolment growth. This directly impacts students. Governments must provide the funding, as well as direct universities to use that funding to ensure the infrastructure at the university is able to continue to support the increased numbers of students attending their programs. The government must ensure that universities allocate their funding in a clear and transparent way to ensure accountability.

School Board Revenue

School boards must diversify and broaden their scope. They will not be able to survive unless they increase their revenue and revenue streams from sources beyond the Ministry of Education. Typically, school boards have augmented their revenue through rental of their facilities and by offering educational programs for adults and other fee-paying patrons. Some boards have been successful at recruiting international students to increase their daily enrolment as tuition-paying visa students. This tuition greatly increases the ability of school boards to run their core programs. Unfortunately, many school boards, such as those in remote and rural areas of the province, are not as successful in recruiting visa students.

School boards have the facilities to expand their course offerings to the current private college market. Many subjects such as law enforcement and computer programming that are successful in the private college market can be run through the school system.

Eliminate EQAO

Standardized tests cannot be the arbiter of a student's progress or success. The daily, authentic assessment and evaluation by an education professional provides the most useful and effective feedback to both students and parents. Students learn in a variety of ways and must complete a variety of tasks in order to achieve a credit so it makes no sense for a student's achievements to be based on one form of assessment. Eliminating EQAO would save \$33 million per year which could be reinvested in education. Using random sample tests instead, such as the ones conducted by PISA have the advantage of highlighting how exemplary our publicly funded education system is both internally and on the world stage. This recognition of Ontario students' achievement attracts industry and investment to Ontario for its educated and skilled workforce.

Revenue Generation

When examining how to generate cost savings and efficiencies, it is also important to examine potential revenue streams. The provincial government's planned corporate tax cut rate from 11.5% to 10% will result in approximately \$2.4 billion in lost revenue. In light of the current fiscal situation, cancelling the corporate tax rate reduction provides funding that can be used to protect public services that Ontarians rely upon such as a properly funded education system, which is the foundation for a strong and stable economy.

Health Benefits and Long Term Disability

The tremendous advances in health care have benefitted all Ontarians. Some advances have allowed patients to be effectively treated outside of a traditional hospital or clinical environment. Many peptic disorders, for example, that used to require surgery, are now treated by oral medication, providing a great benefit to both the patient and the health care system because no hospital bed is required and there is no need for the many staff that ensure successful surgery for patients. The expense for that hospital stay is not the responsibility of OHIP. The bill for the treatment is paid by the patient's drug plan. This scenario will continue to be a growing trend as many treatments that may have required clinical support (including injections) will be available in a delivery model that is portable, dispensable and billed to drug plans.

The inflationary pressure and increased service expectations on the health care system will drive services into public and private health plans. This inevitability, along with the onslaught of biologic formularies under development, will make public and private health and dental plans an important part of Ontario's health care future. OSSTF/FEESO is proposing becoming a key partner in the future health care of education workers and their families.

Some individual OSSTF/FEESO bargaining units have taken over the responsibility of running their health and dental plans. Plans have been running independently for 10 years with the employer contributing only funding at a negotiated amount. OSSTF/FEESO has monitored the performance of these plans and has made comparisons with employer-owned plans. The data analysis reveals a remarkable difference in plan experience. After accounting for all related variables, employee-owned plans ran at greater efficiency and with lower usage. The consumerism of employee-owned plans has allowed the employee group to use funding to provide education and support to their members. This in turn accounts for the efficient use of benefit plan provisions.

Changes in legislation governing prescription drugs has made small benefit plans vulnerable to the pressure of profit margins of big pharma and drug store chains. The ability to control the mark-up on goods and services will be an essential component of future employee benefit plans.

A large plan can use its buying power to control the inflationary pressure.

OSSTF/FEESO is proposing the establishment of a province wide employee-owned health and dental benefit plan. A plan of this nature would combine the consumerism of a self-run plan but also the influence that a large plan would provide. This proposal addresses how to make the best use of scarce resources, promote disease prevention and optimum health for plan members and provide cost effective coverage.

Conclusion

An educated, well-trained workforce requires a strong, properly funded education system. Currently, 95% of all Ontario students attend publicly-funded schools and Ontario is now ranked 5th in the world in quality of education, with 81% of students graduating from high school. Up to 35,000 four and five year olds are benefitting from full-day kindergarten and 0 school days have been lost to school lock-outs or strikes in the last eight years.

These important statistics that reflect some of the positive developments in the Ontario education system need to be front and centre when efficiencies and cost saving measures are being considered in the education sector. Education is Ontario's best investment and the return on that investment is a strong, competitive and economically stable future for Ontario.

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