



BUILDING BETTER SCHOOLS

The ETFO Education Agenda

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Our Platform

Introduction

Sam Hammond, President

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has prepared this education platform to contribute to 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 basic skills, and foster creativity, innovation, a love of learning, and a commitment to full participation in our democratic society. Public education should create 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. ETFO—representing 76,000 teachers, early childhood educators, and educational and professional support personnel—is committed to making it even stronger. ETFO believes Ontario can do a better job of addressing the learning needs of our diverse student population and ensuring that students are well-prepared for higher education, training, and citizenship. Strengthening the education system will contribute to a healthy, vibrant society in the future.

Prior to the 2011 provincial election, ETFO released an education platform – Building Better Schools. This document revisits the same issues, but updates them to reflect the current school context and recent research. This updated education agenda also speaks to the important role that unions play in promoting healthy and safe schools and advocating for public education.


ETFO's platform proposals profile those issues our members believe will improve the quality of programs, enhance inclusiveness and equity in our elementary schools, and engage all students to become productive lifelong learners.

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Small Classes for All Elementary Students

Front-line classroom educators identify small classes as the most important factor in their ability to work individually with students and meet their diverse needs. ETFO's recent research tells us that parents place equal importance on class size.



Class size has been extensively studied. The most recent U.S.-based review of the research concludes: "The academic literature strongly supports the common-sense notion that class size is an important determinant of student outcomes."

Ontario's recent investment in smaller classes in primary grades (junior kindergarten through to grade 3) has had a positive impact on our 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. Smaller classes have improved student engagement and achievement in the early grades.

The latest research indicates that small classes have an even greater impact if teaching strategies and classroom practices that take full advantage of the benefits of smaller classes are used. Teachers need opportunities to share and collaborate on best practices in smaller classes.

The benefits of small classes we have seen in the primary grades need to be extended to grades 4 to 8. Currently primary grades are funded for an average class size of 20 and secondary grades for a class size

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average of 22. By comparison, funding for grades 4 to 8 supports a class size average of 25. These grades have the largest class sizes in the system, often more than 30 students in a class.

The new full-day kindergarten program is an exciting, bold initiative, but there are some issues that must be addressed, including class size. The full-day kindergarten program is funded to have an average class size of 26 and an average staff-child ratio of 1:13. There are, however, a considerable number of classes with 30 or more students. ETFO members consistently raise concerns about the challenges of setting up activity-based programs for that many young children. Overcrowded and often noisy classrooms or open "pods" limit educators' ability to take full advantage of the play-based program and create stressful work and learning environments.

Ontario has a longstanding policy of integrating students with identified special needs into regular classrooms. It recognizes that our public schools have the responsibility to support the education and growth of all children. It ensures that Ontario students' learning environment reflects the diversity of society at large and fosters understanding and appreciation for individual differences. To effectively support this policy and enable classroom educators to meet the individual needs of their diverse students, class sizes should be adjusted to reflect the number of students with identified special needs in each class.

Because of associated costs, the small class size policy is often targeted by those looking for savings in the education sector. Small classes are, however, at the heart of educators' ability to engage students and meet their individual needs.

Recommendations:

- Extend the benefits of smaller classes to grades 4 to 8.
- Reduce the average class size of the full-day kindergarten program to align with other primary grades.
- Introduce a weighting factor that reduces class size in accordance with the number of students with identified special needs integrated into regular classrooms.

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More Meaningful Student Assessment and Learning

1. EQAO-Driven Education

Ontario must move beyond its current standardized assessment regime. The testing administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) has been in place since 1998. Changes have been made to reduce the length of the tests and schedule them later in the school year. But we still test every grade 3 and 6 student. Teachers still teach to the test and the time devoted to EQAO-related data collection has increased. EQAO test results are being misused by real estate agents and organizations like the Fraser Institute to rank schools and neighbourhoods, and by the government's on-line School Information Finder to compare schools. This is socially divisive and a misuse of the results.

It is time to move beyond the test-driven focus of EQAO assessments and define broader measures of school success. The fifteen-year narrow focus on literacy and numeracy and on student performance on EQAO assessments has led to system fatigue. Educators – from classroom teachers to superintendents – are stressed. And so are students. It is not only staff who are calling for fundamental changes. Ontario-based education experts advocate for a new vision for education, one that is not focused on standardized test results. Their vision is based on creating supportive and collaborative school cultures where educators have greater professional autonomy regarding their classroom practice, curriculum, and assessment strategies.

There are alternatives to Ontario's testing regime. Finland, a top-performing nation on international assessments, uses random sample tests to occasionally check if its curriculum and teaching approaches are appropriate. The international tests conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are random sample tests. Ontario should adopt the same approach.

In the end, 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 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 EQAO tests.

Recommendations:

- Adopt a random-sample model to measure the appropriateness of the Ontario curriculum and the effectiveness of teaching strategies.
- Place more emphasis on the role of ongoing teacher assessment of student progress.

2. Teaching for Deep Understanding

There is a general consensus that, to be responsible citizens and successful in their future careers, students need to develop the skills of critical thinking, problem solving, communications, creativity, and the ability to work collaboratively. In the context of a global economy and rapid technological change, our students need



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to be self-directed, lifelong learners who are innovative, flexible, resourceful, and resilient.

Focusing on these skills does not mean abandoning the basics, like reading, writing, and mathematics. It does mean addressing the barriers Ontario educators face in creating classrooms and strategies to foster these skills, including an overly broad and prescriptive curriculum. Teachers need to be able to provide students with opportunities to study what matters to them and the time to do it deeply. Authentic, experiential, inquiry-based learning encourages students to pursue areas of interest, solve problems, and make connections to the broader world, to become responsible, global citizens.

On average, the Ontario curriculum establishes about 500 specific expectations for each elementary grade. These expectations limit teachers' ability to delve 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. This is critical for the increasing number of elementary teachers who teach one, two, or even more grades in one classroom.

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:

- Revise the elementary Ontario curriculum by reducing the number of prescribed student outcomes and identifying, instead, a set of core learning goals.
- Provide all elementary classrooms with resources that support hands-on, experiential learning.

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More Specialist Teachers

The Ontario curriculum mandates that elementary students receive instruction in the arts and physical education, but the government does not provide sufficient funding for teacher-librarians or specialist teachers in music, guidance, 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 for regular classroom teachers to have the preparation time they need.



The number of specialist teachers at the elementary level dropped significantly between 1999 and 2005. In 2005, ETFO negotiated additional funding for specialist teachers that has contributed to a modest increase. The Ontario education grants 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.

Technology, the arts, global, and environmental education all support experiential learning that ignites and sustains students' interest and connects them to the world around them. Arts education gives students a greater motivation to learn, improved self-esteem, communication and social skills, increased creativity and innovation, and a lifelong appreciation for the arts.

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. Physical well-being is crucial to students' ability to learn and be successful at school. Schools can do more to promote healthy physical activity. For this to happen, teachers need more flexibility in terms of the curriculum. The government also needs to increase funding for specialist elementary physical education teachers. The Ontario non-profit organization People for Education reports that only 45 percent of grade 7 and 8 schools have a specialist health and physical education teacher. In one third of the schools, these teachers are assigned part-time.

Despite the importance of design and technology to our future economic prosperity, design and technology and family studies 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.

Teacher-librarians play a critical role in developing student literacy, supporting teachers' classroom programs, and making the library the technological hub of the school. Studies conducted by 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. Yet, the number of elementary schools that have a teacher-librarian continues to decline. In 2011-12, 56 percent of Ontario elementary schools had a teacher-librarian, compared to 80 percent in 1998. Most teacher-librarians in elementary schools work part-time.

The provincial government allocates \$33 million to the EQAO, \$70 million for the Ministry of Education's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, and a further \$45 million to support 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 in literacy initiatives if it shifted these allocations to increase funding for teacher-librarians.

Current education grants do not ensure all grade seven and eight students have access to guidance counsellors. These teachers have specialized skills and training to support students with personal and social issues and make decisions regarding their high school programs that will directly affect their post-secondary education and career path.

Recommendations:

- Establish more balance between the focus on literacy and numeracy and the importance of providing elementary students access to programs in 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.
- Reintroduce family studies and design and technology to grades 7 and 8.
- 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.

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More Resources for Students with Special Needs



Meeting the needs of special education students is a constant challenge for any government. The Ministry of Education's core grants for students with identified special needs are tied to overall enrolment. Therefore, as total student enrolment declines across the province, school boards receive less money for special education. However, the number of students being identified through the special needs identification process is increasing, not decreasing.

There are also many students not formally identified who are receiving supports and interventions not covered by special education funding. 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.

Teachers need additional professional support to successfully integrate students with identified special needs into regular classrooms. Teachers are reporting an increase in incidents of violence on the part of students with psychological and behavioural issues. To address these and other issues related to students with special needs, classrooms require more access to educational assistants, behavioural counsellors, child and youth workers, psychologists, and speech and language pathologists.

Recommendations:

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

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Greater Focus on Equal Opportunity and Inclusion



1A. English-Language Learners

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 in the 2013 People for Education annual report on public schools, 72 percent of English elementary schools have English-language learners (ELL) compared to 43 percent in 2002-03. These students face significant challenges in catching up to their peers and schools do not have the resources to adequately support them.

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 school. The grants also assume that ELL students only require special language programs for up to four years, an assumption that is not supported either by reports from teachers who work with these students or by research on language acquisition.

There is no requirement that school boards actually spend their second-language grants on the intended programs. The latest data indicate that 28 percent of English-language elementary schools with 10 or more ELL students do not have an ESL teacher. All too often, the overall shortfalls in the funding formula have led to school boards using their second-language grants for other purposes, short-changing ELL students.

1B. Student Diversity

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 society.

In the past, when school boards had taxation powers, some funded community workers who worked with parents, in particular those who were immigrants and refugees. These workers served as an important link between parents who weren't able or inclined to be active in their child's school. Their work helped to address language and class barriers and to broaden the school's connection with the more marginalized in the community. Currently, the Ministry of Education, through the Parent Engagement Office, supports some important initiatives to promote parent engagement, but the initiatives can't fill the gap of work formerly done by community workers. The Ministry should support school board community workers through Grants for Student Needs.

Recommendations:

- Revise 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 English as a Second Language grants to increase the capacity of schools to extend ESL programs to students who continue to need the support beyond four years.
- Provide classroom resources to support the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.
- Provide teachers and other education workers with professional learning that addresses discrimination and oppression of marginalized students.
- Fund community workers at the school board level through the Grants for Student Needs.

2. Children Living In Poverty

Perhaps the most significant factor contributing to the difference in student achievement is socio-economic status. OECD reports demonstrate that countries with smaller gaps in income inequality have higher student achievement levels. Its reports have attributed Canadian students' high achievement scores on international assessments, in part, to the narrow income gap and social programs that support lower income Canadians. However, Canada is poised to lose this advantage as we witness a widening income gap. Lower family incomes mean many students arrive at school hungry and unable to fully engage in learning. School nutrition programs only partially meet the need and they can be stigmatizing and short-term.

Schools can address poverty-related issues. For example, with Ministry of Education support, ETFO has developed a number of programs to increase teacher and community awareness about poverty issues and has promoted school nutrition programs. However, 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 with 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 increase the number of field trips and in-school arts performances. These additional resources would increase student engagement and student success. ETFO's experience through its poverty work at the school level also points to the importance of school boards employing community workers to make connections with parents and foster greater parental engagement in their child's school and education.

Beyond the school level, Ontario must also live up to the commitment of its poverty reduction strategy and address income levels, social housing needs, and access to early intervention programs. The federal government has a key role to play in addressing poverty, but Ontario can do its part by investing more in anti-poverty strategies. These include more generous income support programs and tax reform to more evenly distribute economic prosperity in the province.

Recommendations:

- Provide specific compensatory grants for schools in disadvantaged communities to support additional learning materials, field trips, and in-school arts programs.
- Increase investments in anti-poverty measures such as income support measures and tax reform.

3. Expansion and Integration of Children's Services

Ontario will be missing the opportunity to reap the full potential of early childhood development if it fails to make quality early learning and care more universally accessible to Ontario children aged 0 to 3.8. Accessible early learning and care would contribute 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, and the workforce. This enhanced workplace participation would increase provincial tax revenue.

Schools can build partnerships with the community if they function as hubs for children's services. There are models where schools are the sites for community recreation programs or public libraries, but such examples are far too rare. More can be done to integrate services, especially in communities with declining enrolment where schools have available space. Better integration at the community level should result in

cost efficiencies through reduced program overhead costs.

Recommendations:

- Increase funding to expand parent access to early learning and care programs for children aged 0 to 3.8.
- Increase the capacity of schools to act as hubs for community services.

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A Strong Union Voice

Ontario public education has benefited from having unions representing teachers and other education workers for more than one hundred years. ETFO and other unions have worked to negotiate compensation and working conditions that attract and retain highly-qualified, committed professionals to the school sector. Through our programs and training, ETFO members engage in professional learning that improves their capacity to be effective educators and keeps them current with new teaching strategies.



By advocating for safe and healthy workplaces, education unions ensure students are learning in safe and healthy classrooms. ETFO, through its health and safety representatives, identifies potential hazards such as poor air quality, unsafe equipment, and the potential threat of asbestos. Through their unions, classroom educators advocate for measures to address workplace violence that threatens the safety and well-being of the entire school community.

By promoting policies such as smaller classes, curriculum reforms, and more meaningful student assessment policies, unions are not only promoting improved working conditions for their members, they are also addressing issues that affect student learning and success.

Education unions are committed to addressing broader social issues that affect their students' ability to be successful learners and to become active and engaged citizens. With the support of their union's training and classroom resources, ETFO members work in their classrooms, their schools, and their communities to fight against poverty, inequality, and discrimination.

It is important that the provincial government continues to recognize education unions as important partners in the discussion and implementation of education policies. It is equally important that government not introduce initiatives that weaken the ability of education unions to represent their members and be strong advocates for public education.

Recommendations:

- Engage education unions

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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 standardized 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.

While recent initiatives like class size reduction in primary grades and the introduction of full-day kindergarten are important enhancements for elementary schools, other aspects of elementary education remain short-changed by the government's funding model. The government can correctly claim that it has increased education funding during its three terms in office, but the additional funding has gone largely to additional programs, not to 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, expanding the public role in supporting the development and well-being of children, and recognizing the important role unions play in supporting a strong school system. We look forward to participating in the public discourse about the public schools that Ontarians need and deserve. We invite you to join us in shaping the future of public education in our province.

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