



Submission on Bill 229 - Protect, Support and Recover from COVID-19 Act (Budget Measures) November 30, 2020

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation was founded in 1919. OSSTF/FEESO represents over 60,000 public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, instructors, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, and many other educational workers employed in full-day kindergarten to university.

OSSTF/FEESO is pleased to make a submission on Bill 229, with respect to its impact on the public education and university and college sectors.

The pandemic has taken a serious toll on Ontario's economy and key to a strong economy is a robust public education system. Public education is an investment and the returns on this investment are lower costs in social services. This reduces the amount of revenue the government is required to set aside for social services, including the health, legal and welfare sectors. However, instead of investing in our future, the government has chosen to ignore the education sector in Bill 229. The budget shows a mid-term outlook of only \$300 million over the next three years, during a time when enrollment is set to grow by 4% and inflation will continue to rise. This will require school boards to cut programs and remove frontline workers from our schools. The result will be a weaker public education system and a weaker economy. At a time when governments should be investing in education, the Ontario government has decided to leave both our public schools and our universities at risk, grappling with austerity budgets. The university and colleges sector is also subject to a restriction in funding. The mid-term outlook is limited to \$500 million, with much of this funding tied up in capital projects.

Public School Board Sector:

The Fall 2020 Budget update revealed only one funding item for education, and that is to provide \$380 million directly to parents. Adding this new funding to the previous \$376 million from March, results in \$758 million diverted from the education sector, with no accountability as to where these dollars will go. This represents 2.5 times the amount of money the government is projecting that they will invest in the public education sector over the next three years. OSSTF/FEESO recommends that the government redirect this funding to the front lines of public education. We continually hear that this government is pouring money into education, but all the while, items are being continually added to the education budget, like last year's child care tax credit, to give the impression that the education envelope is growing.

The government claims to have increased education spending by \$800 million from \$30.2 billion to \$31.0 billion. However, included in these figures are \$763 million from the federal government and \$496 million that school boards had in reserves, with most of that money already earmarked for local projects and commitments. This amounts to less than stagnant funding for public education. These tactics mesh perfectly with the information in the leaked government document reported on by the Toronto Star, which revealed plans to cut over \$50 million a year for the next four years by forcing students into on-line learning.

The government states in the budget that they will be investing \$13 billion over the next 10 years into building new schools and renewing current school buildings. There is a \$16.3 billion repair backlog for Ontario's public schools. This backlog has been growing exponentially, despite the government allocating \$1.4 billion per year since 2016. This funding model has been failing for years, and yet, now we are seeing a \$100 million cut in the funding. OSSTF/FEESO recommends that this government take this opportunity to provide good paying jobs to our construction sector and public school board maintenance workers and fund the repairs that are desperately needed in our schools.

Citizens rely on governments to provide strong social services. The people of Ontario have never needed them more. So why does this budget contain so many tax cuts that will make the provision of services more difficult? The wine and beer taxes, for example, will remove \$40 million from the government's coffers over the next two years. Why freeze a tax increase on a luxury item?

This government could instead find real savings by eliminating services that do not provide value for money, like the failed Education Quality and Accountability Office. It fails to test student achievement, but instead tells us which students are best at learning how to take a test. There are two million students in Ontario, and the EQAO estimates that it costs \$17 per student to run these evaluations. The government spends this \$34 million with no return on its investment. This money could instead be used to fund more educational assistants or custodians in our schools - frontline workers who would make a difference to a child's educational experience.

Post-Secondary Education:

Bill 229 contains very little for the post-secondary education system in Ontario. With over 93% of the \$500 million being added to the post-secondary education system earmarked for building repairs and upgrades, there is just \$34 million available for everything else across the entire sector. This amount will not cover the cost of inflation and will force our universities and colleges to become further indebted to the public sector. This lack of funding will have a profound effect on the educational experience for students. New buildings are of little value without the front line workers that make these institutions some of the world's best places to learn.

Conclusion:

Bill 229 has all but abandoned our children and our economy. Public education is the great equalizer and societies are judged based on the importance that they place on it. We urge this government to change direction. A properly funded public education system, from kindergarten to post-secondary, provides for a well-educated workforce and attracts employers. The Financial Accountability Office has confirmed that there is over \$9 billion of funding from the federal government that has yet to be allocated. There is no reason to plan an austerity budget for education.

While there are some positives in this budget, such as doubling the funding for the Black Youth Action Plan and freezing tuition rates for universities and colleges, the vast majority of the budget is cuts taxes, which reduces the government's ability to provide services for Ontarians. It is abundantly clear that this government still views education as an expense, rather than an investment, to the detriment of our students and our economy.