



# OECTA RESPONSES TO GOVERNMENT CONSULTATIONS ON EDUCATION

*\* All responses have a 500 word limit.*

## Q 1. How should we improve student performance in the disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)?

There is no doubt that STEM learning must be a key part of any 21<sup>st</sup> century education. All students should be provided with opportunities to engage and realize their full potential in these subjects. In the publicly funded education system and in society at large, we should be making a particular effort to foster the development of female students and others who have previously been excluded from these fields.

Of course, this does not mean that Ontario's publicly funded education system is not already doing an excellent job in these areas. There is a popular misconception that students are struggling in math, but the reality is that Ontario's students continue to excel by national and international standards. While there is always room for improvement, going back to basics will not get our students where they need to go.

We must ensure that the proper resources are in place to provide meaningful instruction and opportunities. For example, the need for technological infrastructure and hardware is beyond what funding provides, and school boards are not able to keep pace with constant innovation. This has resulted in inequality between boards, as well as the proliferation of "bring your own device" policies, which have the potential to widen the digital divide between students. The government must close the technology gap among schools and students, so that it does not result in achievement gaps. Teachers also need time and resources to develop proper plans and lessons, to make the most effective use of technology in the classroom.

Any discussions around STEM learning must acknowledge the fact that teachers are trained, qualified, and certified professionals. Reforms to curriculum or assessment should involve extensive consultation with teachers, and respect our professional needs and judgment. Furthermore, teachers are dedicated life-long learners, who continually upgrade our knowledge and skills, often on our own time and at our own expense, to ensure that we keep abreast of what is current and effective in our classrooms. Thousands of teachers have taken advantage of opportunities over the past few years to upgrade and refine our skills in math and technology. With any

curriculum changes that are made, it is imperative that resources continue to be provided for teacher-led, teacher-directed professional development – the most efficient and effective form of professional learning.

Finally, we must be wary of any attempts by the private sector to influence curriculum or programs in publicly funded schools. While it is understandable that businesses want to ensure that graduates will have the skills necessary to work in fast-paced, knowledge-driven industries, it is imperative that the publicly funded education system remain equitable, accessible, and focused on student needs and the public interest. This includes a recognition that STEM subjects are only part of a well-rounded education.

## **Q 2. How should our schools prepare students with needed job skills, such as skilled trades and coding?**

Laying a foundation of job-related abilities should be one function of the publicly funded education system. However, young people are entering a rapidly evolving labour market, and they will need to continually upgrade their knowledge and technical skills throughout their lives to meet the requirements of jobs that do not yet exist. Therefore, the overarching goal of publicly funded education should be to prepare students with a broad range of values and competencies that will enable them to adapt. We also must be sure that we remain focused on the needs of students and the public as a whole, rather than the desires of business interests.

It certainly should not be the expectation that every graduate will go on to university. Many of the jobs that will be most in demand over the next few decades will require a high level of skills, but not necessarily a university degree. Public awareness campaigns and labour market information should be used to promote the skilled trades as viable and potentially lucrative career options. More resources should be provided for guidance counselling, to help students and families make informed choices about post-secondary goals and planning.

Experiential learning can be a valuable way for some students to develop skills, confidence, and attitudes about learning and working. But not all experiential learning programs are equally demanding or beneficial. The government should ensure that in all cases, learning expectations are high and the integrity of credits is maintained. Furthermore, students should not be required to participate in experiential learning if the programs do not match their interests or goals. We should also be wary of allowing private industry to design and implement experiential learning projects for their own benefit.

We must be careful that job-readiness does not become a main objective of the publicly funded elementary and secondary systems. Employers, not the public, should bear the bulk of the responsibility for training young people on job-specific knowledge and skills.

The idea of a mismatch between the needs of employers and the abilities of students is greatly exaggerated, and the problems that do exist are largely the result of businesses being unwilling to invest in on-the-job training or pay appropriate wages. Under no circumstances should private businesses be influencing the development of curriculum, or transferring the risk and cost of job training to the public.

Parents, teachers, and the general public want students to be prepared to move the economy forward, but publicly funded education should be about much more. We must continue to seek a balance between instilling hard skills, encouraging collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving, and fostering the development of thoughtful, creative, caring, well-rounded citizens.

### **Q 3. What measures can be taken to improve provincial standardized testing?**

There are serious and well-founded concerns about the stress that high-stakes testing causes for students, teachers, and administrators. Although EQAO tests are supposedly not meant to be used to rank schools, we know that they are often employed as a basis for comparison. Trustees and superintendents feel nervous about how their schools will measure up, which leads to pressure being exerted on principals, who pass it on to teachers, who then have to spend weeks focusing the specific types of questions and answers that will be found on the tests. If results in one year are deemed unsatisfactory, the anxiety is only heightened the following year. We also know that some boards and schools are diverting precious funds that could be used for books, events, or equipment toward test preparation materials.

Students most especially feel the pressure to perform well on EQAO tests – and the OSSLT is a requirement to graduate. The stress and anxiety exacerbates other learning challenges, mental health issues, or other issues that students are experiencing, and often negatively impacts their performance.

To make matters worse, standardized testing does not give an accurate reflection of student ability, because it only captures a moment in time, and fails to account for the range of skills and factors that affect achievement. While some argue that the tests provide essential information to improve student achievement and ensure the education system is accountable to taxpayers, the reality is that teachers already use our professional judgment to conduct assessments for, as, and of learning, which we then use to modify our instruction and provide individual attention, as well as to complete provincial report cards.

If the government still believes that some sort of province-wide testing is necessary, they should at least move toward a random sampling model. This would produce accurate results at a fraction of the current costs, while reducing the level of student anxiety and allowing most teachers and students to remain focused on genuine learning activities and more meaningful classroom assessments.

#### **Q 4. What more can be done to ensure students graduate high school with important life skills, including financial literacy?**

School is where children learn how to live in the world; preparing them to meet life's challenges goes beyond teaching reading, writing, and math. While these basics are fundamental building blocks of learning, they are not adequate to prepare students for our rapidly changing economy, the complexities of an ever-changing society, or the rigours and demands of adulthood. Globalization and advances in technology have made the world more fast-paced and interconnected than ever before, which makes it all the more vital that we graduate students who can appreciate diverse opinions, and work constructively together. To help our students become engaged and responsible citizens, we need to go beyond the basics.

We should be mindful of the extent to which much of this is already happening. Financial literacy and other household skills are useful elements of a comprehensive, 21<sup>st</sup> century education, but so are critical thinking, problem solving, and effective communication and teamwork. Teachers, especially those in the publicly funded Catholic education system, infuse these skills in lessons across the curriculum. Subjects such as visual arts, music, environmental studies, and health and physical education – taught with an up-to-date, inclusive curriculum that reflects the realities of modern society – are essential in helping students develop robust, well-rounded, highly transferable skills. Contrary to the popular misconception, our schools are already doing an excellent job of preparing students for the “real world.”

Ontario's publicly funded education system has been recognized for its commitment to equity, and it is important for these efforts to continue. We must help students understand and work with one another in a safe and welcoming learning environment. This includes, among other things, honouring the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, continuing to protect and promote Gay-Straight Alliances, and supporting anti-racism initiatives. The government should also provide adequate funding to ensure that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have equitable access to programs and activities.

If the government plans to update the curriculum to pay more particular attention to financial literacy or other practical life skills, it is crucial that the programs be developed in close consultation with teachers, not businesses. Furthermore, classroom instruction must be delivered only by trained, qualified, certified teachers. Only professional teachers have the knowledge and judgment around teaching and assessment to properly plan units and lessons, individualize instruction, and gauge student progress.

#### **Q 5. What steps could schools take to ban cellphone use in the classroom?**

It is not entirely clear where the government has gotten the idea that a blanket ban on mobile phones in classrooms is needed or desired. Among teachers, for example,

there are a wide range of views. The easiest and best solution would be to leave the use of mobile phones in classrooms to the discretion of teachers, who will use our professional judgment to determine when and how students should be able to access them.

One reason that some teachers might allow students to use mobile phones is that, like many technologies, they can be leveraged in ways that benefit student learning, when used as part of a well-designed pedagogical plan. However, it really should not be up to students and teachers to provide our own devices. To ensure equitable access, the government should be providing funding for appropriate hardware, software, and internet connectivity for all teachers and students throughout the school day. Teachers will use our professional judgment to determine when and how this technology can be used to deliver programming.

The proliferation of technology and its increased use in schools does raise important safety and privacy considerations. To address these concerns, students should be taught about issues such as cyberbullying through a modern health and physical education curriculum, and school administration should ensure compliance with policies regarding acceptable use of technology and cyberbullying, in addition to *Occupational Health and Safety Act* provisions related to workplace harassment.

## **Q 6. How can we build a new age-appropriate Health and Physical Education curriculum that includes subjects like mental health, sexual health education and the legalization of cannabis?**

It is important to point out that, as of 2015, Ontario students were already learning an age-appropriate Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum. The 2015 HPE curriculum was the product of a multi-year, multi-consultation process, which made major and necessary updates to respond to developments in law, technology, and society. In developing the curriculum, the Ministry of Education consulted with thousands of parents and educators, as well as a broad cross-section of experts and stakeholder organizations.

In reverting to the 1998 curriculum, even on an interim basis, the government is subjecting students to a curriculum that was developed before smartphones, social media, and progress in the understanding of different sexual orientations and gender identities. A wide range of legal and health experts have outlined the dangers posed to students that result from removing discussions of contemporary civil rights and the dangers associated with modern technology.

If the government is intent on developing a new HPE curriculum, it must provide teachers with relevant, up-to-date information and resources. Topics such as consent, gender expression, and LGBTQ+ issues must be included to ensure that students are prepared for the realities and challenges of modern life. While it might make some members of the community uncomfortable, we cannot ignore the fact

that students are already learning about these topics on the internet or from their peers – it is crucial that the publicly funded education system provide them with proper information, from a trained source. It is also imperative that the curriculum be informed by a broad base of subject matter experts, including teachers and other education stakeholders, to ensure the safety and well-being of all students.

## **Q 7. What elements should be included in a Ministry of Education Parents' Bill of Rights?**

Educators agree that students learn best, and schools work best, when parents, guardians, or caregivers are active participants in their child's education. Research consistently demonstrates the link between parental activity and student learning and achievement. Each and every day, teachers and parents work closely together toward a common objective: ensuring student success.

In this effort, enumerating a formal "Parents' Bill of Rights" is an unhelpful exercise – one that threatens to drive a wedge between parents and teachers. Instead, it is far more constructive to point to, and continue to build upon, the many positive examples of parent-teacher collaboration that already exist.

Across Ontario, parents are involved in their child's education in formal and informal ways, and to varying degrees. Central to this relationship are the open lines of communication that exist between parents and teachers. If parents have questions or concerns pertaining to their child, they are encouraged to speak with their child's teacher or principal, as many already do.

For those interested in more formal avenues of engagement, parent-teacher conferences, which can include other professionals involved in student learning, allow parents to consult with educators who interact with their children at school. Parents can also join School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees, where the partnership between parents, students, teachers, principals, school boards, government, and the community can be further strengthened.

In addition to these opportunities for involvement, parents have a wide variety of tools and resources at their disposal to stay informed about their child's education. At the school level, teachers regularly provide information to parents on activities taking place in schools. This is especially true with regard to the Health and Physical Education curriculum. For example, Catholic schools distribute a letter that outlines what will be discussed in the classroom when it comes to the sexual health and development aspects of the curriculum, and parents in all of the publicly funded education systems have the right to remove their children from some of these lessons. At the government level, regulations regarding Safe and Accepting Schools include requirements that keep parents informed in situations such as bullying. Through all of this, parents have the ability to request access to their child's Ontario Student Records (OSR) files, which are regularly updated by teachers.

Parental engagement can take many forms, and a wide variety of parental engagement strategies and effective practices are already in place. These strategies and practices are all predicated on communication and a positive, constructive relationship between parents and teachers. Rather than antagonize this relationship, we should look for additional ways to connect parents to teachers, schools, and the community. Further developing this collaborative relationship will have a positive impact on student learning.

## **Q 8. Do you have any other feedback or ideas?**

Ontario's system of publicly funded education is among the best in the world, with impressive student achievement and sincere efforts to improve equity and inclusivity. Recent results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) continue to show that Ontario is among the top-performing jurisdictions.

Publicly funded Catholic schools have made remarkable contributions to the overall excellence of this world-renowned education system. In addition to teaching literacy, math, science, and other skills, Catholic schools develop students' character and commitment to the common good, encouraging them to be discerning believers, creative and holistic thinkers, self-directed learners, caring family members, and responsible citizens. There are almost 650,000 students attending publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario, including many non-Catholic students whose parents have chosen the system for their children.

Although some have agitated for merging the Catholic and secular school systems as a way to save money, ample evidence from previous municipal and school board mergers shows that the legal, administrative, and other costs inevitably overwhelm any potential savings. We also need to be mindful of the incredible disruption that a merger would create, as boundaries would have to be redrawn and students would have to change schools. None of this would serve to address the real, pressing needs in Ontario's schools.