

SHARED VALUES, SHARED PRIORITIES

IMPROVING PUBLICLY FUNDED
EDUCATION IN ONTARIO



ONTARIO ENGLISH
Catholic
Teachers
ASSOCIATION

Teachers, parents, school administrators, political leaders, and the broader public generally want the same things for children and young people in the publicly funded education system. We want them to learn how to live and work together. We want them to develop the skills and knowledge that will move society and the economy forward. And we want them to grow into engaged, caring, and responsible members of the community.

In our *Lessons for Life* position papers, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) has laid out our detailed perspectives on the best ways to achieve these ends. But we recognize that there are many issues competing for attention, and different people have different ideas and interests. We also understand that new governments bring their own agendas for education reform. The Progressive Conservative government has been upfront about its intention to rethink some practices, as well as its desire to make more efficient use of government expenditures.

To continue moving our publicly funded education system forward, protecting and improving this vital public service, Catholic teachers believe that it would be best for everyone to focus on the essentials. We can build on the progress that has been made, and give our attention to the things that everyone agrees need fixing.

Catholic teachers have identified a few examples of policies and programs that are working well and should be protected, as well as some key issues and concepts that should guide any attempts to improve our schools. We believe that by following this blueprint for engagement, everyone involved in publicly funded education can work toward a shared set of priorities, based on our shared values. We can give Ontario's students the best possible chance to succeed at school and in life.

VALUING WHAT WORKS

We should celebrate the fact that Ontario has one of the best publicly funded education systems in the world. While there is room for improvement, our students continue to perform incredibly well by national and international standards, with impressive achievement in literacy, numeracy, science, and problem solving. This is due in large part to the way that evidence and experience have guided education policymaking, and the important investments that have been made in programs with well-established, long-term benefits. Rather than going backward, any efforts to improve publicly funded education in Ontario should build on this solid foundation.

Class Size

Research has shown that smaller class sizes enable teachers to provide individualized instruction to students. This is especially important considering the large number of students with special needs who are being integrated into today's classrooms. Smaller classes also improve attentiveness and attitudes about learning, benefits that boost performance in school and stay with students throughout their lives, leading to long-term social and economic gains.


Skeptics often point to jurisdictions such as Japan and South Korea – where class sizes are large and test scores are high – as evidence that small classes are not necessary. However, they ignore the consequences of these large classes, such as lack of student engagement and social skills. In fact, many of these education systems have announced plans to reduce class sizes in order to better develop communication skills, higher order thinking, and collaborative learning.

Reduced class sizes in Ontario have enabled teachers to attend to the academic, social, and behavioural diversity of our students, while managing expanded administrative and accountability requirements. Smaller classes are also popular with parents, who take comfort in knowing that their children will receive the care and attention they deserve.

A COMMITMENT TO SMALLER CLASS SIZES SHOULD REMAIN A HALLMARK OF ONTARIO'S APPROACH TO EDUCATION.

“Class size is one of the most-studied education policies, and an extremely rigorous body of research demonstrates the importance of class size in positively influencing student achievement.”

Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach,
National Education Policy Center

A young child with dark hair and glasses is smiling and holding several colorful sticks (red, blue, green, yellow) in their hands. The child is wearing a blue hoodie. In the background, another child is visible, slightly out of focus, also holding similar sticks. The overall scene is bright and cheerful, suggesting a classroom or play area.

“Our analysis suggests that the long-term benefit [of public investments in early childhood education] could be as high as \$6 for every dollar invested.”

Craig Alexander,
Conference Board of Canada

Full-day Kindergarten

The long-term benefits of public investments in early childhood education have been recognized by groups such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), TD Bank, and the Conference Board of Canada. In Ontario, parents, teachers, early childhood educators (ECEs), administrators, and researchers agree that the Full-day Kindergarten (FDK) program is preparing children socially and academically, leading to better outcomes in later years.

When the program was developed, the teacher/ECE teams were recommended based on pilot tests in Ontario and elsewhere, in which teams were found to add to the professional preparation and skillset of each team member. ECEs bring specialized knowledge about early childhood development, while certified teachers bring high levels of skills and training related to pedagogy and delivery of the curriculum. Research has shown one of the main reasons students are benefitting from the program is that the staff teams are uniting around the mission to support children and families.

Ontario's FDK program is a ground-breaking, world-leading initiative. Children and parents are benefitting immensely, and the investment will continue to pay dividends long into the future, for individuals, families, the economy, and society.

WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THE FDK PROGRAM SO IT CAN HONOUR ITS ORIGINAL PROMISE.

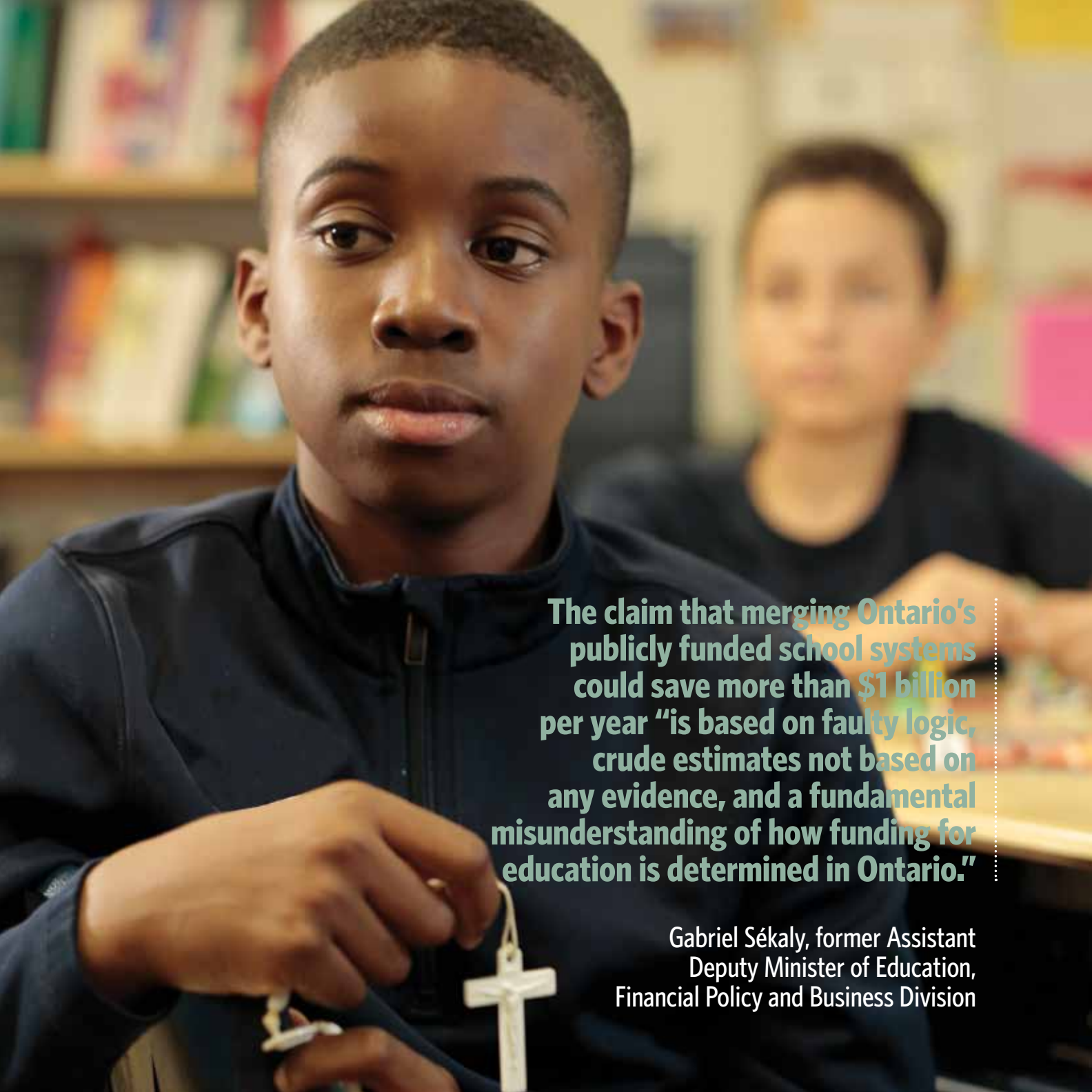
Catholic Education

Publicly funded Catholic schools have made remarkable contributions to the overall excellence of Ontario's world-renowned education system. In addition to teaching literacy, math, science, and other skills, we are developing 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's high standards and well-rounded methods for their children.

There is a popular belief among media and some education stakeholders that merging Ontario's school systems could save more than \$1 billion per year. However, it is important to be aware that this figure is rooted entirely in a single, flimsy discussion paper released by a fringe group called the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods of Ontario, Inc. (FUNOI). Recent research undertaken on behalf of OECTA by Gabriel Sékaly, former Assistant Deputy Minister of Education overseeing the Financial Policy and Business Division, has found that the FUNOI analysis "is based on faulty logic, crude estimates not based on any evidence, and a fundamental misunderstanding of how funding for education is determined in Ontario." According to Mr. Sékaly, the vast majority of spending on education is naturally driven by student enrolment, and the FUNOI paper provides no evidence for its "grossly overstated" savings estimates.

In contrast, there is ample evidence from previous municipal and school board mergers of how the legal, administrative, and other costs inevitably overwhelm any potential savings. And we 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. When we also consider how ingrained publicly funded Catholic schools are in the province's history and culture, it is clear that amalgamation would not be in the interests of students, families, or communities.

WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO VALUE THE ROLE THAT PUBLICLY FUNDED CATHOLIC EDUCATION PLAYS IN OUR SOCIETY.

A young Black boy in a dark blue zip-up jacket is the central focus, looking off-camera with a thoughtful expression. He is holding a white string with a cross. In the background, a girl is blurred, sitting at a desk. The setting appears to be a classroom or library with bookshelves.

The claim that merging Ontario's publicly funded school systems could save more than \$1 billion per year "is based on faulty logic, crude estimates not based on any evidence, and a fundamental misunderstanding of how funding for education is determined in Ontario."

Gabriel Sékaly, former Assistant
Deputy Minister of Education,
Financial Policy and Business Division



“As many as one in five children and youth in Ontario will experience some form of mental health problem.”

Children’s Mental Health Ontario

FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE

Making our schools the best they can be does not require dramatic upheaval. Instead, school communities across the province have been clear and consistent that the most helpful course of action would be to provide safe, supportive, and well-resourced environments for teachers and students to work and learn. This could involve some innovative forms of service delivery, ultimately making for more efficient and effective use of education resources.

Mental Health

Up to 70 per cent of mental health issues emerge by adolescence, but young people remain the least likely of any age group to receive adequate care. According to the most recent data, almost 20 per cent of students in Grades 7 to 12 in Ontario report their mental health as fair or poor, and nearly a third of those who wanted to speak to a professional about their mental health issues over the past two years did not know where to turn. More than 6,500 children and youth are waiting more than a year for treatment, which eventually leads them to access emergency services.

Beyond the stress this causes for families and households, not to mention the strain on the health care system, it is also well-established that undiagnosed or untreated mental health issues are a significant impediment to student engagement and achievement. By providing more mental health supports in schools, where children and youth spend much of their time, we can reduce stigma, connect students to their communities, and deliver more responsive, cost-effective service, leading to better health outcomes and improved academic performance.

There is a broad consensus among teachers, students, parents, and health care professionals that significant investments are needed in mental health supports. The government has said it will spend \$1.9 billion over 10 years on mental health and addictions services, but it is unclear how much of this funding will be directed to children and youth.

IT SHOULD BE A TOP PRIORITY FOR THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION TO WORK WITH OTHER MINISTRIES TO FUND AND ESTABLISH SERVICES WITHIN SCHOOLS TO PROVIDE DIRECT MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES.



85%

of respondents say that the number of incidents of violence against teachers is increasing.

85%

of respondents believe that the severity of incidents of violence against teachers is growing.

Over the course of their careers,

89%

of respondents have either witnessed or experienced violence or harassment in their schools.

76%

of respondents agree that violence in their schools makes teaching more difficult.

**Responses from OECTA member survey on violence against teachers in the classroom.*

Safer Schools for All

Publicly funded schools across Ontario are generally excellent places for students to learn and grow. But it is becoming increasingly evident that some students are not getting the support they need, which is resulting in negative behaviours manifesting in the classroom. There is also a need for the government to lead the way in combatting discrimination and marginalization.

For several years, our Association has been discussing the increasing frequency and severity of violence and harassment against teachers, especially at the elementary level. This has repercussions for everyone in the school community. In our survey of classroom teachers, more than three-quarters of respondents said that violence in schools makes teaching more difficult, and more than a quarter have had to take time away from work due to the physical or mental toll of a violent incident. Some progress has been made over the past few years in terms of standardizing and enforcing reporting procedures, but there is still a long way to go to fully implement the solutions outlined in OECTA's *Safer Schools for All* platform. Most importantly, more professional services, such as child and youth workers, social workers, and psychologists, are required to help students deal with their social, emotional, and behavioural needs.

Of course, creating safer schools is not all about physical violence and harassment. It is also about a commitment to equity and inclusivity. This involves, among other things, responding to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, continuing to protect and promote Gay-Straight Alliances, and supporting anti-racism initiatives in our communities and schools.

IT IS ONLY WHEN SCHOOLS ARE SAFE AND WELCOMING FOR ALL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS THAT WE WILL GET THE MOST OUT OF OUR INVESTMENTS IN PUBLICLY FUNDED EDUCATION.

“Students need to receive appropriate supports and environments. Most students would not be violent if their needs were met.”

Catholic teacher*

Teachers as Professionals

The delivery of curriculum and the assessment of student learning are core elements of a teacher's job, which means we have unique and valuable insights on these topics. Any reforms to curriculum or assessment should involve extensive consultation with teachers, and respect our professional needs and judgment.

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. 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. This will ensure that our knowledge is relevant and up-to-date, based on the current, job-embedded experiences of our colleagues, and designed to address the needs of our students. It is in everyone's interest to expand the time and resources available for this type of ongoing, classroom-focused, collaborative professional development.

Our perspectives and experience can also inform any efforts to update the high-stakes standardized testing administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office. Since the office was created, Catholic teachers and others have been arguing that the tests are counterproductive, even harmful. Too much time, energy, and resources are spent on test preparation. To make matters worse, the data are not particularly helpful, because they do not capture all of the skills and factors that contribute to student success. And the pressure and stress created by the tests have a negative impact on students' health and well-being.

Teachers regularly use our professional knowledge and judgment to conduct assessments for, as, and of learning – that is, to determine what students know, to help them practice and grow, and to gauge how they are progressing. We use these records and observations to refine our lesson plans and decide where more individual attention is required, as well as to complete provincial report cards. If the government still believes that some sort of province-wide, system-level testing is necessary, they should move toward a random sampling model. This would free up resources, and alleviate some of the burden on teachers and students, while still yielding statistically valid results. Random sampling is used by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, as well as the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada's Pan-Canadian Assessment Program.

Teachers understand the immense responsibility that comes with our jobs. We appreciate the importance of continually improving our practice, and we encourage open communication with parents to ensure that we are meeting their children's needs. However, as the professionals who work directly with students every day, teachers bring considerable expertise to the table. As with any other profession, we are able to offer the best possible service when our training, experience, and professional standards are trusted and respected.

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD WORK WITH TEACHERS, VALUING OUR PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT AND INCORPORATING OUR VIEWPOINTS ABOUT WHAT STUDENTS NEED TO SUCCEED.



Conclusion

Everyone involved in publicly funded education wants to help produce a healthier, more prosperous, more peaceful society. While we all have our own roles and responsibilities, students and the public are best served when everyone is moving in the same direction.

Catholic teachers are proud of our contributions to Ontario's publicly funded education system, and we have well-grounded perspectives and positions on a wide range of policy issues. But we believe publicly funded education will be most improved if we focus on the key priorities that have been identified here. Building on our past successes, and directing our attention to the issues on which there is broad consensus for reform, will make the most effective use of everyone's time, energy, and resources.

We invite you to visit catholicteachers.ca/LessonsForLife to learn more about who Catholic teachers are and what we do, then join us in working constructively to improve publicly funded education in Ontario.

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