



ONTARIO ENGLISH
**Catholic
Teachers**
ASSOCIATION

400-65 ST. CLAIR AVE. EAST
TORONTO, ON M4T 2Y8

T. 416.925.2493
1.800.268.7230

catholicteachers.ca

OECTA SUBMISSION

TO THE ONTARIO HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION RIGHT TO READ INQUIRY

February 2020

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The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) represents the 45,000 passionate and qualified teachers in Ontario's publicly funded English Catholic schools, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

Liz Stuart
President

David Church
General Secretary

Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
65 St. Clair Avenue East, Suite 400
Toronto, ON M4T 2Y8
416.925.2493 or 1.800.268.7230
Fax: 416.925.7764
catholicteachers.ca

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.01** The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read inquiry.
- 1.02** As the Association representing the 45,000 professionals who teach Kindergarten to Grade 12 in publicly funded English Catholic schools, we are able to provide the perspectives of some of the frontline workers in Ontario's classrooms. We can give insight as to the challenges teachers see when children enter the school system, as well as the barriers and resource shortages that prevent all students from having the opportunity to realize their full potential. Our positions are firmly grounded in research and evidence about what teachers and students need to create the best possible learning conditions. (Some of these recommendations echo those submitted to the government through the pre-budget and Grants for Student Needs consultations. These papers are available at catholicteachers.ca.)
- 1.03** It should not be overlooked that Ontario's education system is widely regarded as among the most successful and equitable in the world. For example, the five-year high school graduation rate is now over 87 per cent, nearly 20 percentage points higher than in 2003-04. Testing by the Programme for International Student Assessment shows that achievement gaps between students from high- and low-income households, and Canadian- and foreign-born students, are relatively low. Catholic teachers are proud of the role we have played in building this system, and we will continue to urge the government to work with us to develop forward-thinking education policy.
- 1.04** At the same time, we must acknowledge that there are still too many areas where our education system is lacking. Too many students are being left behind. A true commitment to the right to literacy will require significant, sustained investments in publicly funded education, to ensure timely, equitable access to resources and supports. Teachers dedicate ourselves to helping our students make daily progress toward their goals, but our efforts can only go so far without a robust, whole-community approach.

2. CHILD POVERTY

- 2.01** According to the latest data from Campaign 2000 (2018), one in five children, and one in seven families with children, live in poverty. These families are forced to make difficult decisions about how or whether to access housing, child care, transportation, or food. Parents and guardians are often in precarious work, with limited time and income to provide their children with early learning opportunities.
- 2.02** Research shows that children from low-income families often start school already behind their peers (Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller 2007), and that poverty can even change children’s brain structure (Proudfoot 2020). Teachers see the effects in our classrooms every day, as students arrive at school tired, hungry, anxious, and unprepared. To give every child in Ontario the ability to realize their full potential, we need to prevent them from suffering the stresses and indignities of poverty. The government should work to ensure all families have access to affordable housing, public transportation, decent work, fair social assistance, and adequate health care coverage.

3. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

- 3.01** The consequences of poverty are exacerbated by the striking gap in access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) (UNICEF Canada 2018). It is well established that affordable, accessible, high quality ECEC reduces poverty, creates a strong foundation for lifelong learning, and increases equity in learning outcomes (McCuaig, Bertrand, and Shanker 2012; McCain, Mustard, and McCuaig 2011). But there are currently licensed child care spaces for just over 20 per cent of children under the age of 12 in Ontario (Friendly et al. 2018). Furthermore, in many cases, child care workers and early childhood educators have poor working conditions, which reduces their ability to provide stimulating, engaging learning environments for all young children (AECEO 2017; Halfon and Langford 2015).
- 3.02** The Ford government’s tax credit will only exacerbate these problems. Despite the fact that it will cost roughly \$70 million more per year than the government projected, it is unlikely to help low-income recipients, as only 0.1 per cent of families will be eligible for the full credit (FAO 2019). With the value of the credit being

significantly lower than the actual cost of child care, many parents may be forced to opt for lower-cost, lower-quality care, which will ultimately lower the quality of care overall (Cleveland 2019; Monsebraaten 2018). An affordable, high quality, publicly funded, and universally accessible child care system is essential to provide all children with early learning opportunities, including the opportunity for early childhood educators to identify and address cognitive and non-cognitive difficulties before children enter the formal school setting.

4. FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

- 4.01** Parents, teachers, early childhood educators (ECEs), administrators, and researchers agree that Ontario's full-day Kindergarten (FDK) program is preparing children socially and academically, leading to better outcomes in later years (Alphonso 2017; Janmohamed 2014). The unique model of a teacher and an early childhood educator enables the teams "to capitalize on children's individual needs and inquiries. They have the time to know their students very well and to identify problems and intervene early before a child becomes too frustrated and discouraged to try" (McCuaig 2019). New longitudinal research provides evidence of self-regulatory and academic gains, with benefits being apparent in all academic areas at the end of Kindergarten and remaining significantly greater to the end of the primary division (Pelletier and Corter 2019).
- 4.02** However, there are still some problems that keep the program from being effective for all students. For example, although the previous government took some action to address the problem, more still needs to be done to reduce the number of large and/or split classes. There are also cases of schools arranging supervision or break schedules in such a way as to remove the early childhood educator from the classroom during the instructional day. These situations limit educators' ability to give students individual attention and recognize any learning or other challenges. They must be addressed if the program is going to live up to its original promise of providing a safe, welcoming, equitable space for all early learners to develop their skills and adjust to the school setting.

5. SCREENING, IDENTIFICATION, AND INTERVENTION

- 5.01** To give every student the best chance to succeed, it is crucial that learning difficulties are identified at an early age and appropriate interventions are provided. No doubt, this inquiry will hear from a number of students and families who had to wait too long for identification and access to resources. For example, waiting times for access to psycho-educational assessments and services can be months or years. The same is true of other professional services, such as speech and language specialists.
- 5.02** While the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2018) policy says that schools should provide accommodations for any student with a disability, regardless of whether they meet the Ministry of Education’s definition of “exceptionality,” it is still the prevailing practice that only students with identification through the formal Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) process are automatically provided with special education support. Because school boards are struggling to provide supports for the students who have already been identified, they are often reluctant to go through the IPRC process. Data indicate that while the proportion of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) has increased steadily since 2006-07, the proportion of students who have IPRC identification has actually declined (People for Education 2019). As a result, students often go far too long without their learning needs being acknowledged, which means they do not get the proper interventions while they are awaiting identification, and it is more difficult to build new skills or change attitudes when identification finally happens.
- 5.03** There are also persistent issues with respect to students accessing professional services and supports for behavioural or mental health issues that might interfere with their learning, or the learning of others. In a survey of classroom teachers, OECTA (2017) found that fewer than half of teachers believe social workers or child and youth workers are available to them when dealing with incidents of violence in schools. Only 26 per cent have access to psychologists, and a mere 9 per cent have access to psychometrists. The lack of resources affects everyone in the school community. For example, three-quarters of teachers say incidents of violence in the classroom interfere with classroom management and makes teaching more difficult.

- 5.04** Some families are able to bypass these hurdles and access services independently. They can purchase professional assessments to have their children’s needs identified, and then pay out-of-pocket to provide private supports. However, the average cost of a psycho-educational assessment is roughly \$2,500, and there is considerable time and effort required to find proper supports outside of the school. Many families do not have the financial resources or social/cultural knowledge to take advantage of these options. The result is a widening of existing inequalities, both within and between schools (Carter 2015).
- 5.05** While our publicly funded education system has made great strides in recognizing students’ unique needs and aiming to provide support, funding is still far below what is required to give every student equal access to professional supports and services. The government must make significant investments to ensure all students can have their learning needs identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity.
- 5.06** The government and school boards also must do more to empower families to advocate for their children, by providing information about what resources are available in schools, as well as guidance as to when and how to seek help for their children. Furthermore, there should be more support for parents to be engaged in their child’s literacy learning. Typically, parental engagement is not actively encouraged beyond the early years; however, funding should be provided to create resources and help parents remain engaged in reading and whole-language strategies throughout their child’s elementary and secondary journey. Some of these supports could be locally developed, to help meet the diverse needs of various communities.

6. EFFECTIVE ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPORTS

- 6.01** Even when students’ needs have been identified, there are persistent issues with ensuring students have access to timely and effective accommodations and assistive technology. Schools across the province report difficulties in providing for all students’ special education needs – the average ratio of students receiving special education support to special education teachers is 38:1 in elementary school and 77:1 in secondary school (People for Education 2019). And across the province, more than 80 per cent of school boards are spending more on special education than they

are allotted by the government (McQuigge 2018; Rushowy and Ferguson 2015). Unfortunately, in many cases the Ford government's cuts to education funding have only served to worsen this situation.

- 6.02** For instance, the government's elimination of the Local Priorities Fund (LPF) cut \$230 million in programs and supports for vulnerable students. In particular, the cancellation of the LPF resulted in the loss of 335 teaching positions in Catholic schools, many of which were dedicated to assist students with special education needs. Cancelling the LPF has had a direct negative impact on providing accommodations and supports for students with reading difficulties.
- 6.03** A similar consequence is evident with the government's decision to cancel the planned increase to the Special Incidence Portion (SIP), which was capped for two decades at \$27,000, and has been increased recently by less than \$700 (Ontario 2019). In response to advocacy from OECTA and others, the previous government had finally planned to increase the SIP by \$30 million, which would have enabled schools to hire an additional 500 educational assistants to support students with special education needs. Instead, the Ford government cut \$2 million from the original announcement and reallocated the remaining \$28 million, with no mechanism for hiring any new educational assistants.
- 6.04** Even before the Ford government's drastic cuts to education funding, access to effective accommodations and supports was already in decline. For example, teacher-librarians had previously served as a key resource, providing support through literacy programs for primary-aged students with identified reading difficulties. However, as of 2019 only half of elementary schools in Ontario have either a full- or part-time teacher-librarian (People for Education 2019). Among schools where the position still exists, teacher-librarians are more frequently being required to cover other teachers' planning time and maintain the library, rather than providing additional literacy supports to the school.
- 6.05** There is also a clear need to reinstate and/or increase funding for site-based intensive support programs and specialized reading programs, such as Structured Literacy programs or Reading Recovery. These programs have proven effective, allowing teachers to support students and target special learning needs (Laurie

2019; Lynch 2019). Looking at national data for students enrolled in Reading Recovery, in the 2017-2018 school year 54 per cent of students enrolled in the program achieved “accelerated progress” and were able to discontinue the lessons. A further 17 per cent made “substantial progress” and were recommended for longer-term support, while 29 per cent made “limited progress” and were recommended for specialist support – overall, 75 per cent of students reach grade-level expectations within 20 weeks (Tolentino and Matczuk 2018). Additional funding and teacher training for specialized intensive support programs would provide students with access to an established and effective form of accommodation.

6.06 For some students with reading difficulties, assistive technologies have proven helpful (MacArthur, Ferretti, Okolo, and Cavalier, 2001; Mull and Sitlington, 2003). At the same time, a number of researchers have identified problems that impede effective implementation of assistive technology, such as insufficient funding, limited and inadequate training for teachers, lack of access to support services, and a lack of teacher-student interaction (Okolo and Diedrich, 2014; Ault, Bausch, & McLaren, 2013; Flanagan, Bouck, and Richardson, 2013; Morrison, 2007). While these technologies can be effective, the government must provide long-term, sustainable investments in technology and training, to ensure students have the required supports.

7. CLASS SIZE AND COMPOSITION

7.01 Experts have reached a consensus on the benefits of smaller class sizes. For example, after a thorough review of the research, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach (2014) of the US National Education Policy Center concluded, “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.” By contrast, no study currently exists that documents advantages for student learning that result from increasing class sizes.

7.02 While these findings are true across all grades, the positive relationship between small class sizes and literacy is especially evident among students in the early years. In the most comprehensive and well-known study of class size reduction, the Tennessee’s Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) project tested the effects

of class size reduction on student academic achievement in literacy and mathematics, from Kindergarten through Grade 3. The study found that smaller class sizes produced a significant advantage in literacy improvement for male and female students, across "inner-city," urban, suburban, and rural schools.

- 7.03** A report by Dr. Nina Bascia (2010) of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education highlighted the specific benefits that smaller class sizes have for students with special education needs. The report found that smaller class sizes not only allow for greater frequency of teacher-student interaction, but also creates opportunity for teachers to employ a greater variety of instructional and differentiated strategies based on student needs. While this is beneficial for all students, it is especially important for "students identified as having learning difficulties in reading and writing." Anecdotal research with Ontario teachers in the primary panel confirms this point: "Many primary teachers told us that smaller primary classes meant more time to help individual students experiencing learning difficulties with pre-literacy, pre-numeracy or reading/writing/listening/speaking/visualizing."
- 7.04** Closely related to class size is the issue of class composition. Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy embraces a model of inclusion, which seeks to integrate students with a variety of unique special education needs into regular classrooms. As a result, classrooms often reflect a broad diversity of students, including those with mental and/or physical disabilities, learning exceptionalities, including second-language learners, and a variety of socio-economic circumstances, among other factors.
- 7.05** In tandem with class size, class composition affects the delivery of literacy instruction (OISE 2010). For instance, a class of 28 students, comprised of three students with special education needs and two non-English speaking students, requires a substantially different teaching strategy and set of resources than would a class of 25 students, five of whom have special education needs. Research also shows that shifts in class composition creates a corresponding shift in teacher workload, making it more difficult for teachers to meet the needs of all of their students (Manitoba Teachers' Society 2019).

7.06 The related issues of class size and composition affect teachers' ability to plan and support student learning. When teachers are faced with large class sizes, multiple students with Individual Education Plans, and students with varied learning needs (both identified and unidentified), accompanied by limited resources and supports, it becomes very difficult to identify students who may be at-risk or have special education needs, such as those with reading disabilities.

8. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

8.01 Teachers strive to meet the unique needs of every student entrusted to our care. We examine student records, differentiate instruction, modify our assessments, and stay in regular contact with parents and guardians. As our classrooms become increasingly diverse, we consider the range of linguistic, cultural, behavioural needs of our students, and try to give each the individual attention they require.

8.02 Still, as knowledge and best practices continue to evolve, we are constantly trying to refine our practice. This is why our Association advocates for ample resources and access to teacher-directed, teacher-led, job-embedded professional development. Such participant-driven professional learning, as opposed to Ministry of Education- or school board-mandated initiatives, enable teachers to inquire and collaborate about issues that are directly relevant to their classrooms (CEA 2015).

8.03 There is a tendency for professional development funding to be directed toward the ever-changing priorities of the government or the Ministry of Education. The result is that fundamental areas, such as literacy, can be forgotten – even more so because the majority of students in Ontario perform exceptionally well in these areas. Currently, the emphasis is on the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) disciplines. These areas are undoubtedly important, but they are incomprehensible without a solid foundation of literacy. It is imperative that teachers have some freedom in choosing professional development opportunities, and that funding is not directed entirely toward pre-determined initiatives.

8.04 Unfortunately, the current government has shown itself to be skeptical of teacher-led professional development altogether. For example, they have cancelled subsidies for Additional Qualification courses, and discontinued the popular Teacher Learning and

Leadership Program. Research has clearly shown that these professional learning opportunities improve knowledge, understanding, and instructional practices among teachers, and that they have positive effects on students' engagement, attitude, and learning experience (Campbell et al. 2018). To give every student the opportunity to reach their full potential, the government must also give every teacher the opportunity to realize theirs.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.01** Most Ontarians share the belief that all children and young people have a right to literacy. However, without the proper conditions and programming in place, teachers cannot prevent some students from falling behind.
- 9.02** OECTA members are incredibly concerned about the cuts the Ford government is making to publicly funded education. Projections show that with budget allocations failing to keep up with inflation and enrolment growth, by 2021-22 they will be underfunding our schools by more than \$1 billion. However, it is fair to acknowledge that many of the problems identified in this submission existed even before the Ford government took office.
- 9.03** The difficult truth is that good intentions are not enough. Providing appropriate learning environments and supports for every student requires substantial funding. If every student in Ontario is going to realize their right to read, Ontarians will have to be willing to make the necessary investments in our vital public institutions.

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