



# **OSSTF/FEESO Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy**

## **[43-1 Bill 98] Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act, Hearing**

**May 2023**

*Protecting and Enhancing Public Education  
Protéger et faire avancer l'éducation publique*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) is a strong, independent, socially active union that promotes and advances the cause of public education and the rights of students, educators, and education workers.

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.

Despite its misleading title, Bill 98, *Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act, 2023* has very little in terms of supports or resources for students and seems primarily focused on assuming control over school board decision making, and not on how we can better support students and make up for the learning loss experienced during the pandemic.

OSSTF/FEESO welcomes the opportunity to provide our feedback on Bill 98, *Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act, 2023*.

### **What's Missing?**

#### **Inadequate Investment in Student Success**

The province has been short-changing public education since 2018, delivering underfunded budgets and then underspending against their own subpar budgets.

The Financial Accountability Office has already shown that the education budget is underfunded by at least \$1.4 billion dollars, and we can expect that shortfall to continue over the coming years under this government.

OSSTF/FEESO acknowledges that according to the official numbers presented in the Grants for Student Needs, Ontario is planning to spend \$27.1 billion in total GSN funding, an increase of \$383 million (1.4%) over the most recent revised estimates of spending for the current school year. However, with enrollment projected to increase by 0.6% for 2023-24, this effectively represents an increase of less than 1%, meaning school boards' ability to provide the supports and resources students need will suffer since these funding levels are nowhere near what is needed to keep pace with rising costs, with annual inflation of 6.8% for 2022 and average monthly inflation at 4.3% as of March 2023.

Instead of properly funding public education in Ontario, this government continues to play the blame-game, refusing to take responsibility for the fallout from their ongoing underfunding of the system. This legislation focuses on streamlining and “maximizing school capital assets” instead of streamlining access to the supports that students need.

Nothing in the legislation or subsequent announcements will address this government's years of inadequate funding.

This government has overseen our public education system for five years. They have had the responsibility to focus on student success and achievement, on preparing students for life and work.

How have they discharged that critical responsibility? By seeking to drastically increase class sizes, by forcing students to earn credits online away from classmates, teachers, and other supports. On both of those issues, they ignored the preferences of parents – indeed, not only did they enact policies that were the exact opposite of what parents wanted, but they then tried to hide that information from Ontarians.

If the government was truly intent on listening to Ontario's parents, they would invest in smaller class sizes and properly fund the supports and programs necessary to ensure that every student has the resources necessary to thrive no matter where they live in the province.

If the government truly understood how significant student mental health is to social, emotional, and academic success, they would not have waited until three years after the pandemic began to announce any real increase in mental health supports for students.

The length of time and the number of young people and their families waiting for publicly provided child and youth mental health care in Ontario is at an all-time high.

This is not new news. According to a 2020 report from Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) the province's children and youth under 18 were waiting as long as two-and-a-half years to receive mental health treatment and wait lists for services have more than doubled between 2018-2020.

As front-line workers, OSSTF/FEESO members are heavily relied upon by students desperate for help and assistance related to mental health. Increasing the number of permanent, caring, professionally trained, school board employed adults in our schools has been a priority for over a decade.

Introducing legislation requiring significant changes for a school year less than 4 months away, with little to no implementation details, is simply not indicative of a government that plans ahead or that understands the needs of students, nor the logistical realities facing Ontario's public education system.

And, like virtually every single policy initiative from this government, it includes hidden regulatory powers that allow the government to put their thumbs on the scales in favour of their wealthy property developer donors.

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## **Lack of Consultation**

If the government wants to improve student success they should start by consulting front-line educators, teachers and their representative unions, student groups, and parent and community organizations. To fully appreciate what is happening in schools, the government should be actively engaging with all stakeholders. They should be holding proactive and ongoing consultations.

Yet, the Ford government chose not to consult with any education union that represents the teachers and education workers who deliver education every day to Ontario's two million students prior to introducing Bill 98. Instead, this bill aims to increase Ministry overreach into the autonomy of education workers, teachers, and school boards, a tactic of this government continues to wield, despite how often it undermines the excellent work being done in the public education system.

Given this government's record on education, Ontarians have little reason to believe that the government will use the extensive powers it is giving itself under this legislation to improve the province's public education system.

More can and should be done, and OSSTF/FEESO is committed to student success and enhancing public education.

Improving student success and strengthening public education is something OSSTF/FEESO and its members have been advocating for over 100 years.

Between 2017 and February 2023, OSSTF/FEESO made many substantive proposals, submissions, plans, commissioned reports, and letters to the Minister of Education and other members of the government caucus. All these documents are publicly available and are focused on improving Ontario's public education system and student success.

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Examples of OSSTF/FEESO's Efforts to Enhance Public Education 2017-2023

*Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs – Budget Hearings. April 2023*

<https://www.osstf.on.ca/resource-centre/briefs-and-submissions.aspx>

*Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs - Pre-Budget Hearings. February 2023*

<https://www.osstf.on.ca/resource-centre/briefs-and-submissions.aspx>

*Submission to the Ministry of Education on Modernizing Education. March 1, 2022*

<https://www.osstf.on.ca/resource-centre/briefs-and-submissions.aspx>

*Joint letter from Education Unions to the Minister of Education regarding de-streaming in Ontario schools. February 22, 2022.*

<https://www.osstf.on.ca/news/Joint-letter-from-Education-Unions-to-the-Minister-of-Education-re-de-streaming-in-Ontario-schools.aspx>

*A safe return for all: OSSTF/FEESO's framework for reopening schools in 2020-2021*

<https://www.osstf.on.ca/public-education/safety-for-all/osstf-feeso-proposals-updates-and-commissioned-reports.aspx>

*OSSTF/FEESO's Submission on Bill 48 (Safe and Supportive Classrooms Act),*

February 2019

<https://www.osstf.on.ca/resource-centre/briefs-and-submissions.aspx>

*Strengthen Public Education – Rebuild Ontario, 2019*

<https://www.osstf.on.ca/public-education/strengthening-public-ed-rebuild-ontario.aspx>

*Improving the Learning Environment: Addressing Violence in our Schools, 2017*

<https://www.osstf.on.ca/services/violence-in-the-workplace-resources/lobby-day-2017-improving-the-learning-environment.aspx>

It must be noted that, since being elected, this government has repeatedly ignored and dismissed our recommendations and good-faith demonstrations of our willingness to collaborate.

Ontario's education workers and teachers continue to support student success, even when faced with a government that ignores and dismisses them as demonstrated by the development and introduction of Bill 98.

The efforts of OSSTF/FEESO members are integral to student success and the marked improvement in graduation rates in recent years. As of August 31, 2021, 89.0 per cent of students graduated in five years, and 84.2 per cent in four years.

As the representative of over 60,000 front-line education workers and teachers, we hope the government will finally begin working with us in earnest so our schools can have the necessary resources and support that our students deserve and need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.