

# Consultation: Education in Ontario Submission

December 10, 2018

## Introduction:

The Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), the bargaining agent for 55,000 Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) members who work in Ontario school boards, welcomes this opportunity to participate in the Consultation on Education in Ontario. OSBCU-CUPE members have a vast amount of experience in the education sector, working in all support staff classifications throughout the province. These include early childhood educators, educational assistants, instructors, library staff, child and youth workers, other professionals and paraprofessionals, office and clerical staff, information technologists, custodial, maintenance and trades personnel. Our members' experience informs this submission, as does the need that all CUPE members have for a strong, sustainable education system.

Providing publicly funded and publicly administered education that is accessible to all is one of the most important functions of government. Accessible, high quality education that provides for all students' needs is a necessary component of creating a just society. It is, in a very real way, an investment that keeps paying returns each year. Students benefit directly in terms of the knowledge and skills they acquire, and the important role public education plays in their overall development. But our communities also advance because of the education system. We all benefit from an education system that continues to produce skilled, knowledgeable citizens with critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In a very real sense, public education is at the heart of a well-functioning society.

The importance of education is codified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

### **Article 28**

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;

(b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

The principles of equality, accessibility, and affordability (i.e. free and public) are entrenched within this document. Of course, these are but minimal standards that any jurisdiction should meet. A wealthy province like Ontario can certainly afford to aspire to a higher standard, while keeping these principles central to the delivery of education. We will return to these principles and higher standards in our discussion of the proposal for a Parents' Bill of Rights.

The following submission outlines our position on the issues raised in this consultation. The principles and priorities listed herein are intended to improve the quality of education in Ontario, ensure that all students have access to a comprehensive curriculum that helps them develop to their fullest, guarantee all students have access to the system on equitable grounds, and provide a basis for additional investments in the system.

### **Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM):**

There is no doubt that the STEM subjects are important. Teaching these subjects, however, cannot be based solely on rote learning. Memorizing of information cannot provide students with the critical thinking skills and creativity they need to flourish. As our OSBCU-CUPE education workers know from their training and experience, discovery learning – that is, learning based on developing skills of inquiry and problem solving – is a fundamental part of children's learning process. These are skills that will be useful beyond the classroom into the work world, and that are a necessary part of social citizenship.

To improve outcomes in STEM it is vital that all students have access to the resources and technology that will give them hands-on experiential learning opportunities. This will require an investment so that students have the access to well-stocked science labs and have regular access to computers. The 2018 report of the Auditor General noted that there is no standard for student access to computers, which leads to wide variations in the quality of the technology students can use, and the frequency with which they can use it. The Auditor General reports that it is not uncommon for schools to use computers that are out of date, or for eight students to share a computer.<sup>2</sup> This is not a basis on which to build strong outcomes in STEM. Investments should be made immediately so that all students will have equitable access to the technology they will need for success.

Critical thought, of course, is not merely developed through the STEM subjects. Students' full academic development can only be achieved with a comprehensive curriculum that includes the arts, humanities, social sciences, and physical and health education as well. We recommend that any curriculum review has a focus on ensuring that students have universal access to a comprehensive education. Arts, humanities, and social science curricula should be coupled with

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<sup>2</sup> 2018 Auditor General Report.

universal access to experiential learning opportunities, including the ability of students to participate in arts and cultural events in their communities. Investments in the education system to make this possible should be made immediately.

## **Preparing students with needed job skills**

Consistent with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, articulated above, students should have access to a diversity of educational options that help them develop job skills based on their own needs and interests. By definition, this will require that a comprehensive curriculum be offered to students to allow them to explore their options, find their interests, and select their programming based on their chosen career paths. In addition to the broadly-based fields of study that were discussed above (STEM, arts and humanities, social sciences) this would, of course, include opportunities to learn about skilled trades.

Preparing students for a wide spectrum of possible job and career options will require investment in the education system. Giving students more hands-on, practical experience in any field will require that schools have technology and equipment, as well as specialized training for educational workers, to support advanced learning and training for employment.

## **Standardized testing**

Standardized testing is an ineffective tool for measuring student progress. Preparation for standardized tests takes time away from teaching curriculum, and there is a regularly reported problem of “teaching to the test” rather than teaching material that will expand students’ education. Problems with standardized testing are exacerbated when not all students are provided the resources they require to maximize their potential. At School Boards across the province there are long lists of students who need special educational assistance who are not provided the resources they need to succeed. We recommend that the province scrap the EQAO, abandon universal standardized tests, and develop alternative methods of evaluating student progress. We further recommend that the province fund special education based on need, rather than the current statistical model of funding special education. Only through providing equitable access to education and designing supports to meet individual student needs is it possible to ensure that educational outcomes improve.

## Life skills

Virtually every student will eventually have to find paid employment. Many have jobs while they are attending school. An essential life skill for all of us who work for a living is to know and demand/claim our rights at work. The Employment Standards Act (ESA) is premised on self-enforcement and, as the reports of the Changing Workplaces Review (CWR) made abundantly clear, there are not enough ESA inspectors to do the proactive work to ensure that all workers' rights are respected. The CWR also made it clear that enforcement of employment and labour rights is lacking, and there is a high rate of violation of workers rights. As long as self-enforcement is central to the defence of workplace rights, all workers need a thorough understanding of relevant workplace legislation.

In order to prepare students for their time in the paid workforce, there needs to be a mandatory secondary school course on relevant workplace legislation, workers' rights, and how to enforce those rights. The course should/must cover workers' rights under the ESA; the process for joining a union and the rights of workers and unions under the Labour Relations Act (LRA); rights under the Occupational Health and Safety Act (including the right to know, the right to participate, and the right to refuse unsafe work); and workers' rights under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act (WSIA).

## Managing the Use of Technology in the Classroom

This is not a significant issue. Education workers already have strategies for managing classrooms. Moreover, students utilize their own technologies to make up for the lack of access to computers in their classrooms. Managing the use of personal technology in the classroom need not have a prominent place in this review; individual teachers and principals are more than capable of developing appropriate policies and practices regulating the use of technology in the classroom.

## Health and Physical Education Curriculum

The 2015 updates to the Health and Physical Education Curriculum were based on extensive consultation with parents, experts in the relevant fields, and front-line educators. These updates included significant and sensible revisions to the 1998 curriculum. The 2015 version included important elements, including using scientific names for body parts, segments on sexual and gender identity, and the importance of consent. All of these additions to the modern curriculum had the effect of creating more open, inclusive, and safe classrooms for students,

and all had the effect of making students better informed and safer in general. We recommend an immediate return to the 2015 Health and Physical Education Curriculum.

## Parents' Bill of Rights

Given the language used by the Ministry, it appears that a Parents' Bill of Rights will definitely be created out of this consultation process. As a starting point for such a document, a Parents' Bill of Rights should guarantee that parents have the right to access the highest quality publicly funded and publicly administered education system for their children. Access to free, publicly funded, publicly administered education is a fundamental right of social citizenship.

We propose the following principles be included in the Parents' Bill of Rights:

- Access to the highest quality publicly funded, publicly administered education system for their children.
- Access to all necessary resources to allow for children with different needs to attend school and succeed. Parents should have a right to equitable treatment for their children, regardless of the specific educational needs they have.
- A guarantee that all school facilities are maintained to the highest standards of repair and cleanliness.
- A school in every Ontario community to provide a welcoming learning environment for local students and act as a community hub for services, groups, and families.
- Access to fully stocked, properly staffed library facilities in every school.
- The right to small class sizes so that parents can be assured their children have adequate access to teaching staff in class.
- Access to professional services (e.g. from speech language therapists, psychologists, etc.) in schools to ensure students receive the supports they need.
- Access to properly resourced integrated classrooms so that parents do not have to pay out of pocket to ensure their children have what they need at school.
- A comprehensive curriculum that guarantees that students have access to a diversity of learning experiences, and also have access to the classes they need in order to succeed in the kinds of work they choose.

Because the right to education is a fundamental basis of a free and democratic society, and because rights in the education system should be extended not just to parents, but also to students, we propose that the Ministry also create a Students' Bill of Rights that includes all the

elements described above. Such a Students' Bill of Rights would be consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and would be a bold statement of the government's intention to make Ontario's education system the best in the world.

## Conclusion:

All students have a right to the highest quality public education. The education system in Ontario can be improved significantly by adopting the recommendations outlined in this submission. For ease of reference, our recommendations are listed below.

## Recommendations:

- Develop curriculum in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) that includes discovery-based learning that fosters critical thinking, inquiry, and problem solving.
- Ensure all students have equitable access to computers and other scientific technology and supplies necessary for success in STEM courses.
- Guarantee that all students have access to a comprehensive education that includes arts, humanities, social sciences, and health and physical education.
- Eliminate the EQAO. Replace standardized testing with new methods of evaluating student achievement that take differing student needs and aptitudes into account.
- Increase investment in special education.
- Introduce a mandatory course on employees' rights, including coverage of the Employment Standards Act, the Labour Relations Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act.
- Restore the 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum.
- Issue a Students' Bill of Rights that mirrors the Parents' Bill of Rights, based on the following principles:
  - Access to the highest quality publicly funded, publicly administered education system for their children.
  - Access to all necessary resources to allow children with different needs to attend school and succeed. Parents should have a right to equitable treatment for their children, regardless of the specific educational needs they have.
  - A guarantee that all school facilities are maintained to the highest standards of repair and cleanliness.

- A guarantee of schools in communities to act as both learning environments for local students and as resources for the wider communities.
- Access to fully stocked, properly staffed library facilities in every school.
- The right to small class sizes so that parents can be assured their children will have adequate access to teaching staff in class.
- Access to professional services (e.g. for speech language therapists, psychologists, etc.) in schools to ensure students receive the supports they need.
- Access to properly resourced integrated classrooms so that parents do not have to go out of pocket to ensure their children have what they need at school.
- A comprehensive curriculum that guarantees that students have access to a diversity of learning experiences, and also have access to the classes they need in order to succeed in the career paths they choose.

