

Consultation: Class Size Engagement

February 2019



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 class size. 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. We are a part of CUPE Ontario, the largest union in the province, with more than 270,000 members living and working in every community in Ontario. Our members' experience informs this submission, as does the need that all CUPE members have for a strong, sustainable public education system.

We welcomed the opportunity to share our views on this consultation at a meeting on February 15, 2019 with Ministry staff. The written submission below is intended to highlight our main points and supplement the feedback we provided at that meeting.

If the goal of the Ministry is to improve student outcomes, then the focus of consultations should be on system investments rather than the possibility of increasing or removing caps on class sizes or changing the education model for kindergarten. As we have regularly noted in our submissions to the Ministry's education funding consultations, funding for education has been insufficient to meet needs for more than two decades. These funding deficiencies have meant that schools are understaffed, and school renewal and repair needs have gone unmet. These accumulated deficits in the education system weaken our ability to provide high quality education. We will take this opportunity to refer the Ministry back to our most recent submission on education funding as a statement of the ongoing need for additional funding and increased staffing.

Class Size:

The consultation paper identifies some research on average class sizes in OECD countries, and notes that Ontario has one of the lowest student-to-teacher ratios. Comparisons based on a single variable are overly simplistic and superficial. There are multiple factors that contribute to education outcomes making comparative analysis of the relationship between class sizes and student outcomes extremely difficult. For example, it is not merely the number of students in a classroom that is important to consider, but the specific needs of students in those classrooms must be factored into the analysis. Jurisdictions that exclude students with exceptionalities

from classrooms are not comparable to Ontario, which is premised on the principle of integrated classrooms.

Nor is it reliable to make comparisons between jurisdictions that have integrated classrooms¹ when these jurisdictions offer different levels of support to students. Ontario has a long list of students waiting for assessments, whose needs are going unmet. Additionally, Educational Assistant (EA) workloads have been increasing in recent years, and the average number of students supported by each EA is increasing.² Rather than focusing on changing or removing caps on class sizes, Ontario should invest in providing additional supports to students with exceptionalities. Such investments would lead to greater potential for success for students who need supports and will also increase the potential for students who do not directly rely on the support of an EA to improve outcomes.

Comparisons must also take into account the social determinants of educational outcomes. For example, affordable high-quality childcare from an early age has several positive effects on student learning potential. There are direct positive effects for students that come with the care provided by childcare professionals. But there is also the benefit of improving family earnings as affordable childcare allows for greater labour market participation of women and has been identified as one of the most significant contributors to lowering the gender wage gap. These positive economic and social benefits of affordable childcare, as one example of a social determinant of educational outcomes, must be factored into comparisons of student outcomes. Failure to integrate this approach into comparisons based on class sizes will lead to unreliable results and bad public policy decisions.

Studies that compare class size should also consider government spending. Total government spending on education is one factor, as is overall per-student funding, and education funding as a proportion of GDP. Furthermore, a comparative analysis must also consider government spending on all areas of social policy and public services. As the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario recently reported, Ontario spends less per capita on public services than any other province in Canada.³ Spending on a broad array of other public services, including health care, municipal services, social services, childcare, etc., will also indirectly support educational outcomes. Comparisons that ignore these other factors that contribute to student learning outcomes provide a distorted picture of the complexity of the issue.

¹ Integrated classrooms are those in which students with a number of different exceptionalities (and students with multiple exceptionalities) are part of inclusive classrooms.

² In 2018 CUPE surveyed the Educational Assistants we represent. Respondents to the survey reported that 60% of EAs provide support to 5 or more students. 76% of respondents reported that the number of students they support has increased over the past five years. Half of those who reported that their workload has not increased stated that they were providing support to 5 or more students (i.e. that their workload had already been high).

³ Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, *Comparing Ontario's Fiscal Position With Other Provinces*, February 14, 2019, <https://fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/inter-prov-comparisons-feb-2019>.

Despite all of these complexities (and other factors that need to be considered), the consultation guide provides evidence that Ontario student achievement is not in crisis. In three areas of learning Ontario students do better than most other provinces. In Mathematics, Ontario does as well or better than all provinces except for two. In Reading, there is not a single province that does better than Ontario. And in science, Ontario does as well or better than 6 provinces.

There is no single factor that can be used in comparisons of student outcomes. For a variety of reasons (many listed above) class size, when used on its own, is an unreliable metric for comparison. This is why the literature on the relationship between class size caps and student outcomes is inconclusive. Instead of focusing this consultation on class size the Ministry should be focusing on opportunities to invest more in education and the public services that support educational outcomes. When the system has been underfunded for so long it is foolish to pursue means by which funding can be withdrawn from education.

For the reasons listed above, and the reasons articulated in our meeting with Ministry staff on February 15, we submit that existing caps on class sizes should be maintained. Increasing class size will put additional strain on the system, adding workload to education workers whose workloads are already too heavy. Instead of changing the regulation of class sizes the Ministry should instead increase resources in schools, hire more education workers (see our submission on the 2019-20 Education Funding Consultation, and our submission on Ontario School Board Hiring Practices) to improve the education experience for students.

Furthermore, the Ministry should avoid the use of Board-wide averages for caps on class size. Such a move could lead to wide variation of the number of students in classes, disadvantaging those students in classrooms that have higher than average enrolment. A system of Board-wide averages can also adversely affect students because it increases the risk that high-enrolment classrooms will not be staffed based on need. Without changing other funding and staffing mechanisms there is no guarantee that larger-than-average classrooms will have the staff necessary to ensure all students receive the supports they need. The larger the classroom the greater the risk.

Kindergarten Classrooms:

As we discussed at our meeting with Ministry staff, OSBCU-CUPE supports maintaining the current two educator model for Kindergarten classrooms. The team-teaching approach that includes an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) and a Kindergarten teacher has demonstrated its effectiveness. We would like to reiterate, however, that Kindergarten classrooms also require additional supports. For example, Kindergarten students with exceptionalities are not provided

adequate access to EA supports. The government’s recent announcement on changes to supports for children with autism will likely lead to increased utilization of Kindergarten by students on the autism spectrum. We are in favour of inclusive classrooms that provide supports to all students. All students have a right to access a comprehensive education that includes access to full-day kindergarten. This access must be accompanied by sufficient supports to maximize student learning potential.

Conclusion:

Current caps on class size, and the current two educator model of Kindergarten education should be maintained. Instead of attempting to find areas to cut funding or make changes that will increase workloads and diminish supports for students, the Ministry should take this opportunity to invest in public education. Earlier attempts to “find efficiencies” in school boards have left us with a structural deficit that manifests itself in student needs being unmet (including need for more EAs, ECEs, Office, Clerical and Technical (OCT) staff, maintenance and custodial staff, library staff, etc.).

