



## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning**

The Ontario government funds its public education system to the tune of approximately \$24 billion annually. Despite rising inflation and practices requiring greater accountability between school boards and the provincial government, allotted funding has remained substantially unchanged for two decades. As a result, funding has failed to keep pace with inflation and other emerging needs and, more importantly, societal expectations and ever-growing needs of our students.

According to economist Hugh Mackenzie, education funding in Ontario should be sufficient to adequately fund our schools. Why then, is there a continued lack of technological resources necessary to implement the Ministry's 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum? Why is there a lack of resources to address the needs of our most vulnerable students, a population that continues to grow in numbers? Clearly, the \$24 billion, as it is currently allocated, does not account for growth in and diversity of needs in our schools in the GTA and across the province.

In 1997 the Mike Harris government passed Bill 160, the *Education Quality Improvement Act* which changed the funding model. The bill ended two centuries of local initiatives in, and accountability for, the delivery of elementary and secondary education. It eliminated the right of local school boards to raise revenues from the municipal property tax base and required boards to operate within the limits of a funding formula established under provincial regulation. As a result, there has been a steady erosion of accountability on how monies are allocated and utilized.

Lack of tools, supports and resources in the areas of violence and mental health contributes to an unsafe workplace as cited in the committee's paper titled, *A Safe School Environment for All 2016*.

The education of Ontario's children is not a business for profit. Nor should schools have to fundraise for school or program essentials, which results in inequities. Education is an investment for the future, looking to enrich the student's experience of learning, equipping them for a life that they shape for themselves with confidence. The priority in this endeavor is how students experience education and how confident they feel at the beginning of their post-secondary journeys.

### **School Buildings and Maintenance**

School Boards across the province are facing a crisis as schools deteriorate and the required maintenance and repairs of buildings face massive backlogs. The neglect and deterioration of our schools is the result of the Harris government's view which continues today, that large urban school boards were wasteful and under-utilized, thus necessitating the closure of schools which

were labeled inefficient. The current funding formula and the negative effects it has had on our building structures is a by-product of this view.

In addition, the square-footage-per-child rate used to calculate the median building and maintenance cost is flawed. It disregards class size, specialty or English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, and diversity of needs, thus leaving boards such as TDSB and TCDSB underfunded by as much as \$1.30 square foot compared to other boards. The funding formula fails to take into account current demographic trends such as urban revitalization, which affects future population growth. Closing an “under-utilized” school in response saves money in the short-term but costs rise exponentially as further building costs increase relative to inflation and population growth.

*The Education Act* requires School Boards to maintain safe school environments for students and staff. Despite these requirements, government guidelines on maintenance are non-existent. In recent years the province has made an attempt to address funding gaps to take into consideration local conditions, however, school facilities continue to remain severely underfunded relative to their actual replacement cost and maintenance.

The current funding formula, based on square footage of the median-cost rather than actual costs, also fails to address the real costs of improvements and upkeep. As a result, many boards receive far less funding than is required to maintain their buildings to a realistic standard.

### **Students at Risk, ESL and Special Education**

Numerous negative effects arise out of the “Learning Opportunities Grant” (LOG) portion of the funding formula. The LOG is intended to fund programs for ESL and at-risk-students. The focus and criteria of the LOG, which is based on demographic factors, has been diluted over time to allow school boards to allocate the use of these monies for “discretionary” purposes and away from our most vulnerable students, and to address pressures in other areas which are inadequately funded. The funding of this grant does not account for the increase in immigration and diversity in schools and, as a result, students in the GTA are disadvantaged.

Resources for students with special needs are severely lacking. The Education Committee previously addressed the lack of funding for special education in our statement entitled *Special Education “Realignment” Means Cutbacks 2016*. The current funding formula prioritizes statistics, EQAO marks for example, as opposed to actual student needs.

**The Education Committee Recommends that Labour Council:**

- Prioritize the Education Funding Formula as a provincial and municipal election issue for 2018.
- Call on the Ontario government to:
  1. Fund all schools adequately and appropriately and end reliance on private and fundraised support for school/program essentials by:
    - a) Establishing a special commission to investigate existing funding disbursement structures within school boards, with a view to rewrite the funding formula to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century students and their learning.
    - b) Amending the funding formula to allow for smaller class sizes in grades 4-8 and Kindergarten, like those that are set for grades 1-3.
    - c) Creating funding “envelopes” for programs such as special education and ESL, to restrict school boards from using those monies for other areas, and increase ESL funding to include students who are born in Canada but whose native (first) language is not English.
    - d) Increasing funding (per square foot amount) for maintenance and capital costs in order to stop the deterioration of our school buildings, apply additional credit to schools that are 20 years old, and establish a proper standard of good repair for school facilities throughout the province.
  2. Develop a more reliable system to help boards adjust to declining enrolment.
  3. Permit Boards to access funding for local school board priorities in order to address the needs, requirements, and unique circumstances of various school-board communities.
  4. Eliminate EQAO testing and reinvest monies saved to address the shortfalls in other areas of the funding formula.
  5. Dedicate funds to address violence in the workplace and mental health.

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