

## **Update on Support Staff and Teacher/Occasional Teacher Central Table Bargaining**

The Minister of Education's press conference yesterday, and subsequent announcements in the media, have left many, including members, parents, and students, wondering about the status of bargaining. While the announcement made by the Minister regarding average class size funding, mandatory e-Learning, and the Supports for Students Fund (formerly Local Priorities Funding) may be a move in the right direction, the reality is that these are still cuts and they will continue to have a negative impact on education in this province.

It is clear that all of the proposals from the Minister of Education are education funding issues. All cuts to funding negatively impact the quality of education and have a direct effect of decreasing the level of supports provided by education workers and teachers across the system. It has been shown that underfunding education often results in reduction of education worker positions which affects the safety of students and puts our most vulnerable students at risk. As demonstrated in the Conference Board of Canada report "The Economic Case for Investing in Education" (June 2019), "there is a public cost to not sustaining educational attainment" (see: [betterschoolsstrongereconomy.ca](http://betterschoolsstrongereconomy.ca)).

It is important to examine what has occurred to date since the government's initial announcement of cuts to publicly funded education.

The government tried to decimate our secondary schools last March by announcing an increase in average class sizes from 22 to 28. The Premier and his Minister of Education repeatedly said the public supported this move but they refused to release the results of their consultation. As a Federation, we knew this was not good for students and as such, we have bargained, engaged in work action and even in exploratory talks within a mediator's framework. When the consultation results finally became public last week, it was immediately clear that the public is overwhelmingly opposed to any increase in class size. The consultations also prove that the government and this Minister had been misleading the public from the get-go.

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Yesterday, the government announced a 23:1 funding average. Although a 23:1 funding average is a step in the right direction, it is still a cut from the 22:1 in the 2018-2019 school year. Moving to a 23:1 funding average cuts teachers and reduces the number of courses that students are able to access. As these teachers and courses are not funded, boards will be put in a difficult position to continue to retain courses, which will inevitably result in cuts to many positions both teachers and education workers.

Local class size caps are still at risk, as earlier tabled strips to local class size language remain on the table. Local class caps limit the number of students in each class and changes to these limits will result in larger class sizes. Larger classes will have a negative impact on student engagement and outcomes. Students who require more individual assistance will inevitably receive less attention in larger classes. The government has yet to commit to ensuring manageable class sizes across the province.

The Minister has made reference several times to improvements to e-Learning, stating that his plan is better because it allows parents, not unions, to make decisions. He is proposing an opt-out for parents similar to negative billing often used by telecommunication companies whereby you are assumed to have signed up for a service unless you opt-out. Currently, e-Learning courses are available across the province for students who are interested. Students can opt-in to an e-Learning course where they are guaranteed a reasonable class size maximum so that they can get the attention they need from their teacher. The class size for e-Learning tabled by the government is set at 35:1 which will reduce funding even further. There are, also, no guarantees that these classes will not be contracted out to private businesses.

The Minister talks about returning Special Education funding to 100%, now referred to as Student Support Funding. In fact, his proposal returns only a portion of the funding that was removed. The entire Secondary Programming grant, which provided funding for teachers to support our most vulnerable students and ensured that school boards could provide a varied and full program to students, is being removed. When all of the proposed funding cuts are made, the result is a loss of over 2800 teaching positions from secondary schools.

The proposal does not return the hundreds of education worker positions that were lost this year. These job losses specifically impact students with special needs including those with mental health issues requiring support in the school system. Once again, it is unacceptable that our highest risk students are losing the needed valuable supports.

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Minister Lecce continues to mislead the public by stating that the hiring regulation (known as Regulation 274) mandates hiring based only on seniority with no consideration for merit. The regulation actually allows boards complete discretion to create a list of eligible teachers based on qualifications and merit. The regulation ensures that vacancies are filled by qualified teachers from that list by seniority.

At the invitation of the mediator, the parties recently agreed to hold informal talks to exchange ideas and explore whether a return to formal bargaining was possible. During this process, neither party formally presented written proposals to the other. The Minister has misrepresented the events and outcomes of the past two days.

These exploratory discussions were interrupted by the Minister of Education's press conference where he presented the newest version of the cuts the government is still seeking to impose on the education system. To be clear, these were not formal proposals, and presenting them from behind a podium rather than at the bargaining table does little to advance negotiations, since there remain many unanswered questions about how the government plans to implement these cuts. OSSTF did formally receive the proposals by email hours after the exploratory talks ended.

We are committed to examining the latest proposals by the Ministry at the bargaining table with the goal to protect and improve publicly funded education. Although this is certainly a move in the right direction, in addition to the unacceptable funding cuts, there are too many unanswered questions. It is difficult to trust this government since it is now clear and obvious that this government has no education policy other than slashing the number of teachers and education workers and taking money out of our world-class public education system. Over and over again, the Minister of Education stood in front of news cameras and said he wanted predictability for parents while blasting unions for striking for lower class sizes. It is now clear and obvious that it was this government's decision to pursue massive cuts to the education system – while insisting this was what the public wanted – that caused the strikes and introduced unpredictability into the system. The offer we made many weeks ago, to cancel full withdrawals if all cuts are removed, has been repeated continuously since it was first put forward. That offer still stands.

The [BargainingForEducation.ca](http://BargainingForEducation.ca) website will be updated with further details within 48 hours.

**Please frequently check the *myOSSTF* section of the OSSTF/FEESO website for updated information.**