



**ETFO Submission to the
Ministry of Education
Consultation on Class Size – Phase 2**
May 2019



**Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario
Fédération des enseignantes et des enseignants
de l'élémentaire de l'Ontario**

ETFO represents 83,000 elementary public school teachers, occasional teachers and education professionals across the province. Its Building Better Schools education agenda can be viewed at **BuildingBetterSchools.ca**.

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INTRODUCTION

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the second phase of the Ministry of Education's Consultation on Class Size. ETFO represents 83,000 elementary public school teachers and education professionals across the province and is the largest teacher federation in Canada.

As stated in its response to the initial phase of this consultation, it is ETFO's position that the issue of class size can only be addressed at the bargaining table and that Ministry of Education's consultation format is not the appropriate venue for these discussions.

Nonetheless, this submission summarizes ETFO's perspectives, which are rooted in our members' experiences, research conducted by education experts and the overarching goal of providing high-quality public education to students in Ontario. This submission should be considered as complementary to ETFO's response to the initial phase of the consultation and addresses the questions posed by the Ministry's *Consultation Guide* that directly relate to the elementary panel. For clarity, this submission does not constitute a bargaining document and is provided without prejudice to any position which ETFO might subsequently pursue in negotiations or elsewhere.

The government has identified student achievement, evidence-based decision making and protecting front line staff as key goals during this consultation. These goals are at cross-purposes with the planned increases to class sizes. Research clearly supports the common-sense conclusion that student achievement is better served with smaller classes. In addition, the proposed increase in class size will inevitably lead to the loss of front-line educator positions. The government has chosen to ignore these realities; ETFO urges the government to reconsider their proposals.

Smaller Classes Lead to Better Student Outcomes

Smaller classes mean educators have more opportunity to give students individual attention.

Smaller classes improve student behaviour and peer relationships and increase student engagement and achievement in the early grades. These factors, in turn, contribute to increased student success.

Class size has been extensively studied. A 2014 US-based review of the available research concluded, “The academic literature strongly supports the common-sense notion that class size is an important determinant of student outcomes.”¹

Ontario’s previous investment in smaller classes in primary grades has had a positive impact on classrooms across the province. Ontario-based research demonstrates that smaller primary classes have enabled teachers to provide more individual attention to students and use a greater variety of instructional strategies.²

Grades 4 to 8 currently have the highest class sizes in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system. There is no pedagogical rationale for this. In her 2017 Annual Report, the Ontario Auditor General notes the difference in class sizes and remarks, “It means that not all students will be benefitting from smaller class sizes.”³ Recently negotiated improvements to funding for grades 4 to 8 class size for certain boards were a step in the right direction. The current government’s

¹ Schanzenbach, D.W. (2014). *Does Class Size Matter?* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. p. 10. nepc.colorado.edu/publication/does-class-size-matter.

² Bascia N. (2010). *Reducing Class Size: What Do We Know?* Canadian Education Association. Toronto.

³ Ontario Auditor General (2017). *2017 Annual Report*, Chapter 3, Section 3.08 - Ministry Funding and Oversight of School Boards.

proposal to increase class size average for grades 4 to 8 will undo this progress and represents a step backwards for our public education system.

Class Composition

Class composition is an important aspect of any discussion regarding class size. Ontario has a policy of integrating students with identified special needs into regular classrooms. The policy recognizes that our public schools have the responsibility to support the education and growth of all children. The inclusion model is based on the notion that students' learning environment should reflect the diversity of society at large and foster understanding and appreciation for individual differences. To effectively support this policy and enable classroom educators to meet the individual needs of their diverse students, class sizes must be adjusted to reflect the number of students with identified special needs in each class.

Recent changes made to the Ontario Autism Program will leave many students and their families without adequate support. These changes will have an impact on class composition as more and more students with autism look to their schools for support. Without adequate additional funding provided to school boards to cover this increasing demand, many schools will not be able to meet student needs.

Realizing the Potential of Full-Day Kindergarten

Earlier this year the government indicated that it was considering changes to the current Full-Day Kindergarten program and, although it has not provided any further details, it has since refused to rule out changes. This uncertainty is detrimental to educators, students and their families. Other jurisdictions recognize Ontario's Full-Day Kindergarten program as an innovative and successful model. This government should be looking to strengthen it, not undermine it.

Ontario's current model for Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK), which includes a teacher and designated early childhood educator (DECE), is based on international research and was created by experts, educators and partners in the field. If adequately supported, Full-Day Kindergarten significantly contributes to supporting children with special needs and promoting student well-being.

The Teacher/DECE team is central to the success of Ontario's FDK program. The teacher and designated early childhood educator, working as a team, bring specialized knowledge and skills to best nurture the development and growth of every student. They ensure that children's academic and socio-emotional skills are fostered with the support and guidance early learners need.

ETFO calls on the government to commit to maintaining the Teacher/DECE team model for Full-Day Kindergarten and to work with ETFO and other stakeholders to strengthen this successful program.

Responses to questions raised by the Ministry of Education:

Grades 1-8

1. What are the opportunities of the planned changes in relation to the four key goals?

ETFO acknowledges that the government has decided to maintain existing hard caps on class size in Kindergarten to Grade 3 and welcomes this decision. However, ETFO strongly opposes the planned increase to average class size for grades 4 to 8. As already stated, grades 4 to 8 currently have the largest average class sizes in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system.

Research shows that students benefit from smaller classes. If the government is truly concerned about student achievement, it needs to focus on reducing class sizes, not increasing them.

2. Will the status quo in grades 1-3 and modest changes to grades 4-8 allow for continued flexibility in organizing school board class sizes?

As already stated, ETFO supports maintaining the hard caps on class size for Kindergarten and grades 1 to 3. Changes to average class size in grades 4 to 8 will impact boards differently. Board-wide class size averages without hard caps on class size cannot provide consistent and equitable class sizes within a given board or across the province. Board-wide averages allow for wide variances in class size within individual schools and from one school to another. These variances further entrench inequities based on geographic location in accessing teaching resources.

The proposed increase to average class size in grades 4 to 8 will have a unique impact on schools in rural areas, especially on staffing for smaller classes. The government should review the Remote and Rural Grant to ensure that it is adequate to serve the needs of remote and rural schools.

There are several boards that are red-circled in the current regulation (Reg. 132/12) to maintain a class size average below 24.5, these exemptions must remain in place.

3. Are there any other comments on the planned changes, keeping in mind the key goals outlined above, you would like to provide?

Hard caps on class size are the best method to ensure consistent class size across the province.

The staffing needs of schools cannot be adequately considered in isolation and should incorporate a discussion on class composition; in particular supports for students with special needs. A weighting factor should be implemented that reduces class size in accordance with the number of students with identified special needs integrated into general classrooms.

Funding to support students with special needs has not kept up with the increase in required specialized services. This issue needs particular attention given the expected influx of additional students resulting from government changes to the Ontario Autism Program. The downloading of responsibility to school boards to provide support for these students cannot be done without adequate additional funding.

ETFO would like to comment on the use of data by the government in the consultation guide. The comparison between Ontario's average class sizes to those in Quebec is misleading. Other jurisdictions with lower average class sizes are not used as a point of comparison. In addition, Quebec deals with class size differently than Ontario and in fact maintains varying average class sizes and hard caps on class size depending on demographic factors.

CONCLUSION

Since the Ministry launched its consultation on class size, the response from educators, parents and the public-at-large has been overwhelmingly in support of smaller classes and maintaining the Teacher/DECE team model for Full-Day Kindergarten. Frontline classroom educators identify small classes as the most important factor in their ability to work individually with students and meet their diverse needs. Parents and guardians know that smaller classes lead to better quality education. Educators, parents, and the public-at-large value the current model for Full-Day Kindergarten which combines the unique skills of teachers and DECEs to provide a valuable education experience to students.

The government has stated student achievement, evidence-based decision making and protecting front-line staff as key goals during this consultation. These goals are at cross-purposes with the planned increases to class sizes.

The government should listen to the voices of educators, parents, education experts and the public and make the necessary investments to reduce class size, maintain the Teacher/DECE team model for Full-Day Kindergarten and continue to improve our public education system.