



## **ETFO: Call to Action to Address Violent Incidents in Schools**

**The government must ensure the necessary funding and resources for special education programs.**

**A comprehensive approach to children’s mental health is needed that includes inter-ministerial supports and possibly an inter-ministerial task force for children’s mental health in schools.**

**The Ministries of Education and Labour must proactively support school board compliance with health and safety legislative and policy requirements and reporting of incidents.**

**A stronger health and safety culture needs to be built within school boards with increased training provided at all levels.**

### **BACKGROUND NOTES**

#### **Necessary Funding and Resources for Special Education Programs**

In 1980 the government amended the *Education Act* under *Bill 82* to require that all school boards provide special education programs and services for exceptional pupils. This includes procedures for early and ongoing identification of the learning abilities and the needs of students. A further decision by the Ontario Court of Appeal in 1995 meant that more students with severe or multiple mental or physical challenges have been integrated into classrooms.

ETFO firmly supports an integrated model for special education; however the Federation, school boards and other education stakeholders have long recognized that government funding for special needs has not kept up with growing needs nor has it kept up with the rate of inflation.

More than half of elementary school principals reported restrictions on waiting lists for special education services according to People for Education. Twenty-six per cent of elementary schools report that not all identified students are receiving recommended supports. And education workers have one of the highest levels of Lost Time Injuries caused by workplace violence according to WSIB statistics. Elementary teachers have more than twice the rate of these Lost Time Injuries as secondary teachers.

Many school boards are compensating for their underfunded special education budget by borrowing from other areas. When the Ministry of Education phased out its mitigation funding for declining school enrolment, at least 14 public school boards received cuts to their special

education grants in 2015. This has forced schools to make difficult decisions about which students can be next in line to access limited services, such as psychological assessments.

The provincial government must increase its funding for special education teachers, educational assistants, psychologists, behavioural therapists, school support counselors, child and youth workers and speech-language pathologists.

This funding would improve early interventions and supports for children's mental health and special education needs. In short, it must update its funding model for special education to address actual needs for special education programs and supports.

### **Comprehensive Approach to Children's Mental Health with Inter-ministerial Supports**

One in five children and youth in Ontario have a mental health challenge. ETFO members working in Kindergarten and primary grades find that their students with high risk aggressive and disruptive behaviors, mental health issues or potential special education needs are less likely to get assessments and supports. Parents of students of all ages struggle to get referrals and specialist appointments for their children. This is even more acute for families in small towns and rural areas.

Being wait-listed for mental health and other services negatively impacts these students when it comes to their emotional and academic well-being, health, social interaction and speech language development. Students who have timely access to effective supports do better in school. The sooner they get these supports, the more likely they will experience success and happiness.

The Ministries of Education, Children and Youth Services and Health and Long-Term Care need to take a coordinated and integrated approach to deliver these important services to families. Such action must build the capacity of children's mental health agencies and resources to meet the needs of families.

### **Proactive Ministry Support for School Board Compliance and Reporting of Incidents**

Legislative and policy requirements to ensure school health, safety and well-being are set out under the *Education Act*, *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and Ministry of Education documents. School boards need to ensure that incidents of workplace violence are reported and dealt with effectively. The sooner issues are addressed, the more likely that supports for students can be provided.

### **Stronger Health and Safety Culture and Training within School Boards**

School boards must reinforce the leadership role of superintendents and principals in making health, safety and well-being a priority for everyone in the school community. Ongoing health and safety training for them must be a school board priority.

There must be an effective system in place for staff to report health and safety concerns including incidents of workplace violence, followed by prompt investigation by principals and superintendents. This is the most effective way for assuring that prompt and effective actions will be taken for early intervention and the avoidance of future harm. All staff, not just teachers, should have health and safety training about legal requirements and school board procedures.