

# BACK TO THE FUTURE

## Lessons from the PC government's sweeping and regressive education reforms

By Mark Tagliaferri

**T**o many, the Ontario Science Centre is synonymous with progress – a testament to, and record of humankind’s unyielding quest to move forward. It was against this backdrop that, on March 15, Minister of Education Lisa Thompson laid out – and laid bare – the PC government’s plans for publicly funded education. The Minister informed Ontarians of the government’s intent to “modernize” education, by returning to practices and learning conditions research discredited years ago. It was truly an odd sight: the Science Centre’s march toward progress juxtaposed against the Minister’s desire to drag education “back to basics.”

In the wake of this announcement, and on the heels of several others, we can parse the government’s words and actions, to connect the dots and draw some broader lessons about the government’s intentions, and consider what they mean for publicly funded education in Ontario.

### Putting the “con” in consultations

At every opportunity, the government has trumpeted their “unprecedented” education consultation. “We did what the Liberals had been afraid to do, or perhaps they just didn’t want to do!” Minister Thompson said at the Science Centre. “We threw the doors open to real meaningful public and parental input into our education system. And I have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, the people of Ontario did not disappoint... Seventy-two thousand students, parents, teachers, employers, and organizations [participated]. This consultation is the largest of its kind in Ontario education history.”

There is just one problem: the consultation was a complete and utter sham. Every aspect was an abject lesson in how *not* to conduct policy research. First, despite the government’s claims, it is impossible to verify that 72,000 people participated, as no mechanism was used to authenticate respondents. Stories on social media abounded of people participating dozens of times, inputting fake postal codes, and taking part in multiple telephone town halls.

There were also issues with the questions. Many were biased or leading (“Ontario needs to improve student achievement in math. Where should we focus?”). Others were system-wide questions, which the average individual could not be expected to know. In the telephone town halls, participants were barred from open dialogue, and only a select few were chosen to offer remarks.

Later, after two reports were finally – and quietly – posted online, the data seemed to undercut several of the government’s positions. For instance, there was broad support for topics in the 2015 health and physical education curriculum, which the government repealed last summer. Also, a majority characterize the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) as a distraction, and want less standardized testing. It is difficult to reconcile this with the government’s decision to expand EQAO’s mandate, and institute a new full-time Chair at a 3,400 per cent pay increase.

The entire exercise was the antithesis of research integrity. But that was never the point. The “largest consultation ever” was performance art, not policy development. The approach – evidence-based policy, without the hassle of evidence – offered the government rhetorical cover to justify cuts it already planned to make.

### Bigger is better?

The most publicized news from the March 15 press conference is the government’s plan to increase class sizes: in Grades 4 to 8, the average class will increase by one student; in secondary schools, average class size will increase by six, from 22 to 28 students.

This decision will have several devastating consequences. The most obvious is the loss of teaching positions. The Minister has brazenly repeated that “not one teacher will lose their job.” This is a rhetorical trick. Instead of pink slips, the government will rely on attrition – positions of retiring or resigning teachers will not be filled. The Association estimates that 4,000-5,000 teaching positions in Catholic schools will be lost as a result.

The government has attempted to shrug off this increase, downplaying the impact of “adding only six students.” But this is not how averages work. As many educators know, there are classes at the secondary level that, for a variety of reasons, are required to have fewer students – in some cases, classes for students with special education needs, or specialized programs that require particular technologies, can have as few as five or six students.

Currently, these smaller classes are offset by other classes of 30 or more students. However, come next year, some mandatory classes such as math may swell to upward of 40 to achieve the new 28-student average. Pedagogically, this will leave teachers unable to engage in differentiated learning strategies, or provide vital one-on-one interactions with at-risk or vulnerable students. Even from a practical perspective, classrooms were not constructed with these numbers in mind.

There is another potential consequence. Larger classes will mean fewer teachers, and fewer teachers will mean less course offerings for students. Schools will simply not have the staffing capability to maintain current course options. This will negatively impact students every day in schools, and will especially hurt smaller, rural schools that may no longer have the staff to offer a class like Grade 12 physics, or other electives that often inspire students to pursue post-secondary or career paths.

The Minister attempted to justify all of this during a CBC radio interview, claiming larger class sizes will improve student resilience. This baffling statement is devoid of any logic or evidentiary basis. More than this, it is indicative of a government with little knowledge of how education operates, no desire to learn, and total disregard for the consequences of its actions.

### **Technology: one size fits all**

Many would agree that technology can enhance students’ learning experience. However, problems arise when policies are used as a blanket tool to cut costs. Such is the case with the government’s surprise turn toward e-learning. Starting in 2020-21, secondary students will be required to take a minimum of four e-learning credits. The government says some exceptions will be made on an individual basis, but as yet no details or criteria have been presented.

The government claims this will allow students to embrace technology, but educators and researchers were quick to condemn the plan. “It’s a terrible idea,” said Beyhan Farhadi, whose PhD research focuses on e-learning. Not all students are suited to e-learning, and Farhadi’s research indicates that only a minority of students succeed using this platform. Many students will be unprepared to take on the responsibility of e-learning, and there is a fear that credit accumulation and graduation rates will be compromised. As well, with an estimated 440 fewer hours of classroom instruction, it will

be harder to integrate Catholic values and foster community-building.

There will be additional consequences for educators. It is estimated that this change will result in a 13 per cent reduction in the number of class-delivered credits. Funded at a student-to-teacher ratio of 35:1, hundreds of teaching positions in Catholic schools will also be lost.

### **Doing more with less**

As part of the 2017-19 extension agreement, the Association negotiated the hiring of 335 teachers specifically dedicated to special education and at-risk students, through a newly created Local Priorities Fund. That money will be discontinued as of August. Also gone is the Cost Adjustment Allocation, which provided supplemental funding for education workers. This is added to the \$25 million Education Program – Other (EPO) funding that was cut in January. All of this coming at a time when, due to changes with the Ontario Autism Program, more students with diverse needs will be entering classrooms.

The release of the Grants for Student Needs in late April will provide a clearer picture of education funding for the year ahead, but the reality is that further cuts and changes are likely. For instance, although the Minister offered tepid support for full-day Kindergarten, she conspicuously refused to rule-out future changes to the current teacher/early childhood educator model. We also know that Regulation 274, which ended nepotistic hiring practices, is being revised and may be eliminated. The bottom line is that with the PC government in power, educators are going to be required to do more, with fewer resources.

### **The road ahead**

Each new government has the right to put its stamp on education. And there is certainly room for agreeable people to disagree on the finer points of policy. But despite protestations to the contrary, this government has not engaged in good faith discussions with education partners. The Minister’s announcement on March 15 only punctuated this point. Determined to cut four per cent – approximately \$1 billion – from the education budget, government accountants brandished their red pens, closed their eyes, and reduced students and educators to numbers on a spreadsheet.

Now, more than ever, we must stand united. The difference will be made in big actions, like the Rally for Education on the steps of Queen’s Park, and in small actions, like conversations with neighbours, or with family around the dinner table. In venues of all sizes, we must celebrate and defend Ontario’s system of publicly funded education. The Premier wants to claim that he speaks “for the people.” But we will make our voices heard, and we will speak for ourselves.

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