

Cuts to our future



Jan. 28, 2020

By Nate Smelle

Over the past few months we have learned a lot about the Ford government's intentions when it comes to education through its ongoing labour dispute with education workers throughout the province. Through speaking with many of the education workers on the picket line and researching the facts presented to me from both sides, there is no doubt in my mind that the provincial government's budget cuts will lessen the quality of education offered in Ontario.

By now, anyone keeping an eye on this situation as it unfolds knows that the teachers and education workers are fighting to protect the students from the impact of the governments cuts to education. These impacts include: larger class sizes; teaching job losses; mandatory e-learning; less support for students with mental health and behavioural issues, despite a subsequent increase in violence in the classroom; and, less course options for students.

At the same time, the narrative the government has been attempting to push is that the job action is being driven by ?union leaders? and teachers wanting, as Minister of Education Stephen Lecce put it, ?to advance higher compensation, higher wages, and even more generous benefits.? Speaking on behalf of the government, Lecce also claimed the teachers and education workers participating in the province-wide job actions ?are jeopardizing the learning experience of Ontario's future leaders.?

When interviewing those on strike, I always ask what the main issues they would like to see resolved are. Not once has compensation, wages, or benefits come up. Instead, their answers always include accounts of their firsthand experience explaining how more students + less teachers and support workers in a classroom = a recipe for disaster that degrades the quality of education the students receive.

The one per cent cost-of-living increase that the teachers are asking for amounts to roughly \$750-million. This is approximately the same amount of our tax dollars the provincial government hands over to the already grotesquely rich, high-polluting, planet-heating fossil fuel industry in subsidies each year. If it is true that, ?the government believes in setting students up for success,? as Minister Lecce has said, than they may want to reconsider their priorities.

Last April I had a chance to speak with several students from North Hastings High School during a province-wide, student-led walkout in protest of the same budget cuts the education workers represented by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, and the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens are currently fighting against. Listening to their reasons for participating in the walkout organized by the Students Say No Movement, they clearly understood how the cuts are compromising their future by limiting their opportunities. Concerned with the government's plan to make e-learning mandatory, a NHHS student named Dylan Van Vliet explained to me why he thought it was a bad idea.

?With mandatory e-learning students are not going to be able to sit down with a teacher and get the study time they need to help

them understand what they are learning. Some students will fail because they won't get the help they need," said Van Vliet. The students also aptly expressed their frustration with the Ford government through the signs they made and carried through the streets. One sign in particular stood out for me. It read:

BUDGET CUTS TO OUR SCHOOLS ARE BUDGET CUTS TO OUR FUTURE.?

The students message was loud and clear ? but did the government listen?