

# Ontario education minister touts class-size increases as means to teach “resiliency”

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In a CBC radio interview late last month, Ontario Education Minister Lisa Thompson defended the Progressive Conservative government’s savage cuts to public school budgets—and in particular its plans to dramatically increase class sizes—by claiming they will teach students “resiliency” and thus better prepare them for “the world of work.”

Thompson’s callous remarks exemplify the ruling elite’s contempt for the millions of working-class families that depend on Ontario’s chronically underfunded public education system.

The Education Minister emphatically defended the “education reform” the government announced March 14. It will reduce education spending by \$1.4 billion, increase the average high school class size from 22 to 28 students, impose mandatory online courses for high school students, eliminate up to 10,000 teaching jobs, and make retrograde changes to the province’s sex education and math curriculums.

“When students are currently preparing to go off to post-secondary education, we’re hearing from professors and employers alike that they’re lacking coping skills and they’re lacking resiliency,” claimed Thompson. “By increasing class sizes in high school, we’re preparing them for the reality of post-secondary (education) as well as the world of work.”

Thompson went on to all but acknowledge the class-size increases and other cuts will have a perverse impact on the most vulnerable, remarking that it will probably be necessary to increase spending on mental health support services.

In claiming that Ontario students need to be prepared for the harsh realities of the “world of work,” Thompson shed light on the real meaning of Premier Doug Ford’s promise to make Ontario “open for business.” So as to ensure that its income and wealth

continues to swell, corporate Canada is intent on condemning the vast majority of today’s students to low-paid, precarious employment, shorn of the social rights that workers secured through the mass and revolutionary struggles of the last century.

The right of working-class children to a quality public education is itself under systematic attack around the world—from Trump’s appointment of multi-billionaire heiress and charter school advocate Betsy DeVos to the position of US education secretary, to the drive of successive Labour and Conservative Party governments in Britain to promote privately-owned, for-profit “academies” and gut teachers’ wages and rights.

As they seek to bolster their respective “competitive” and strategic positions through militarism and attacks on democratic and social rights, the rival nationally-based capitalist cliques are targeting public education as an intolerable drain on profits.

The Ford government’s all-out assault on teachers, students and the families that rely on public schools is part of a naked class-war agenda directed against the entire working class. Since coming to power last June, Ford has cancelled a modest minimum wage increase, gutted workplace standards, slashed welfare benefits and the Ontario Student Assistance Plan (OSAP), laid the groundwork for sweeping cuts to healthcare, and criminalized a strike by York University teaching assistants.

The Tories’ cuts to education will devastate a public education school system already reeling from a decade of austerity budgets implemented by the trade union-backed Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne.

In addition to the cuts outlined on March 14, the government has axed \$200 million from programs for students with special needs, including Autism Spectrum

Disorder (ASD), and axed \$100 million in funding for school repairs, amid growing parental concerns about moldy, dilapidated and unsafe school buildings. According to Fix Our Schools, a parent-led school health and safety advocacy group, there is a \$15.9 billion repair backlog for Ontario schools.

In response to the latest cuts, parents have initiated a Facebook page called “Ontario Families for Public Education” to share information about how the Tories’ “reform” will affect school boards, schools, class sizes and the courses offered to students. Parents and teachers are using the social media platform to discuss the adverse impact the cuts will have on students and teachers, express their indignation and shed light on teacher working conditions.

Explaining the hardships faced in classrooms with large numbers of students, including those with special needs, one teacher commented: “I had an ASD student with such high needs in my class. He was so lovely, but very vocal. I often had to stop my lessons because the class couldn’t hear. Nothing like telling 27 kids to read the information and learn on their own, especially considering my seven who were reading below grade level, and my four with ADHD who couldn’t focus and learn without an interactive lesson.”

Another wrote: “As a teacher with close to 30 students, I can’t adequately support a student with autism. I am very familiar with autism ABA (therapy) and I know what I should do, but can honestly say it is humanly impossible to meet the need when you are the only adult in the room.”

Ontario teachers unions, which have repeatedly sabotaged opposition to the austerity policies pursued by successive New Democratic Party (NDP), Conservative and Liberal governments for the past three decades, are organizing a rally for April 6 in an attempt to bring the mounting public outcry over the attacks on education securely and safely under the wing of their NDP and Liberal Party allies. Their goal is to prevent mass working class opposition to the education cuts from becoming a catalyst for working class resistance to austerity, corporate tax breaks, concessions and anti-strike laws.

The unions’ opposition to the mobilization of the industrial and political strength of the working class against the Ford government and its class-war assault is typified by the Ontario Federation of Labour’s appeal

for workers to wait until the next provincial election in 2022, when they will have the chance to elect a “progressive” government—i.e., a government composed of pro-austerity, pro-war parties like the NDP and Liberals.

High quality public education is a social right! Ontario teachers must raise their own demands by forming rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses and their high-paid functionaries, and mount a struggle to defend public education by reaching out to students, parents, their communities and the working class as a whole—their class allies in this fight.

In answer to the ruling elite’s international assault on public education, these committees must fight to mobilize teachers, students and their families as part of a working-class counter-offensive aimed at securing the social rights of all working people on the basis of a socialist program.

*The authors also recommend:*

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