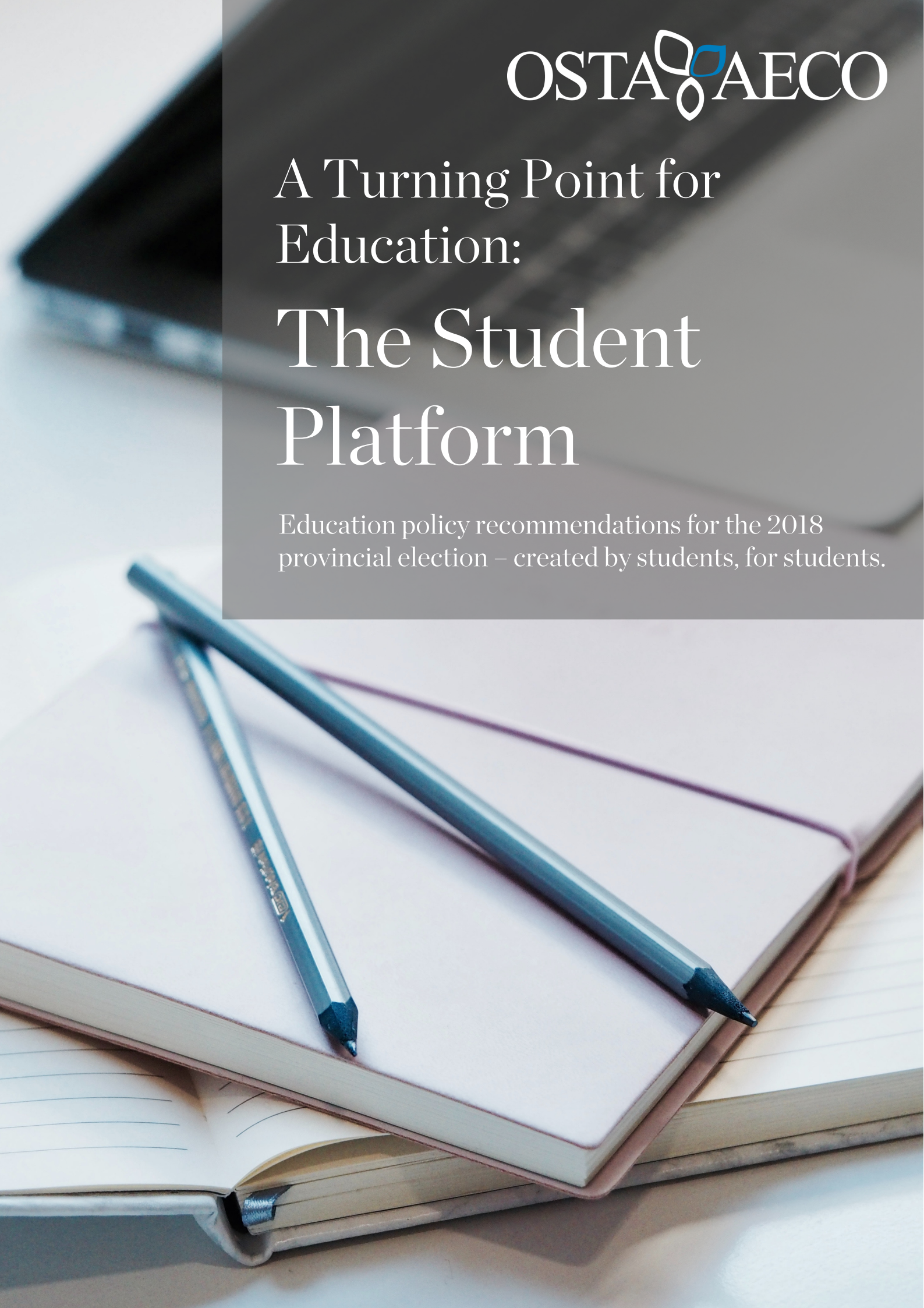


# A Turning Point for Education: The Student Platform

Education policy recommendations for the 2018  
provincial election – created by students, for students.



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# Introduction

Following extensive consultation with students across the province, the Ontario Student Trustees' Association – l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario (OSTA-AECO) has developed the Student Platform in preparation for the 2018 provincial election. The Student Platform outlines a strategy to improve Ontario's education system and ensure that Ontario's youth are better prepared for the unique opportunities and challenges of the modern workforce.

OSTA-AECO has identified three pillars that serve as the foundation of a strong education system:



**Student Wellbeing**



**21st Century Learning**



**Equitable Access to  
Opportunities**

In November 2017, OSTA-AECO conducted the *Student Survey*, an online survey of 8,230 secondary students from 62 school boards in Ontario; it featured a range of educational issues. The results clearly indicate that students from all backgrounds – public and Catholic schools, small and large communities, rural and urban towns – are united by the belief that there are significant deficiencies in the current implementation of each pillar. The Platform reflects the various perspectives of Ontario's students and provides 16 policy recommendations to turn our vision of the ideal education system into reality.

The importance of the Student Platform must not be understated. The quality of education received today will determine Ontario's prosperity tomorrow. The purpose of the Platform is to ensure that the upcoming provincial election addresses the most important issues for the next generation of citizens, leaders, and changemakers in Ontario.

# Student Platform Recommendations



## Student Wellbeing

1. The government should mandate that all Ontario guidance counselors complete ASIST training.
2. In addition to funding suicide intervention and mental health training programs for staff, the government should fund training programs for students (e.g., safeTALK).
3. **The government should legally enshrine the right of students to create a wellbeing club or committee in their school.** Bill 13 (the Accepting Schools Act) requires “boards [to] support pupils who want to establish and lead activities and organizations that promote a safe and inclusive learning environment ... and the creation of a positive school climate.” Organizations promoting student wellbeing, mental, and spiritual health should be included in the list of initiatives schools must support.
4. The government should mandate that every school has a breakfast program accessible to all students and ensure that school boards have sufficient funds to implement and sustain these programs.



## 21st Century Learning

1. The government should mandate that every student be tested in transition grades (1, 4, and 8) for exceptional learning.
2. The government should ensure that every student has a unique student profile, stored in a database open to educators, that is frequently updated to facilitate individualized and differentiated learning at the classroom level.
3. **The government should legally enshrine that every student identified as exceptional has a right to access special education accommodations, and all school boards should have a policy to ensure this right.** The government should also mandate that all teachers receive training on identifying, integrating, and helping exceptional learners succeed.
4. The government should change the co-op credit from an open level (O) course to a mixed (M) level course.

5. **The government should increase per-pupil funding of guidance counsellors.** The student to guidance counselor ratio for elementary schools should match the ratio for secondary schools. In both elementary and secondary schools, the gap between the number of students and the number of counselors in a school must be narrowed.
6. **The government should ensure students graduate high school with basic training in CPR, First Aid, self-defense, and conflict prevention.** These life skills can be integrated into courses (e.g., CPR and First Aid into physical education) as requirements for graduation.
7. **The government should invest in research about emerging markets (e.g., sector growth, the number of new jobs, wage trends).** The findings should be synthesized in a form accessible to students and parents, published, and distributed to guidance counsellors across the province.
8. The government should review existing curriculum to integrate technological literacy (e.g., word processing, spreadsheet, database, and programming skills) in all courses.



## Equitable Access to Opportunities

1. The government should work with school boards to create provincial standards on student eligibility for school transportation services.
2. **The government should update the current funding formula to reflect school boards' local transportation needs.** It must take into consideration factors such as geography, availability of public transit, and the number of students who need transportation services.
3. **The government should provide enveloped grants (funds requiring a specific use) to rural and northern school boards for alternatives to online classes.** Examples include traditional in-person classes, in-person and online hybrid classes, night school, dual credit programs with local colleges, etc.
4. **The government should expand the Urban and Priority High Schools program (UPHS), which currently provides additional funding to high schools in urban low socioeconomic status communities.** The funding should be available to schools across the province (including rural and northern boards) with low graduation rates and a significant proportion of families living below the poverty line.

# Student Wellbeing

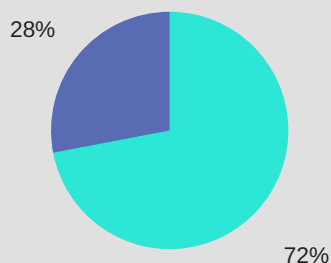


Wellbeing is the foundation of a student's educational experience. The Ministry of Education defines student wellbeing as a combination of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical components. Academic success and student wellbeing are interdependent: a child cannot achieve their full potential without a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle. The government should provide every student with equitable access to wellbeing resources and supports.

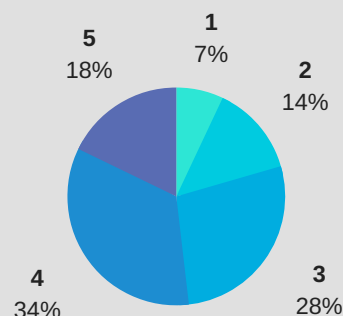
The Ministry of Education has taken steps to improve student wellbeing. In 2011, the *Open Minds, Healthy Minds* strategy required school boards to appoint a Mental Health Lead to develop, implement, and monitor board-level wellbeing strategies. By 2013, all school boards were required to create an Equity and Inclusive Education Policy to ensure safe school environments. In 2015, revisions to the Health and Physical Education Curriculum emphasized the importance of healthy and active living. In September 2017, the Ministry doubled its funding of school boards' wellbeing priorities to \$12 million. Despite these improvements, there remain two pressing problems with student wellbeing in Ontario.

Firstly, many students are not equipped with the skills necessary to address mental health issues. For example, students experiencing suicidal thoughts often confide in their peers rather than reaching out to an adult or trained professional. Students must be trained in detecting warning signs and engaging in difficult conversations when they arise. It is equally important for both staff and students to receive training.

The 2015 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey found that **28%** of students have wanted to talk to someone about a mental health problem but did not know who to approach.<sup>1</sup>



In OSTA-AECO's *Student Survey*, students were asked to rate how prepared they would feel if a peer approached them with a mental health issue. On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is 'not prepared' and 5 is 'very prepared'), almost half (**48%**) of students answered between 1 and 3.

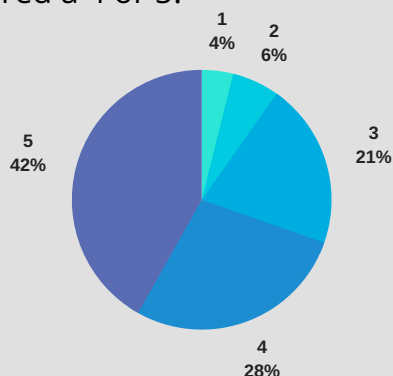


The second problem is that student access to wellbeing supports varies significantly across the province. The Ministry bundles grants to school boards; in other words, school boards receive a lump sum of funds and use their discretion to finance local initiatives. This creates striking discrepancies in the quality of wellbeing supports throughout the education system. For example, some school boards fail to provide breakfast programs for their students, whereas others have well-funded initiatives. Ontario's students deserve a more equitable distribution of higher quality wellbeing resources and supports.

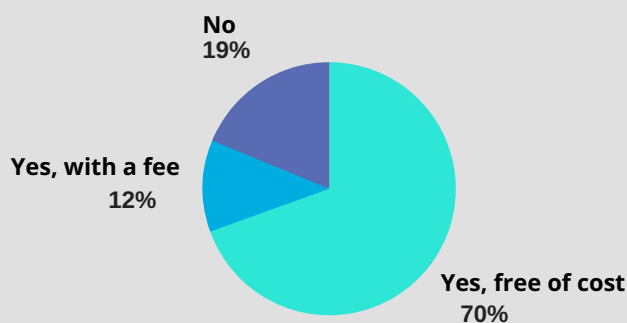
The 2017 Ontario Student, Parent, and Educator Survey conducted by OSTA-AECO found that **1 in 3** students feel their school mental health resources and supports are inadequate. **35%** of students who reported a lack of wellbeing resources and supports self-identify as a minority.<sup>2</sup>

# In OSTA-AECO's Student Survey:

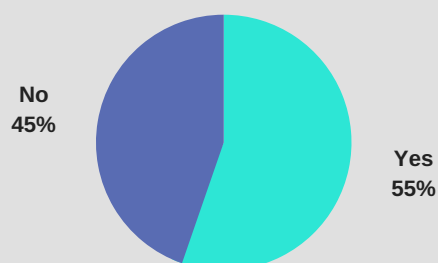
- >> Students were asked to rate the importance of breakfast programs for a healthy learning environment. On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is 'not important' and 5 is 'very important'), **70%** of students answered a 4 or 5.



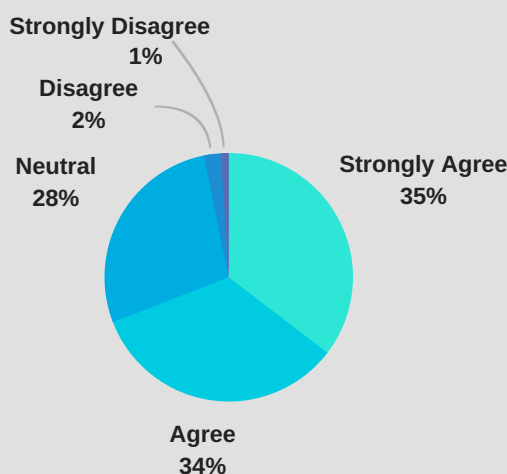
- >> When students were asked if their school has a breakfast program, **31%** answered 'no' or 'yes, with a fee'.



- >> Almost half (**44.7%**) of students reported they did not have a well-being club or committee at their school.

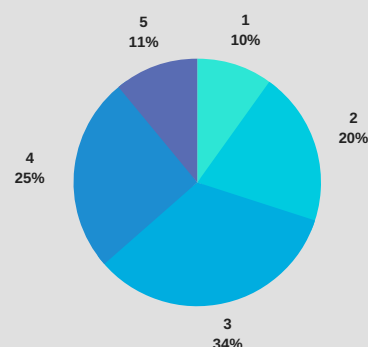


- >> **70%** of students agreed or strongly agreed that every school should have a well-being club or committee.

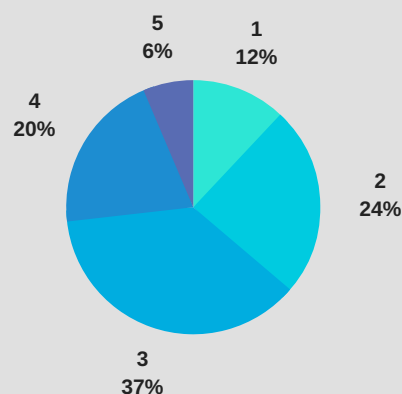


- When asked to rate the accessibility and effectiveness of their school's wellbeing resources/supports on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is 'very poor' and 5 is 'very good'):

- >> **63.5%** of students answered from 1 to 3 for accessibility.



- >> Only **26.8%** of students answered 4 or 5 for effectiveness.





# Recommendations

- 1** The government should mandate that all Ontario guidance counselors complete ASIST training.
- 2** In addition to funding suicide intervention and mental health training programs for staff, the government should fund training programs for students (e.g., safeTALK).
- 3** **The government should legally enshrine the right of students to create a wellbeing club or committee in their school.** Bill 13 (the Accepting Schools Act) requires “boards [to] support pupils who want to establish and lead activities and organizations that promote a safe and inclusive learning environment ... and the creation of a positive school climate.” Organizations promoting student wellbeing, mental, and spiritual health should be included in the list of initiatives schools must support.
- 4** The government should mandate that every school has a breakfast program accessible to all students and ensure that school boards have sufficient funds to implement and sustain these programs.





# 21st Century Learning

The fundamental purpose of our education system is to prepare students for their post-secondary endeavours. The Ministry of Education has acknowledged that the modern workforce is “switching from an industrial model of production to a rapidly transforming, technology-driven, and interconnected globalized knowledge economy.”<sup>3</sup> 21st century learning is predicated on the belief that as society evolves, so should the skills, lessons, and values we teach our students.

21st century learning is a critical lens through which the next government must approach its education policy. There remains significant room for improvement in the implementation of Ontario’s vision to prepare students to grow, adapt, and thrive in a dynamic global economy. Students are demanding an education system that is more relevant to their everyday lives and will best prepare them for their future. In particular, 21st century learning can be further divided into four groups of issues: experiential learning, modernized curriculum, improved guidance supports, and accommodation of learning needs.

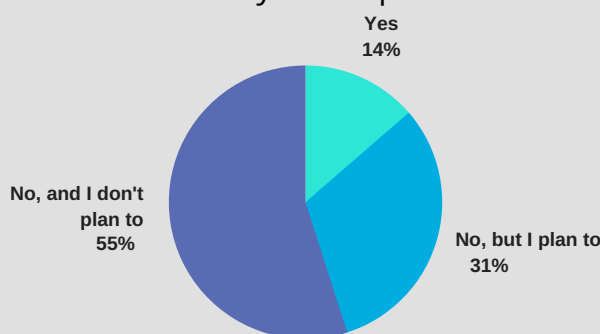
## Experiential Learning

In 2016, the Ministry of Education announced its commitment to providing students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 with a broader range of learning opportunities “connected to the community.”<sup>4</sup> This was an important step towards recognizing the value of experiential learning – the practical application of knowledge beyond the classroom.

In 2017, the Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel recommended the government expose more high school students to skills needed in the workforce.<sup>5</sup> One of the best ways for students to gain practical work experience is cooperative education (co-op), a program which allows students to earn secondary school credits through a job placement. Example co-op placements include auto mechanics, television broadcasting, municipal government, and nursing.<sup>6</sup>

Co-op programs are widespread in post-secondary institutions: in Ontario, they are offered in twelve colleges and fifteen universities. The Council of Ontario Universities reports that “bachelor’s level graduates with co-op experience earn more than their peers, have higher employment and full-time employment rates, and are more likely to have paid off debt two years after graduation.” Co-op is equally beneficial for high school students. A study by the University of Waterloo tracked 11,383 co-op and non co-op students from high school to entrance into the labour market. The researchers found that graduates of co-op programs earned 15% more per year than non co-op students.<sup>7</sup>

Despite co-op’s undisputed benefits, few students participate in the program. In OSTA-AECO’s *Student Survey*, **86.9%** of students reported co-op is offered at their school, but only **46%** indicated that they either plan to or have already participated in the program.



In 2005, the government attempted to incentivize greater student participation by specifying that up to two cooperative education credits can count as compulsory credits. However, the underlying problem is co-op courses' categorization as "open" level credits. In Ontario high schools, the four most common types of courses offered for senior students are university preparation (U), college preparation (C), university/college preparation (mixed, or M), and workplace preparation (open, or O). In order to apply to the vast majority of post-secondary programs, a student must have completed at least six Grade 12 U, M, or C level courses. It is extremely difficult for students to justify completing a co-op course if their credits will not be recognized by the vast majority of universities or colleges.

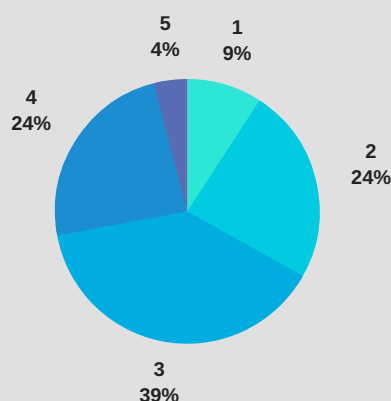
Most importantly, experiential learning opportunities should not be reserved for students who choose to participate in specialized programs (e.g., co-op, Specialist High Skills Majors, dual credit courses, etc.). All courses must integrate opportunities for students to apply their knowledge outside of the classroom. From field trips and application-based projects to partnerships with local businesses and nonprofits, the opportunities to enrich curriculum through experiential learning are endless.

The government must examine the extent to which these issues surrounding implementation of 21st century learning are the result of an outdated curriculum or a disconnect between the curriculum and teaching practices. Ultimately, all aspects of the education system must be reviewed from the lens of experiential learning to ensure Ontario's students are best prepared for their future.

## Modernized curriculum

The purpose of Ontario's education system is to prepare students for whichever post-secondary pathway they choose to pursue. However, the vast majority of Ontario's students feel their education has inadequately prepared them for their post-graduation endeavours. Many students feel that they are not being taught critical life skills and the curriculum has failed to adapt to the evolving demands of the modern workforce.

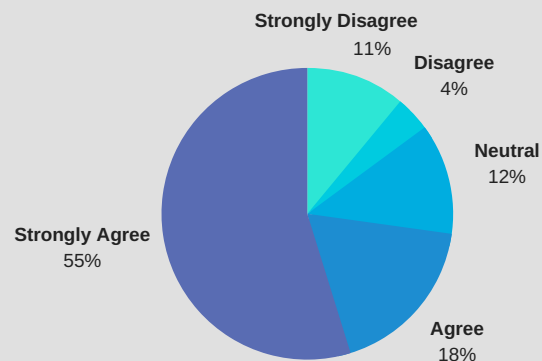
In OSTA-AECO's *Student Survey*, students were asked to rate the extent to which they feel their education has prepared them for life (including work) post-graduation. On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is 'very poorly' and 5 is 'extremely well'), the vast majority (**72%**) of students answered from 1-3.



As a result of prolonged public pressure to modernize the education system, the government has taken steps to refresh the curriculum. In 2016, Ontario unveiled its \$60 million Renewed Math Strategy, which includes an hour of daily math instruction for all students in grades 1 to 8.<sup>8</sup> In March 2017, the Ministry of Education began pilot projects in 28 high schools to implement financial literacy in the Grade 10 Careers course.<sup>9</sup> In September 2017, the Premier announced that Ontario will begin public consultations to modernize student assessment practices.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these changes, the majority of students graduate from high school feeling they lack knowledge and skills needed in their postsecondary endeavours. In addition to financial literacy, the government must ensure students are taught other crucial life skills such as CPR, First Aid, self-defense, and conflict prevention. These life skills are necessary for all students and transferable to every profession.

In OSTA-AECO's *Student Survey*, **73%** of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "students should graduate with basic life skills such as financial literacy, CPR, First Aid, self-defence, and conflict prevention."



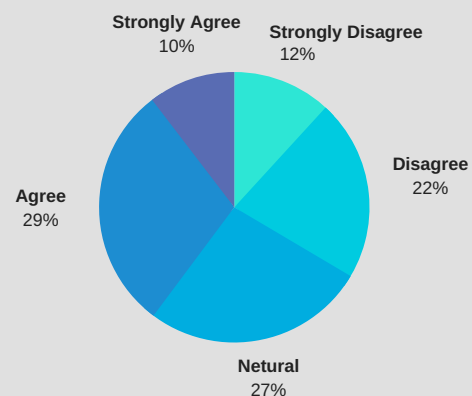
Furthermore, the prevalence of technology in the modern workplace has cemented the need for technological literacy. In order to prepare our students for their future, technology must be integrated into all curriculum, including an emphasis on practical applications like word processing, spreadsheet, database, and programming skills. Ultimately, the government must ensure that Ontario's students are better prepared to succeed in the modern workforce and navigate life post-graduation.

## Improved guidance supports

Guidance counselors play a crucial role in providing graduating students with support to achieve success and fulfillment in their post-secondary endeavours. Their specialized knowledge ensures that students pursue a post-secondary pathway that is optimal for their unique interests and skill set. Unfortunately, many students struggle to decide on a post-secondary pathway and lack information about their chosen career due to limited access to guidance counselors at their school.

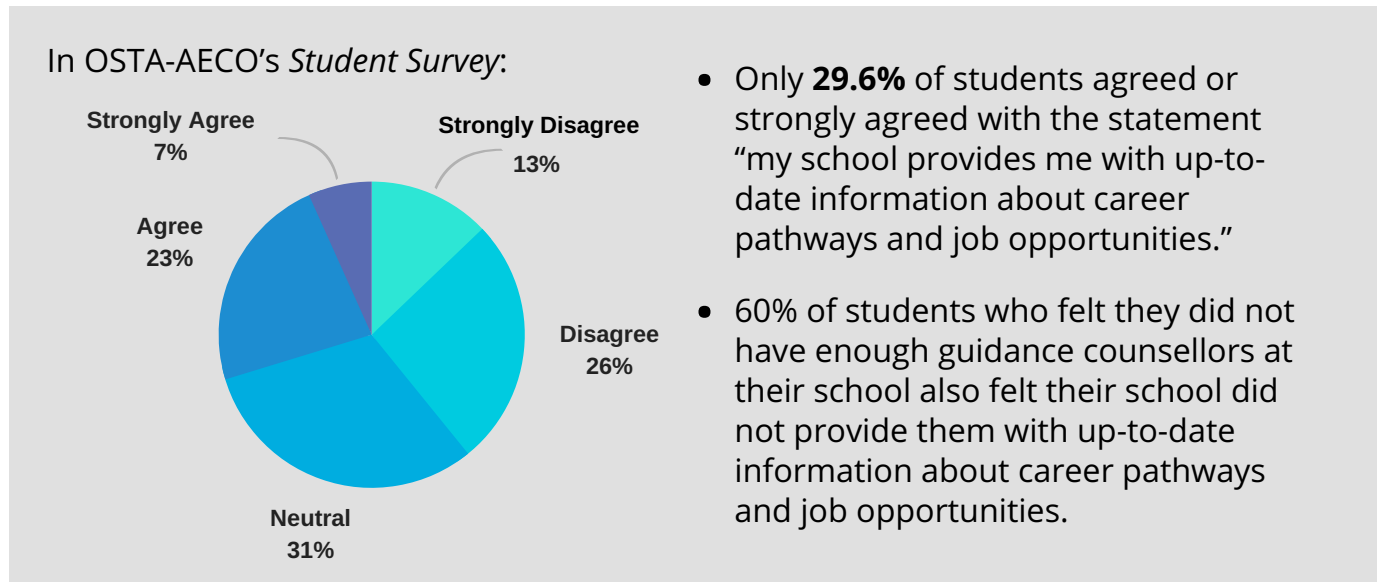
According to a 2016 report by People For Education: "School boards receive funding for guidance counsellors on a per-pupil basis. The province provides funding to cover the costs of one full-time secondary guidance counsellor for every 385 secondary students in a board. For elementary schools, that number plummets to one full-time counsellor for every 5000 elementary students."<sup>11</sup>

In OSTA-AECO's *Student Survey*, only **39.8%** of high school students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "there are enough guidance counsellors at my school."



Ontario's education system must invest in more guidance counselors to support the post-secondary planning of its students.

A further concern is that even when students have access to a guidance counselor, they are rarely provided with up-to-date information about the labour market. In Ontario's rapidly evolving economy, it is vital that guidance counselors receive information about occupations with the greatest job growth, trends in wages, and predictions of emerging fields. This information would allow students to strategically pursue a post-secondary pathway that provides them with financial and occupational stability.



Overall, guidance counselors play a vital role in shaping and strategising the future of Ontario's youth. It is critical for the government to improve accessibility to guidance services and ensure that counselors are well-equipped to provide support that aligns with the state of our province's labour market.

## Accommodation of learning needs

Throughout the past 20 years, Ontario has seen a shift in the delivery of secondary instruction. Instead of simply teaching to the curriculum, many educators tailor lessons to the needs of their students. The 2013 ministry publication *Learning for All* cites evidence that "students learn best when instruction, resources, and the learning environment are well suited to their particular strengths, interests, needs, and stage of readiness."<sup>12</sup>

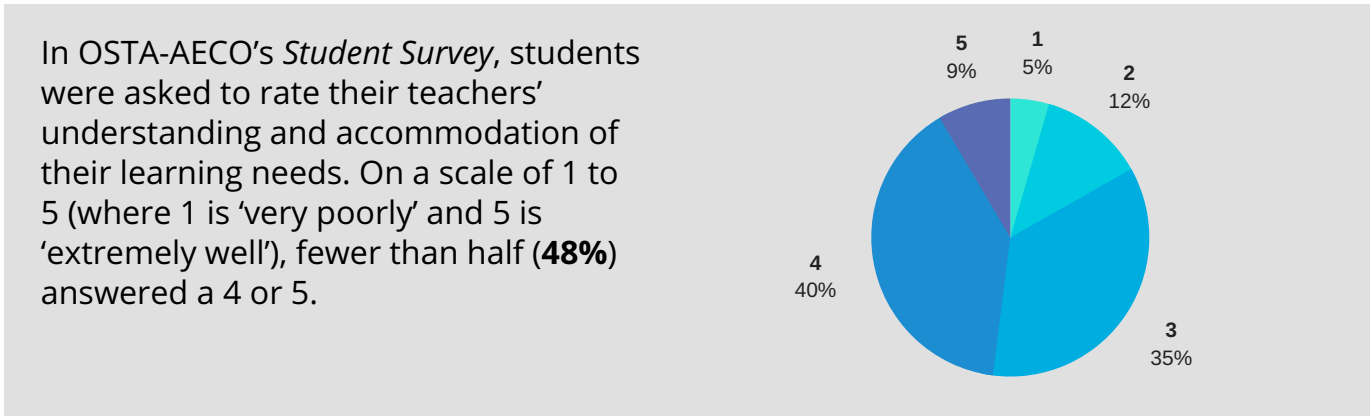
The document encourages educators to create class and student profiles to assist in differentiated instruction. Educators can compile information about students' strengths, areas of need, learning styles, and interests using a variety of resources, including the Ontario Student Record (including report cards and transcripts), transition plans, consultations with parents and previous teachers, student questionnaires, and classroom observation.<sup>13</sup>

The student profile is useful because it allows educators to assess a student's strengths, challenges, and standing "relative to the age-appropriate stage of development in particular areas of learning."<sup>14</sup> However, teachers currently create student profiles at their discretion.

As a result, this practice is inconsistently applied throughout the province. Furthermore, due to the informal nature of the process, useful information gathered when a student is in grade 8 can easily be lost in the transition to high school. The student profile was intended to act as a “living” file which tracks the evolution of a student’s learning preferences; in reality, we lack a mechanism to efficiently and consistently support students’ individual learning needs throughout their education.

Another tool used to accommodate individual learning needs is the Individual Education Plan, or IEP, defined by the Ministry of Education as “a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student, based on a thorough assessment of the strengths and needs that affect the student’s ability to learn and to demonstrate learning.”<sup>15</sup> IEPs must be created for students who have been identified as “exceptional pupils” by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). IEPs may also be created for students who regularly require accommodations for instructional or assessment purposes.

However, the experience for many students is that their special education needs are identified at a late stage in their education. We lack a routine process of testing for every student. Moreover, since IEPs are legally-binding documents reserved for high level interventions, they cannot be used to promote individualized learning for every student.



The inconsistency is particularly prominent in rural communities: a report by People for Education found that 72% of small town/rural schools report restrictions on the number of students that can be placed on waiting lists for assessments, compared to 50% of schools in urban/suburban areas.<sup>16</sup> Although Ontario has committed to transitioning away from a one-size-fits-all educational approach, the current system is mired in insufficient and inconsistent practices.





# Recommendations

- 1 The government should mandate that every student be tested in transition grades (1, 4, and 8) for exceptional learning.
- 2 The government should ensure that every student has a unique student profile, stored in a database open to educators, that is frequently updated to facilitate individualized and differentiated learning at the classroom level.
- 3 **The government should legally enshrine that every student identified as exceptional has a right to access special education accommodations, and all school boards should have a policy to ensure this right.** The government should also mandate that all teachers receive training on identifying, integrating, and helping exceptional learners succeed.
- 4 The government should change the co-op credit from an open level (O) course to a mixed (M) level course.
- 5 **The government should increase per-pupil funding of guidance counsellors.** The student to guidance counselor ratio for elementary schools should match the ratio for secondary schools. In both elementary and secondary schools, the gap between the number of students and the number of counselors in a school must be narrowed.
- 6 **The government should ensure students graduate high school with basic training in CPR, First Aid, self-defense, and conflict prevention.** These life skills can be integrated into courses (e.g., CPR and First Aid into physical education) as requirements for graduation.
- 7 **The government should invest in research about emerging markets (e.g., sector growth, the number of new jobs, wage trends).** The findings should be synthesized in a form accessible to students and parents, published, and distributed to guidance counsellors across the province.
- 8 The government should review existing curriculum to integrate technological literacy (e.g., word processing, spreadsheet, database, and programming skills) in all courses.

# Equitable Access to Opportunities



The quality of a student's education should not be determined by where he or she lives. All students, whether they live in a rural, northern, or urban community, should have equal access to high quality educational opportunities. Unfortunately, there currently exists a geographic divide in the opportunities and resources available across the province. Two of the most pressing challenges for rural and northern students are transportation funding and class shortages.

## Transportation funding

Many school boards with large rural populations do not receive sufficient funding for transportation and, as a result, students have extremely long bus rides, ranging anywhere from an hour to three hours each way. In OSTA-AECO's *Student Survey*, **63%** of students from rural areas said transportation affects or significantly affects their ability to participate in before or after school activities.

A main cause of the transportation challenge is declining enrolment, which has resulted in an increased number of school closures. A report by People for Education found that "34 boards had recommended a total of 121 schools close by June of 2020, affecting 33,000 students and with a 'disproportionate impact' on rural communities."<sup>17</sup> School closures increase the cost of transportation because students must be transported farther to attend the next closest school.<sup>18</sup>

In 2016, the Ministry conducted consultations to develop Ontario's Plan to Strengthen Rural and Northern Schools. In September 2017, as a result of these consultations, the Ministry created the Rural and Northern Education Fund, which allocates an additional \$20 million to school boards with a rural student population (an average increase of about \$55 per rural student) to be divided between transportation, operation, and programming at the board's discretion.<sup>19</sup>

While additional financial supports are always valuable for students, the Fund is a short-term solution which merely scratches the surface of the transportation problem. Despite the fact that the challenges experienced by school boards are more pressing than ever, the 2017-18 Ministry grant is a decrease from previous years: the Ministry offered \$23 million and \$29.3 million in 2000 and 2001 respectively.<sup>20</sup>

Most importantly, the grant fails to address the underlying challenge: the province's outdated funding formula. The 2015 Annual Report of Ontario's Auditor General found that "funding for school transportation is not based on need. Instead, it is based on each board's 1997 spending level, with annual adjustments for enrolment and inflation, and other minor adjustments such as fuel costs and safety initiatives. The Ministry of Education's funding formula does not take into account local factors that can significantly influence transportation costs, such as enrolment density, geography, the availability of public transit, the number of students with special needs, and hazards on the route."<sup>21</sup>

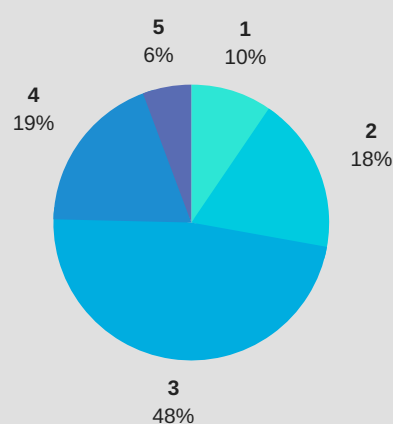
The problem is compounded by the fact that Ontario has no provincial eligibility standard for busing: school boards can determine which groups of students will be provided transportation and benefit from funding. The 2015 Auditor General's report found that the "percentage of students for whom [school boards] have arranged school transportation varies significantly ... from 10% to 87%."<sup>22</sup> Ontario's students deserve a transportation funding model which is equitable, modernized, and consistently applied across the province.

# Specialized course shortages

Declining enrolment and rural school closures results in a further challenge: a shortage of classes and specialized teachers. When enrolment declines, school boards receive less money from the Ministry of Education and fixed costs are spread over fewer students. Faced with lower funding levels, boards hire fewer teachers. Arts and special education staff are often most significantly affected by hiring cuts. For example, a 2013 report by People for Education found that “62% of elementary schools in the GTA have music teachers, compared to 26% of elementary schools in northern Ontario, and 32% in eastern Ontario.”<sup>23</sup> A 2016 report found that “only 66% of small town/rural elementary schools have a full-time special education teacher, compared to 91% of urban/suburban elementary schools.”<sup>24</sup> This inequity is extremely troubling because all students should have the option to take arts classes and the ability to access special education supports.

Online courses are typically offered when there is an insufficient number of students or educators at a school to offer in-person classes. Many students find that learning complex concepts via an online course is extremely difficult and may not always replicate the personalized support offered by traditional classes.

In OSTA-AECO's *Student Survey*, students were asked to rate the extent to which online classes provide comparable quality learning capabilities as in-person classes. On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is 'not at all' and 5 is 'exactly the same'), only **24.6%** of students answered a 4 or 5.





# Recommendations

- 1** The government should work with school boards to create provincial standards on student eligibility for school transportation services.
- 2** **The government should update the current funding formula to reflect school boards' local transportation needs.** It must take into consideration factors such as geography, availability of public transit, and the number of students who need transportation services.
- 3** **The government should provide enveloped grants (funds requiring a specific use) to rural and northern school boards for alternatives to online classes.** Examples include traditional in-person classes, in-person and online hybrid classes, night school, dual credit programs with local colleges, etc.
- 4** **The government should expand the Urban and Priority High Schools program (UPHS), which currently provides additional funding to high schools in urban low socioeconomic status communities.** The funding should be available to schools across the province (including rural and northern boards) with low graduation rates and a significant proportion of families living below the poverty line.



# Conclusion

The Student Platform is OSTA-AECO's strategy to create the best possible education system for the students of Ontario. The three pillars of the Platform explore the shortfalls in our current system and offer recommendations for improvement. The Platform is a meaningful step towards bridging the gap between adult decision-makers and the students they serve. Ontario's next provincial government must implement innovative changes in order to accomplish an equitable, modernized education system which supports the wellbeing of every student.

On behalf of the 2 million students we represent, OSTA-AECO urges all parties to adopt our policy recommendations in their respective election platforms. We look forward to working with Ontario's next government to create a brighter future for the students of our province.



**Student Wellbeing**



**21st Century Learning**



**Equitable Access to  
Opportunities**



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