

Supporting Children and Students Act, 2025

Resuming the debate adjourned on June 5, 2025, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 33, An Act to amend various Acts in relation to child, youth and family services, education, and colleges and universities

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Ottawa West–Nepean.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'll be sharing my time with the member for London West.

It's an honour to rise once again on behalf of the residents of Ottawa West–Nepean. I had the opportunity to begin speaking to this bill back in June before the House rose for the summer. When I was speaking about this government's track record for democracy, which this bill is a part of the context of, I couldn't have known that my speech was about to be interrupted by a 19-week summer break. The government cancelled the first seven weeks of the fall session, which kind of makes my point about a disrespect for democracy and the rights of people's voices to be heard by their government and to know that their government is making decisions that reflect their concerns and priorities.

But what that very long break from the Legislature allowed me to do, Speaker, was to spend a lot of time speaking with parents in Ottawa West–Nepean and across Ontario. I can say, fundamentally, that nobody in Ontario is asking for this bill. Nobody in Ontario is asking for the government to take away the rights of parents and communities to have a say in our local schools. What parents desperately want to see is funding to address the many challenges in our education system. They want to see investments that replace the more than \$6 billion that this government has taken out of our schools. More than 40% of boards are running deficits under this government, and that number is going up every single year because of repeated education funding cuts.

You can't take \$6.35 billion out of an education system, Speaker, without having significant impacts on our kids. We're seeing those impacts every single day with larger class sizes, a crisis in school violence. According to the Auditor General, reports of violent incidents have increased 114% since this government came to power, and that's just the incidents that are being reported. We know that many of them go unreported, either because the education workers and teachers feel like nothing happens with their report, so there's no reason to bother submitting those reports or because those violent incidents are happening so frequently that they could spend all of their time filling out paperwork and they need to just prioritize the most egregious incidents.

We know that our kids are facing a mental health crisis, and yet only one in 10 schools has regularly scheduled access to a mental health professional. Half of our schools have no access at all, which means that our young people, our youth, are being brave enough to say that they need support, and that support is not there for them. They step forward and say, "I need somebody to help me through this challenge," and we're leaving them hanging, sometimes until the next school year.

Our kids desperately need more caring adults around them to provide support every single day. We need an emergency plan to end school violence, like the one that the NDP developed in

consultation with education workers and teachers who came to us and told us what they need to see in order to tackle the problem of violence in our schools.

Instead of taking that step, what the government is doing, Speaker, is spending only 15.4 cents per student, per day on student well-being at a moment when we have a crisis in violence. They are only spending 22.9 cents per student, per day on mental health and not even all of that money is going into front-line supports in schools. That's not how you address a mental health crisis for our kids.

These are the challenges that parents and communities want to see this government addressing. They want to see those funds coming back into our schools. They want to see qualified teachers, education workers and mental health professionals. They want to see smaller class sizes.

Instead of that, what this government is doing is trying to distract from their record. They are trying to dodge accountability for what they are doing. Instead of taking these steps that parents desperately want to see, they are conducting a blatant power grab trying to centralize power over our local schools here in downtown Toronto. They are attacking the rights of parents like me, like you, to have a say in what happens in our children's classrooms. They are attacking the rights of communities to participate in decision-making about our local schools.

This is why local decision-making matters so much, Speaker. You cannot have a minister in downtown Toronto making decisions for students in communities in Kenora, in Cochrane, in Ottawa, in Minden, in Owen Sound and Amherstburg. These regions, these communities, are all so different. They are fundamentally different from downtown Toronto, and they are very different from one another.

We know what we need in our communities. We know what the local concerns and priorities are. We know what programs would benefit our kids. We know how these schools could meet the needs of our community. The minister in downtown Toronto has no idea. What is he doing trying to impose his power grab on our schools, to take away our rights, to say, "This is what our kids need; this is what our community needs"? That is fundamentally undemocratic.

Just to give you an idea of what kinds of decisions the minister is giving himself power over, Speaker, it's where schools are located; where they're being built in the first place; which school your kid goes to; what the school boundaries are; what the bus routes are; how your child is going to be able to get to school and how long they spend on the bus; what programs are offered; whether or not they'll have access to French immersion; whether or not they'll have access to arts courses and enrichment programs; what resources they'll have; whether or not they have access to an educational assistant; whether or not they will have access to a small class size for children with disabilities and special needs. They will decide who is actually even in the classroom, who is hired by the school board and where they are sent by the school board.

Those are all decisions that would be made from downtown Toronto instead of from people who are in the community, who know the community, who are consulting with people in the community and who are accountable to people in the community.

There's a reason why we have school boards, Speaker. They are actually the oldest form of elected representation that we have in Ontario. They date back to 1816—so over 200 years.

Because, for over 200 years, we have recognized the importance of local people, of parents, making the decisions for our kids.

But this Minister of Education thinks that we have democracy only because he lets you have it. This is a quote from the minister's speech in June: "To be clear, school boards exist because Parliament allows them to exist. That is all." The Minister of Education thinks that your right to have a say exists solely because he allows it to exist. He is fundamentally disrespecting parents and fundamentally disrespecting democracy by saying he's letting you have a say. He can take away that right to have a say any time he wants because it exists only because Parliament allows it to.

If this bill passes, the minister will be able to shut us out from having a say entirely. This bill gives the Minister of Education the power to hand-pick a supervisor to sweep away all democratically elected trustees. These supervisors would get 100% of the power over the decision-making affecting our kids with 0% of the accountability. There is no mandate in this bill that this hand-picked representative of the minister has to consult with parents or members of the community. There is no requirement in this bill that these supervisors have to make their decisions in any way that shows transparency to the public, that allows the public to know what criteria they are using to make their decisions. In fact, there's no requirement that they even allow the public to know what decisions that they are making.

And they are completely, 100% unaccountable to the public and to parents. We cannot vote them out of office. In fact, Speaker, we cannot even challenge their decisions in court. They are like kings—kings who have unlimited power over our children, and there is absolutely nothing that we can do about their decisions.

In attacking trustees and allowing the Minister of Education to sweep them away with the stroke of a pen, the government is also taking away a fundamental source of advocacy and support for parents. Because elected trustees don't just make decisions, they help parents and families to navigate the education system. They are a source of advocacy who help families receive the supports that they need for their children.

The Ontario Autism Coalition did a survey of parents of kids with disabilities, and they found that, just in the last school year alone, there were 100,000 kids with disabilities in the province of Ontario who received their supports in school solely because of the advocacy of a trustee. That is what we are talking about losing when we lose democratically elected trustees. We are talking about losing an advocate, a source of support that parents know. They know who their trustee is, they know where to turn to find them. They are publicly present in the community. They are attending schools. They are attending parent council meetings. And they are also a voice demanding better funding in the system, Speaker. I think that might be why the government is attacking them and trying to take away that voice of advocacy on behalf of students and families and on behalf of our public education system.

Et pour la communauté francophone de l'Ontario, c'est encore pire, parce que le droit de gérer leur propre système d'éducation, par et pour les francophones, c'est un droit constitutionnel, pas juste un cadeau du gouvernement. Même le fait que ce droit est reconnu par la Constitution, ce n'est pas quelque chose qui a été donné par le gouvernement. Ce n'est pas juste parce que le gouvernement est sympa qu'ils ont reconnu le droit constitutionnel des Franco-Ontariens; c'est un droit qui a été acquis après des décennies de bataille acharnée. Les

Franco-Ontariens ont dû descendre dans les rues pour avoir leur droit reconnu et le droit de gérer leur propre système d'éducation.

Ils demandent plusieurs choses, madame la Présidente. Avoir le droit de gérer votre propre système d'éducation, ça demande le droit de choisir vos propres représentants. Ça demande le droit d'être consulté sur les décisions concernant vos écoles et vos enfants. Et ça demande la responsabilité, la redevabilité des représentants—que les représentants soient responsables envers vous pour les décisions qu'ils prennent.

Ce que le gouvernement, ce que le ministre veut faire, c'est de remplacer les représentants qui sont choisis par la communauté, qui sont responsables pour la communauté, qui consultent la communauté, avec un superviseur qui est redevable seulement au ministre. C'est le ministre seul qui choisit le représentant. Le représentant n'a aucune obligation de consulter la communauté et il n'est pas responsable envers la communauté. La communauté ne peut pas le remplacer et ne peut pas contester les décisions du superviseur.

J'ai beaucoup parlé avec des parents francophones dans ma circonscription pendant les dernières semaines et j'ai entendu beaucoup de colère qu'encore une fois, la communauté franco-ontarienne doit se battre pour leurs droits. J'ai parlé à un parent à l'école Mamawi qui m'a dit qu'elle a dû quitter le système francophone après la deuxième année parce qu'il n'y avait pas assez de cours pour obtenir son diplôme si elle continuait dans le système francophone. Elle a pensé que ce serait différent pour ses enfants, que leurs droits seraient respectés. Et au lieu de ça, elle est dans une situation où son droit de participer dans la gestion des écoles francophones peut être retiré à n'importe quel moment. Elle m'a demandé : « Pourquoi est-ce que nous devons nous battre toujours pour nos droits? »

Ce n'est pas juste une question de participer dans les décisions qui concernent leurs enfants, madame la Présidente. C'est vraiment le fait que le système d'éducation francophone est une pierre angulaire de l'existence de la langue française et de la culture française en Ontario. L'éducation, c'est une garantie d'un avenir fort de la langue française en Ontario. C'est d'abord le seul service qui est garanti en français, mais c'est aussi le lieu de transfert de la langue, de la culture et du sens d'identité et de fierté. Nous savons que si un enfant va à une école anglophone, il est beaucoup plus apte à perdre sa langue, de ne plus parler le français. Donc c'est très important à la survie de la communauté franco-ontarienne en Ontario.

Surtout, c'est la communauté qui sait ce dont elle a besoin, pas ce gouvernement et surtout pas ce ministre qui menace de mettre les conseils scolaires sous supervision s'ils continuent à insister sur leurs droits.

Let's talk about what this bill includes and what it will mean for kids and communities. As I said, Speaker, this bill allows the Minister of Education to sweep away democratically elected trustees to take over a school board at any moment for any reason that the minister wants. The bill says that the minister can do this for a matter of public interest—and how does it define “public interest”? It says public interest is anything that the minister decides it can be.

The minister can literally feel that public interest is, did a trustee say something mean to him? And that counts. Did a trustee insist that the rights of children were not being respected? The minister can say that's a matter of public interest, and the rights of parents and communities to have a say in their local schools is gone, Speaker. This power is completely unlimited, it's completely unchecked and it's completely unacceptable.

When the minister makes that decision that he's going to put a board under supervision, the minister gets to pick the supervisor. Parents and communities no longer get to participate in the choice of who is going to make the decisions for their kids. And there's unlimited power for this hand-picked puppet to make all of the decisions for our kids about what our kids need, what our kids get, what will be available and accessible in our community.

And we can see already what our future holds from what's happening in the four boards that the minister put under supervision in June and from the board that the minister put under supervision earlier this year. That's boards in Toronto, in Ottawa, Dufferin-Peel and Thames Valley. The supervisors that the minister has selected are not people who have extensive experience in education. They are not people whose careers have demonstrated an interest in children and their well-being. What the qualifications of these supervisors seem to be, Speaker, is their ties and connections to the government.

We have a former Conservative MPP who is also a campaign manager; a former federal Conservative candidate—a serious donor; thousands of dollars. We have a former federal Conservative candidate who has also made extensive donations to the government. We have a Conservative donor who's given thousands of dollars but also happens to be a buddy of the Minister of Education, Speaker. And, finally, we have a former adviser to Stephen Harper who advised on how the former Prime Minister could privatize public assets and take things that were owned by the people of Canada and hand them over to private interests to make profit off of. He was also a member of Tony Clement's leadership campaign.

You can see the through thread here, Speaker, that it seems to be donations to the Conservatives. It seems to be running for the Conservatives, representing the Conservatives and an interest in privatizing public assets. These are people who will always pick up the phone if it is a Conservative calling to offer them a lucrative public-paid position. But apparently, they can't pick up the phone when it's a parent calling.

These supervisors—again, hand-picked by the minister—are making decisions in the dark. There is no public process. They are not sharing with people what decisions they are considering. They are not holding public consultations to allow parents to have any input into these decisions. Some of the supervisors are not even posting decisions that they are making publicly, so parents don't even know what they're deciding.

In the Toronto District School Board, the supervisor is only posting the decisions that he's making because the democratically elected trustees got together and sent a letter to the ombudsperson to say that there is a fundamental principle of transparency, and parents should at least know what decisions are being made about their children's education. The supervisor is still taking his own sweet time to post those decisions.

This refusal to demonstrate any transparency or any accountability extends to refusing to attend the committee meetings that are still taking place in public. There are three committees that are mandated to continue meeting—the audit committee, the parental involvement committee and the special education advisory committee—but the supervisors aren't bothering to show up at the special education advisory committee meetings, even though these committee meetings discuss the conditions that are affecting our most vulnerable children in the system. They just can't be bothered to attend those meetings and to hear what parents have to say.

In fact, it's not just a matter of not being bothered to participate in meetings where parents are present, but they're trying to make it harder for parents to participate in those meetings. The supervisors have banned livestreams, which have been a way that, for years, parents have been able to use to participate in public meetings of the school board, particularly for the special education advisory committee, Speaker.

This is incredibly important because parents are doing a million different things: We don't always have time after a school day—in between trying to get supper and homework done, take kids to a sport practice—to actually make it out in-person to a meeting. That doesn't mean we don't want to participate in these meetings. But for parents of kids with disabilities, it's even more difficult, because it's more difficult for these parents to find somebody who can come in and provide the care that their child needs while they go to attend a meeting. These livestreams are fundamentally about equity—equity of access to the decision-making that is affecting their children, and this government has banned that. These supervisors who are selected by the Minister of Education do not want that to happen. The supervisors are making misleading statements about what things are actually happening, what decisions that they're actually making. They are refusing to answer questions.

The supervisor in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board told parents that, after extensive consultations, he had decided he was going to eliminate the changes that were resulting from the program review. Immediately, parents across Ottawa said, "What consultations? I wasn't consulted. I don't know anything about consultations." There was no public invitation to participate in a consultation. There was no invitation to submit written comments to this consultation. For 10 days, Speaker, parents were asking, "What consultations was this based on?" For 10 days, parents were asking, "What changes is the supervisor actually going to make?" Because the supervisor didn't just say he was cancelling program changes, he said he was going to make some of his own. And parents I was talking to said, "I don't even know what school I should be sending my child to. I selected the school that they're at because of the program changes that were coming; now, I don't know if they're at the right school anymore. I don't know if my kid is going to need to change schools again next year. I don't know if I should be changing schools for my child right now."

The supervisor didn't think that parents deserved any clarity on that, Speaker. In fact, he didn't just refuse to answer questions from parents, he refused to answer questions from the media and he said publicly that he did not have to answer questions. He told parents at the parental involvement committee, which he had actually deemed to attend, that they could submit questions in writing, the small problem being that the supervisor was not responding to peoples' emails. He told the media that he had no mandate to answer their questions and therefore did not need to respond to them.

Finally, after 10 days of parents demanding better, the supervisor managed to send us an email with some further information about the program changes that he was considering and, in that email, he admitted that he had not conducted any consultations. He was basing his decision on the previous consultations, in which he did not participate. He did not tell us how he reviewed any of those consultations, whether he was reading all of the written submissions that were sent in, whether he was reading summaries of the public meetings that took place, which, of course, would have included meetings that were held by trustees in their communities that were not part of the large public meetings that were held. The supervisor didn't tell us any of this, but what was clear was that he had not consulted, despite what he had said in his previous email.

We've had supervisors who are going to great lengths to hide their email addresses. Parents have had to engage in detective work to try to find out the email addresses of supervisors so that they could reach out to them with their questions and concerns. When people were able to find one of the supervisor's email addresses, he told people, "Don't use it. I don't want you to email me at this address." They have refused to answer phone calls from questions.

The supervisor in Ottawa also made another misleading statement, claiming that he had met with every parent who had asked for a meeting. Immediately, Speaker, parents said, "I asked for a meeting three or four times and I didn't even get a response." He had clearly not met with every parent who had requested a meeting.

They are hand-picking who they are actually meeting with, in fact. The Ottawa-Carleton supervisor this week is having a meeting with parent council representatives, but he sent an email to parent councils telling them that they can select one person to meet with him, who has to be a member of the parent council, and they have to RSVP with the email address that he sent the invitation to. So this is a very representative meeting, a very representative consultation, since he's basically hand-picking who he will meet with and closing the door to everybody else.

Besides this lack of transparency, what we're seeing is supervisors making decisions that are already harming our most vulnerable children. The very first thing that the Toronto District School Board supervisor did was to increase class sizes for kids with special needs, a measure that trustees had voted against after consulting with parents and experts because they knew the harm that this would cause to these kids. The supervisor didn't care. The very first thing he did was take away supports for kids with disabilities and special needs, impacting their ability to actually learn while they're at school and to keep them safe while they're at school.

In the Thames Valley District School Board there are kids with disabilities who are sitting home right now—they are not attending school—because the supervisor can't be bothered to consult, can't be bothered to conduct the needs assessments to even figure out what measures they need in order to be able to be at school, let alone provide those measures so that these kids can be at school safely.

We can also see from other provinces what happens when you take away democratically elected trustees. Parents in Nova Scotia and Quebec, where this has happened, are experiencing incredible frustration. They cannot find somebody who will even answer basic questions.

I held a town hall this past week and Jesse LeGallais, who is a parent in Halifax, attended, and he spoke about the fact that a new school was supposed to be built for his school district where his son attends. That school building was supposed to be opened for September this year. It is not open, but nobody would even provide a straight answer to these families. And they had nobody to turn to because there's nobody who is responsible to parents for these decisions. There's nobody who's consulting with parents on these decisions. It's a black hole and parents get informed—the school building is open; the school building is not open—that's the full extent of the public engagement.

The majority of parents there want to see school boards reinstated because their level of frustration is so high. They have lost a voice of advocacy and support.

We are also seeing that there's an interest already in closing schools and selling off school properties. The supervisor in Ottawa has already said he's selling off a school property. I think when you see people appointed who have no experience in education but have experience in privatizing public assets, that certainly suggests that's what's coming. So are we going to see the land from under our kids' schools just sold out—from right under our kids' schools?

Another part of this bill allows police forces—not parents or experts or communities or democratically elected representatives but police forces—to make the decision about whether or not there will be school resource officer programs. I just want to be clear, Speaker: We do have a violence problem in our schools, but policing kids is not the answer. Supporting and investing in them is. We have a violence problem because of the cuts that have come, because our kids aren't receiving the supports that they need academically, emotionally, psychologically. When you don't have mental health supports, when you don't have special education supports, when you have large class sizes, kids get frustrated, and a frustrated child may react violently. The answer to that is not to punish them for failing when we set them up to fail. The answer to that is to provide the supports that they need. It's not to put them in handcuffs after a violent incident; it's to prevent the violence from happening in the first place. It's to help dysregulated kids regulate their system. Police officers don't have that experience in helping a dysregulated child. They're not mental health experts. They're not academic experts. They're not education workers. They can't replace any of that.

This part of the bill fundamentally disrespects communities, because there are communities across Ontario who have been very clear that they do not feel safe with police officers in schools; that their children do not feel safe. This government is completely overriding those communities, taking away their right to have a say in the decisions that affect their children and that affect their schools.

Even the Ontario Human Rights Commission is saying this is incredibly problematic because parents in communities and experts should be involved in these decisions. What the expertise and what the evidence shows is that police in schools are not the best solution to challenges of violence. They cause disproportionate harm to students with disabilities and students who are Indigenous, Black, racialized, LGBTQ. Just over three weeks ago, we celebrated the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation; it is not a step towards reconciliation to put police officers in schools when Indigenous kids are saying they do not feel safe with them there. We need to respect the voice of communities.

Another thing that's kind of shocking about this is that this would make the police the only service or agency that schools are mandated to work with. Public health agencies in Ontario are mandated to work with schools, but schools are not in return required to work with them. So we're not prioritizing the health of children to the point where we say, "Yes, the school board has to work with them," but somehow we're prioritizing police officers in that way. This is just not how we address the well-being of our children, Speaker.

The last measure of this bill on K-to-12 is about school names. This allows the Minister of Education to sign off or not sign off on any school name—new schools; renaming. This is completely and utterly ridiculous, Speaker, when we have such massive challenges in our province and in our education system, that one of the burning priorities for this minister is that he gets to participate in the naming of every school. I guess it's a good thing that there are

already so many St. Pauls. Maybe we'll see more. But maybe we'll also see more St. Dougs. I'm not Catholic, so I actually don't know if there's a St. Doug.

But this is an utterly ridiculous thing for the Minister of Education, in downtown Toronto, to be spending his time on when we have a mental health crisis and a violence crisis. Let's let communities decide who they want to honour and what is the appropriate name that reflects the priorities, the values, the culture of their community. This is utterly ludicrous when we're talking about \$6 billion taken out of our education system, Speaker. Talk about red tape.

There are many other sections of this bill that also cause incredible harm to our children and youth. I'm not going to go into all of them now, but I'm going to turn it over to my colleague from London West to talk about the incredibly harmful components of this bill addressing post-secondary education.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): I recognize the member for London West.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to start by recognizing the 10,000 support staff at Ontario's public colleges, who went on strike this fall to stand up for publicly funded, post-secondary education in Ontario. Let's keep in mind that these are the college workers who keep our institutions functioning. They work in IT. They work in libraries. They work in academic advising, the registrar's office, career counselling, accessibility services. When these workers lose their jobs, students feel the impact by the lack of access to those critical services.

But in our colleges, Speaker, we are seeing job loss at an alarming rate. We know that there are already 10,000 college workers who have been laid off or are about to lose their jobs. We know that more than 650 programs have been cut. We have seen campuses closing in Perth, in Barrie, in Orillia, and there is definitely more to come.

That has an impact, Speaker. It has an impact, as I said, on students. It has an impact on employers who look to those colleges to fuel the local economy and provide the graduates that in-demand sectors need. It has an impact on communities. These post-secondary institutions are anchor institutions across the province in terms of access to employment and also participation in community initiatives. And, of course, it has an impact on the economy.

But the crisis in post-secondary is not just being felt at the college level; it's at the university level as well. This government well knows that its own hand-picked panel of experts pointed out that at least \$2.5 billion was needed to stabilize the sector—and that was before the federal government announced the changes to international student admissions, which have had a very serious financial impact on the sector.

In 2023, in response to the blue-ribbon panel's report, this government provided short-term funding that was less than half of what was recommended by the blue-ribbon panel. We always have to keep in mind that Ontario provides the lowest per-student funding in Canada: just 44% of the Canadian average for colleges and just 57% of the Canadian average for per-student funding for universities.

The result is that right now in Ontario universities we have 28,000 unfunded domestic students. These are students who are attending and there are no dollars attached from the province to provide their education. This is not sustainable, Speaker. You can't expect colleges and universities to operate at a loss to accommodate the domestic students who want to attend

post-secondary—and we want them to attend post-secondary as well. We want them to graduate and come into our workforce.

The Council of Ontario Universities has sounded the alarm, pointing out that there are 80,000 Ontario students who won't be able to get a seat at university over the next five years because those 80,000 spaces that are needed received no funding whatsoever from this government, and certainly we know that any concerns about students not being able to access post-secondary education have directly to do with the lack of funding. It has nothing to do with admissions policies, which is one of the key measures in this bill, and I will get to that shortly.

So does schedule 3 of Bill 33 do anything to address the very serious issues that we are seeing in the post-secondary sector? The answer is absolutely not. What it does instead is offer a distraction from the funding crisis. It's like this government wants to pretend the funding crisis doesn't exist and, as I said, the issue is around admissions policies for colleges and universities, or the issue is around the ancillary fees that are charged for students when they go to attend post-secondary education.

What this bill does instead of addressing the real issues: It centralizes power over our post-secondary sector in the hands of the province. It grants the government the ability to dictate admission policies and the management of student fees. We have heard from experts—Glen Jones; anybody who's involved in the post-secondary sector knows him as a very highly respected expert. He has described it as “one of the most egregious interventions in university autonomy we have ever seen in Canada.”

It's not too often that legislation comes forward—actually, it is, unfortunately, too often under this government that legislation comes forward where stakeholders unite in opposition to what government has proposed, and I just want to share some of the commentary that we have heard from stakeholders that are involved in the delivery of post-secondary education in Ontario.

The Council of Ontario Universities says that Bill 33 “risks undermining institutional autonomy, eroding student services and duplicating existing accountability structures. Rather than imposing new administrative burdens and red tape, the government should work in partnership with the sector to address the real barriers facing students—especially the urgent need for sustainable funding, expanded enrolment capacity and continued support for a secure and world-leading research ecosystem.”

OCUFA, the union that represents university faculty in Ontario, raised concerns that “rather than supporting Ontario's universities amidst mounting financial uncertainty,” Bill 33 amounts “to yet more costly red tape and bureaucracy, creating potential distractions from the core mission of our publicly funded universities.” They repeat the call that COU had put out for an increase in the number of funded domestic student spots; for increased long-term, stable funding for universities; and for increased access to funding supports for students, including converting more student loans to grants.

And it's not just university faculty and administrators who are concerned about Bill 33. Student organizations in the province are very concerned about the impact of the measures in Bill 33 and what it will mean for post-secondary education.

I just want to go in some depth on two of the three main components of schedule 3 of Bill 33. The first is around merit-based admissions. The government has announced with this legislation that admission to college or university in Ontario must be based on merit.

Now, I don't know if the government understands this, but decisions about admission to post-secondary education in this province are already based on merit. No student is admitted to a college or university in Ontario without meeting the academic qualifications for the program to which they are applying. There are robust admission policies already in place.

At the university level as well, Speaker, governing legislation for each individual university in Ontario gives universities the autonomy to determine their own admissions criteria. This is consistent internationally. This is a best practice in higher education governance, to allow institutions to determine their own mission, to determine their own mandate and to determine what admission criteria they will set to not only ensure that students are academically qualified for the programs to which they are applying, but also that the mission of the institution is advanced. There is detailed information already available about admission criteria. It is published on institutional websites, academic calendars, print materials and other places.

So one has to wonder why the government introduced this new provision about merit-based admissions when that is already how institutions govern themselves in this province. There are some legitimate concerns that have been raised—concerns that I certainly share—that this is a way for the government to narrow access for historically marginalized groups who want to be able to pursue post-secondary education. It is very much an echo of what we are seeing down south in the United States with the attack on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Speaker, we know that it is important to ensure that there are pathways for students who are under-represented in our academic institutions. So Indigenous students, students with disabilities, mature students, youth in care—our institutions have an obligation to make sure that pathways are available for those students when they are academically qualified to get into the programs that they are applying to. But this bill would regulate those pathways potentially out of existence.

I want to spend some time on the ancillary fees part of Bill 33, of schedule 3 in this legislation. The legislation allows the government to determine what ancillary fees can be charged to students when they are attending post-secondary and what ancillary fees can be made optional so that students can, when they get enrolled in a post-secondary institution, say, “No, I don't want to pay that fee.”

Unfortunately, Speaker, what we are hearing overwhelmingly from both students and institutions is that this measure poses a significant risk to services offered on campus, organized by student unions and student associations, that provide a direct benefit to students. I held a town hall. We had representatives from over 30 colleges and universities in Ontario attend the town hall. They detailed for me what programs and services are in jeopardy if this goes through and if the government decides that no ancillary fees can be charged or they're going to be significantly limited. The services include mental health and counselling—there's peer counselling for mental health—transit passes; food banks; health and dental benefits; grants and bursary programs; laptop rental programs; clubs and activities funding; co-op housing partnerships; campus radio and newspapers; sustainability initiatives; legal aid services; health centres; tax aid clinics; subsidized, student-run restaurants on campus; LGBTQ+ services. They have also pointed out

that the loss of these services also would mean a reduction in opportunities for leadership and employment for students.

If these services are no longer offered on campuses because this government has decided to completely destabilize the funding that is available to student unions, it means that there will be increased pressure on already overextended community-based services. We have post-secondary students as one of the fastest-growing groups of food bank users in Ontario. In Toronto, one out of every three food bank users is a student. There are campus-run food banks on every institution in Ontario, and without access to food on campus, these students are, of course, going to turn to the community to address growing food insecurity.

There's also concerns about the increased pressure this is going to put on community mental health supports, housing advocacy, our health care system. These are all areas in this province that are already struggling to keep up with demand. With such a serious funding crisis facing our institutions, with layoffs of staff in many areas of post-secondary education, it will increase the pressures on our post-secondary institutions to fill some of the gaps and ensure that students get the supports that they need on campus.

I want to point out to the minister, who has said that we need these changes to the governing of ancillary fees because we need more transparency—that's what the minister has said. I want to make sure that the minister is aware that there is already, just like with admissions policies, complete transparency at the post-secondary level as to what ancillary fees are charged and where the ancillary fee dollars that are collected go. Most, if not all, student associations already show students exactly where their money is going. There are publicly available fee breakdowns that describe exactly how many dollars of ancillary fees are going to which services. Most fees offered by student associations are passed via democratic vote of all students or passed by a council, a representative body of elected students and/or the board of directors at a given student union. So students already have a say in what ancillary fees are collected and what those fees are used for.

I know that this government had a go at this back in 2019 with the Student Choice Initiative, when they tried to do the same thing through ministerial directive and allow the government to determine which fees students could opt out of. The Supreme Court struck down the government's action, and the Supreme Court, in the ruling, had some advice that I really encourage this government to listen to.

The Supreme Court ruling noted that, "Mandatory fees for student associations—collected by universities and remitted to the student associations—have been in place in universities since the 1960s." They go on to say the existing "funding structure has permitted student associations to play important roles in university governance....

"Indeed, given the role played by student associations in university governance, the framework is a profound interference in university autonomy—not a mere fettering of the universities' discretion, as the minister submits."

The students who attended my town hall also shared that some of them had some institutional knowledge of the fallout of the Student Choice Initiative back in 2019. They told me that the result was that many students opted out of services without really any understanding of what those services were for. This resulted in many students being excluded from campus services and programming after their parents had opted out of fees on their behalf. And student

associations were unable to do any long-term planning because they had no idea how much money they would be able to collect in a given year, and that had many impacts on the delivery of programs that they were involved in.

Speaker, one does wonder why the government is attacking student organizations in the province of Ontario. Some people over there may have received a fundraising letter from the Premier back in 2019 when the Student Choice Initiative had been introduced. The Premier defended the attack on student organizations, defended the attempted defunding of student organizations in the province by saying, “I think we all know what kind of crazy Marxist nonsense student unions get up to. So, we fixed that.” That’s what the Premier said at the time.

Speaker, I do not think that student unions are up to “crazy Marxist nonsense.” I know that student unions in Ontario are directly involved in the provision of vital student services for college and university students so that they can be successful in their academic program and they can graduate and fuel our economy.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Questions?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I want to thank my colleagues for that hour leadoff that certainly underlines very convincingly some of the pitfalls in that legislation.

To me, the most concerning aspect is really the centralization of powers here at Queen’s Park, which seems to be a trend. That will have some negative effect on our education system.

So to my colleague from Ottawa West–Nepean: Can you point out those negative impacts that risk very much falling from that centralization of power here at Queen’s Park?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you to my colleague from Ottawa–Vanier for the excellent question.

We are already seeing what kinds of negative consequences the centralization of power in Toronto will have for our children in boards such as the Ottawa–Carleton District School Board, where the minister has already swept away democratically elected trustees. We are seeing cuts to programs and supports that allow our most vulnerable children, kids with disabilities, to actually be at school and to receive academic support so that they can learn. We are seeing program changes announced with zero consultation, without any clarity or even answers for parents about what those changes will mean for our kids. We’re seeing decisions made in the dark, without those decisions ever being shared or being shared with any kind of clarity or straightforwardness to parents. We’re seeing parents barred from participating in public meetings.

This is not how you make decisions in the best interests of our children and in the best interests of our communities.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): I recognize the member from Markham–Unionville.

Mr. Billy Pang: Parents deserve confidence that school boards are making decisions in the best interests of their children’s education. This is why we are strengthening accountability and transparency across Ontario’s education system, to ensure that every dollar invested delivers real results for students. These new measures build on our previous action to improve governance, enforce compliance and focus school boards on what matters most: supporting

students, parents and teachers. We are making it clear that school boards must put students first, not politics, not bureaucracy, and that we will act decisively when we fall short of that responsibility.

When there are school board trustees who burned millions on lawsuits and internal investigations over trustees' misconduct, why does the opposition believe school board trustees should be above basic accountability?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: What we're seeing already from this government's hand-picked supervisors—who, again, have zero qualifications in education and have demonstrated zero interest in the well-being of our children—is that they are not putting our children first, Speaker. In fact, they are making decisions in the dark that are harming our children every single day.

But you know, it's funny that the member opposite would speak about accountability, because what this government has just done is shovel hundreds of millions of dollars out the door to their PC donors, to organizations that are connected to this government, to people that the Minister of Labour is partying with at the George V in Paris. This government seems to be all about: transparency for me, accountability for me, but not for thee.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): I recognize the member from University–Rosedale.

Ms. Jessica Bell: It's also interesting that the member for Markham–Unionville criticizes school board trustees when your very own Premier is under RCMP criminal investigation.

My question is to the member for London West and it's about tuition costs. I recently had a town hall that I attended in my riding. It was hosted by the Graduate Students' Union at the University of Toronto. We heard students talk about the impact of this bill.

They emphasized to me that students already decide the student fees through a democratic process, through referendum. They emphasized to me the programs that student fees support: food banks, the legal clinic, the radio, the newspaper, mental health programs. And they also emphasized to me that the cost of student fees is minuscule—minuscule—compared to the cost of going to school at the University of Toronto. It's absolutely miniscule.

So my question is to the member for London West. Can you outline to me how high tuition fees are these days and why are they so high?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much to my colleague from University–Rosedale for the question. Ontario for decades had the reputation of having the highest tuition in Canada, as well as the lowest per-student funding. This government's decision to cut and then freeze tuition fees back in 2019 had a little bit of an impact on that. We are still at the bottom, but we are not the worst in Canada in terms of tuition, but there's no question that tuition is a barrier for many students, particularly under-represented students.

That's why the Ontario NDP has been pushing so hard for the conversion of student loans to grants, so that any student in financial need is able to attend without worrying about carrying a huge debt burden after they graduate from post-secondary.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: This is for the member from Ottawa West–Nepean. I just wanted to ask you about a bit more about this bill and how it could be disguising underfunding and what we're seeing in the school system right now with the real issues plaguing education or the underfunding of schools and post-secondary institutions, and not only that, ignoring staffing crisis. We're being told, "Look over here," but all this continues to grow. Can you talk more about that?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you to the member for Toronto–St. Paul's for that question. This bill is fundamentally about the government trying to distract from their record on funding and all of the challenges that that has created for our children every single day in school.

The government has taken more than \$6 billion out of the education system since they came to power. Let's be honest, it's not like the system was perfectly funded when they came to power, which means that our children are dealing with severely negative consequences every single day because of the government's cuts—large class sizes, a shortage of qualified teachers and education workers because 45,000 teachers have left the education system because of the working conditions this government has created, far too many kids without access to special education supports or mental health needs, crumbling school buildings. They can't even have the school buses running on time because they've cut funding for that as well.

This is fundamentally not about supporting our kids. It is about a power grab by this government and a refusal to take accountability for their own decisions and actions.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question is to the member from London West. As this government continues to make strategic investments into our world-class institutions, we are ensuring that the most qualified students will be fuelling the workforce of tomorrow. Through Bill 33, we will be consulting with the sector to understand all of the current admission policies and how we can provide better transparency for prospective students looking to study in Ontario. The NDP have made their stance on this item clear, calling it "US-style rhetoric," when in reality that could not be further from the truth.

My question to the member is, will the member opposite support Ontario's most-qualified students by voting in favour of a more transparent admission process to colleges and universities?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'm not sure if the member was listening to my remarks, but I did point out that there is already almost complete transparency over admission criteria at our public colleges and universities.

In terms of universities, here's some of the information that is published on university websites or provided in written materials: Students know what historical admission ranges are. They know the required high school courses or equivalents. They know what additional application materials are required: for example, if they need to provide a portfolio for the program that they're applying to. They know if there are supporting documentation requirements. Do they have to show, for example, an English proficiency test if they're an international applicant? And they also have a range of other pieces of information to assist with their application. There's no problem with transparency in admission practices.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Further debate?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I will start my remarks by indicating that I will be sharing my time with the member for Ottawa South.

I'm standing here on behalf of the people of Ottawa–Vanier to talk about this education bill, Bill 33. I have to admit that when the minister introduced the bill back in the spring, I was actually hopeful. I mean, I should have known better by now, but I actually did hope that, given the state of our education system with all the dire needs that exist within our system and in all our schools, the minister was going to come up with some good measures to help in those areas.

I was hoping that the bill would address the important and concerning shortcomings of our education system, such as the shortage of teachers, for example. It exists in our anglophone schools, but in the francophone schools, it's a crisis and it does affect the quality of education.

I was hoping that there would be some measures for mental health support, because all of the children in our schools are being challenged. They're going through a lot of hardship and, post-COVID, that has become even worse. I do have four children in our school system, and I can tell you that it doesn't matter what kind of household that they live in or the income that their parents might have—mental health support is so important. Right now, that capacity doesn't exist in our schools. There is simply no service available. The only thing that you can do if you want help for your child, you actually need to go to the private sector and hope that you will find somebody good enough to help your child.

And what about our crumbling infrastructure? There are many schools in Ottawa–Vanier that are very old, that don't have air conditioning, that are overcrowded with portables all over the schoolyard. And yet, we don't see any significant investment in our school infrastructure. And I was certainly hoping that the minister would recognize that and do something meaningful in that regard.

Again, there is not enough support for special needs in our schools. Teachers are left struggling with trying to teach and helping every student in the classroom, without the adequate support.

So no, this bill doesn't do any of that. And because of that, I'm very disappointed. Because what this bill does is—while the government frames it as a measure to support children and students through accountability and oversight, we must not allow that language to mask a sweeping power grab. It is a trend. We've got many examples of that. The question before us, therefore, is not merely about oversight, but about who holds power, who gets to decide and whose voices will be heard.

I come to this debate from a Franco-Ontarian perspective in a riding where French-language education and community institutions are vital and where local autonomy and cultural rights matter deeply. The concern over centralization is really great, but what also concerns me a lot is the lack of consultation that conducted to the drafting of this bill because I haven't heard people in school boards, I haven't heard teachers, I haven't heard school staff saying that they wanted that centralization.

Now, I do understand that there's been some concerns with some school boards in the province, but why punish everyone? Why not recognize those school boards who have excellent governance practices, that don't get into trouble, that look at their finances in a professional way, in an accountable way?

But no, we see something that is disturbing in some areas, and then we unfold a blanket that will apply to everyone with the negative impact that this may comport without regard to the school boards that are doing well.

I'm just going to summarize this very quickly, what Bill 33 introduces in terms of significant changes, and those are in three main spheres.

Obviously there's education, with the new ministerial powers over school boards through financial reviews and through interventions by the government.

We haven't talked about it that much, but there's also child welfare that's being affected. The bill is enabling direct oversight and funding control and intervention in children's aid societies.

Finally, post-secondary: The bill is prescribing that admissions be merit-based, granting cabinet authority to override institutional policies and ancillary fees, and deem them non-essential, with the risk to marginalized and minority-language students.

So at face value these provisions may appear to improve transparency and accountability. But the centralization they push is alarming and carries significant risk. Regarding our school boards and local democracy, what we see is the erosion of local authority.

Trustees and locally elected school boards are meant to represent the voices of parents, educators and communities. Bill 33 undermines that by allowing ministerial intervention, bypassing consultation and imposing directives. In many cases, boards already operate under funding constraints. We all know that. That's why they can't do as much in the classroom as they would like to do. But adding top-down mandates without tailored flexibilities may hinder—not help—performance. Unfortunately, that's what this bill is proposing to do.

Now, I've mentioned a bit the francophone school boards, and they are at risk in this bill. French-language school boards serve smaller, geographically dispersed populations, often with fewer resources. The imposed directives from Queen's Park may not reflect their realities. Decisions such as program offerings, staffing, special services or language supports could be overridden, weakening the unique identity and capacity of Franco-Ontarian education.

The risk is the marginalization of French-language governance under the guise of uniform standards. So that's the point I was referring to: When we want to uniformize practice, we may not take into account some specificities that need to be taken into account.

On the child welfare powers, is it really oversight or is it overreach? The bill allows greater ministerial control over children's aid societies, including supervisory appointments and withholding funds. But many CASs are already under strain, particularly in Indigenous, racialized and francophone communities. Systemic issues such as poverty, mental health and housing cannot be solved by top-down interference.

Madam Speaker, effective change requires investment in prevention, community-based supports and collaboration, not heavier oversight without resources.

Now I want to turn to the post-secondary education and how the interference and merit-based admissions may have a negative impact on our colleges and universities. The notion of merit-based admissions sounds fair, but merit is not value-neutral. It often privileges those with more preparation, more—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member, but it is now time for members' statements.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

Skilled trades

Mr. Billy Pang: My question is for the Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. Across Ontario, we are hearing growing concerns about economic uncertainty. Tariffs, trade threats and global instability and inflation are putting pressure on our workers and our industries.

While Donald Trump threatens Ontario jobs, the Liberals and NDP continue to play politics by voting against the very programs that protect those jobs. Instead of supporting Ontario workers, they criticize the very investments that help them succeed.

Our government knows the best way to protect Ontario's economy is to invest in people. Can the minister explain what he is doing to help people get a better job with a bigger paycheque?

Hon. David Piccini: Speaker, it's part of a plan. It's part of a plan that says to youth, "You've got a multitude of rewarding career opportunities." That's why we introduced the largest-ever skilled trades career fair in this province's history, helping tens of thousands of youths get real, hands-on experience in rewarding careers in the trades, Speaker.

1120

We've seen many enroll for apprenticeships. That's why we have a record number of youth today enrolling in apprenticeships. We've added new tech classes for young people in high school to get hands-on experience. We've made sure that the hours and work they're doing in high school can count towards a level 1 certificate of qualification. We're bringing exams closer to home, increasing the number of places we're administering exams for a certificate of qualification, all with a plan to get a next generation of men and women who will build a stronger Ontario. We're working hard every day to make sure we have the miners, the construction workers, the men and women in the nuclear sector, to make sure we have a stronger province.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member from Markham–Unionville.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you to the minister for his response and strong leadership. We know that building a stronger Ontario means building a stronger workforce. As our government looks to grow the economy east to west and reduce our reliance on US markets, we must make sure that our workers have the skills to seize new opportunities here at home. Donald Trump's trade threats make it clear: Ontario must be ready to stand on its own two feet.

But while our government is training workers for good jobs, the Liberals and NDP continue to play politics and oppose the very programs that make it possible.

Speaker, can the minister tell the House, are there more people in apprenticeships today than when we first formed government?

Hon. David Piccini: I want to thank the member for his hard work to support a next generation of workers in this province, Speaker. The simple answer is yes, there's more today than at any point in modern history. We've seen a doubling of the number of women's registrations in

Hansard Monday, October 27, 2025
(Bill 33, Skilled Trades)

apprenticeships. We've broken down barriers to provide more accessible training to Indigenous First Nations.

The member talked about building a more self-reliant economy. When we took office and we were hit by a pandemic, did we or didn't we have a pipeline of reliant PPE from Ontario, built by Ontarians? We didn't. We were dependent on China. That's the record of the previous Liberal government: make us reliant on other countries.

We stood up. We have a stockpile of PPE made by Ontario workers. We're supporting an energy sector built by and for Ontario workers, a critical mineral sector by and for Ontario workers, and are also building the critical infrastructure for tomorrow's generation, again, by and for the incredible men and women we're signing up for apprenticeships today.