

Special education

Ms. Marit Stiles: We remember that. That's when the Premier said, "That ship has sailed," remember? And by the way, it was the union that fought for those jobs and brought those jobs back here in the province of Ontario.

This question is for the Minister of Education. A new report from Community Living Ontario confirms what we've been hearing from parents and educators and advocates for so many years. Your education system is failing students with disabilities. We are hearing stories of unfair seclusion, exclusion and restraints being used in Ontario schools. Many students are being sent home or told to stay home because the school couldn't meet their needs.

When is this minister going to reverse the years of underfunding that his own government has overseen and ensure that students with special needs receive the same level of education as their peers?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I appreciate the question from the Leader of the Opposition.

Look, Madam Speaker, let me just say this: I can tell the Leader of the Opposition through you that the government is spending record amounts in special education, but I don't think that really matters to a parent whose child hasn't been treated in a fashion that makes the child feel safe, or the parent feel that their child is being respected.

I am going to be meeting with the authors of the report. I'm going to be meeting with parents, as have the previous ministers before me who have continuously increased funding. But I know we share the same concern to ensure that all students, but especially the most vulnerable students, have all the tools that they need to succeed, and more importantly as well, that the teachers who are in the system have the resources and the training that they need to provide these students with the absolute highest level of education and care. That brings some confidence in the education system on their behalf.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, Speaker, but I would remind the minister that his own government has cut per-student funding by \$1,500 per student under this government. So maybe he needs to look at that again.

You should know that every school board in the province is running a deficit in special education. They're spending more than they're getting from this government. Not only has the government failed to provide guidance for schools on these issues—seclusion, restraints, exclusion—but there's also no provincial data being tracked. Instead, school boards are creating and implementing their own policies. Students with disabilities, some of them as young as five or six years old, are being physically restrained and separated from their peers.

Will the minister stop abdicating responsibility and take the necessary action so that children with special needs are safe at school and get the same education as every other student?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think it will maybe surprise the Leader of the Opposition to know that I agree. We have to modify or change the way school boards react and behave. I certainly agree with her. The Ministry of Education needs to ensure that there's a more unified level of response from our school boards. Perhaps we've given too much autonomy to school boards, and they are making decisions that are not always in the best interests of students, parents and teachers.

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I think last week we made our first steps into ensuring that accountability returns to our school boards. As I have said countless times, and as the ministers before me have said, we will stop at nothing to ensure that students, parents and teachers have the resources that they need to give our students the best possibility of success.

Let me be extraordinarily clear to school boards out there: When it comes to how we treat children with special needs in our system, they should always put the needs of the child first. They should ensure that the teachers have the resources to do that and that parents will have the utmost confidence. If our boards aren't going to do it, I agree with the Leader of the Opposition: I'll do it for them, and this government will get it done.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I will say to the minister that, really, at the end of the day, the most important thing he could do to start is to put that \$1,500 per student back because there's no way that boards can meet the needs of these kids without that funding. That's an enormous cut across all of our education system that was implemented by this government.

You've got to read this report, Speaker, to truly understand the extent of this. It's about police being called in on a six-year-old Black student with disabilities. She was cuffed at the wrists and ankles and held down on the ground by police—a six-year-old. It's about an autistic grade 1 student who was repeatedly locked into a padded room without his parents being notified. I will remind you that Landyn Ferris died last just last year in a very similar situation, while he was sleeping unsupervised in his school's sensory room.

I want to ask the minister again: Restore the funding as a starting point, and then let's talk about what you can do to actually meet the needs of our kids with disabilities.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Obviously, funding isn't necessarily the issue here because we have record levels of funding in the school system. In fact, that's a hallmark of this government. We've increased funding to education.

Ultimately, I don't think parents care what the minister says with respect to the record levels of funding when you hear instances where children with special needs aren't being treated with respect and that their parents can't have the confidence that their kids are safe in their schools.

I don't blame teachers. Obviously, boards have not given the resources that are required to ensure that teachers have the training and that students are treated with the respect, dignity and care that is required under all circumstances.

So I will be again abundantly clear to school boards out there: We give you record levels of funding. There is an expectation that that funding is used to ensure that students, parents and teachers have the resources that they need for success. If they can't do it on their own, I will step in, and we will do it for them. We will not fail on this.

Ontario Disability Support Program

MPP Lise Vaugeois: My question is to the Premier. People with disabilities continue to live under tremendous strain, with those on the Ontario Disability Support Program living far below the poverty line, struggling to meet their basic needs for shelter, food and transportation. The federal government's Canada Disability Benefit does not go as far as promised, but it is a start, and it is meant to be in addition to the meagre provincial supports available through ODSP.

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Will the government commit to not clawing back the Canada Disability Benefit from ODSP recipients?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Response? I recognize the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services.

Hon. Michael Parsa: I thank my honourable colleague for the question.

Madam Speaker, we have been very clear from the beginning: Our intent is to make life more affordable for all Ontarians, including those on social assistance, which is why we pushed and worked with the community on the delivery of this program. But it's imperative that any support that is provided complements the already existing supports, which is why, during my meeting with my federal counterpart, members of other provinces and territories joined me in requesting that the federal government make amendments to the Canada tax act to make sure that these supports come with fewer barriers and fewer burdens as possible. It's why we asked the federal government to treat all those receiving ODSP as automatic recipients.

On this side of the House—and I'm hoping that my colleagues across the aisle will support us in making sure that life becomes more affordable for Ontarians—we will never stop fighting for them.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Thunder Bay–Superior North.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I think a simple, "Yes, we will not claw back," would actually answer the question.

The struggle to survive from day to day too often leads people to suicide. It is easier to get an assisted death in Ontario than it is to get support to survive, and that is shameful. An extra \$200 a month will not bring people up to the poverty line, but it will help.

Will the Premier do the right thing and join the other six provinces that have already committed to not clawing back the Canada Disability Benefit?

Hon. Michael Parsa: Madam Speaker, I'm not sure what part of the answer my honourable colleague misunderstood when I said we have fought from day one to make life more affordable for Ontarians. I know that they struggle with answers sometimes.

It's why we increased the Ontario Disability Support Program by nearly 17% in just over two years, the largest increases in the program's history in decades. It didn't come from the NDP; it didn't come from the Liberals. It came from this government. It's why we increased the earned income threshold from \$200 to \$1,000, so those that are able and are willing to work can get a job without it affecting their benefits up to \$1,000.

We have been very clear: We will support any initiative that makes life more affordable for Ontarians. That includes those on social assistance, which is why, once again, I'm asking my colleague to join me in asking the federal government to amend the Income Tax Act and make the recipients automatic and make ODSP recipients automatic in this support.

School trustees

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Moving on to the independents for questions, I recognize the member for Kitchener Centre.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question is for the Minister of Education. Yesterday evening, queer advocacy groups, Indigenous and ally community members, concerned staff and students came together to stand up against hate. Some trustees at the Waterloo Catholic District School Board, who are supported by an organization called Campaign Life Coalition, have been trying to ban the pride flag, 2SLGBTQ books and other symbols of inclusion, including the “Every Child Matters” flag. These actions and behaviours of trustees, many of whom were appointed, not elected, go far outside their role.

Ontario’s education system is publicly funded and must be inclusive of all students. So I ask the minister, will you intervene and stop these trustees who are wasting time and taxpayer dollars fighting about what books should be in libraries and what flags should be on poles?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I will say this: I am encouraged today that both the Leader of the Opposition and the Green Party seem to fully agree with me that we have to ensure that our school boards are focused on what matters to the people of the province of Ontario, and that is ensuring that students, parents and teachers have the resources that they need in order to ensure maximum success for our students for the jobs of tomorrow.

I completely agree. That’s what our school boards should be focused on, and I have said this since the day that I was sworn in to the file, that school boards should be put on notice. If you don’t do this, if you don’t start putting parents, teachers and students first, then I will do it for you, because that is what people expect. They expect that their education system and that boards are focused on students, making sure that they have all the tools to succeed—and not pet projects, not other things that matter, not to how a student does in the future.

Let me be clear again, and I thank the member: School boards, you will either do what you’re tasked to do—that is, put resources for education—or we will step in and ensure that those resources go to the people who need it most.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Kitchener Centre.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Unfortunately, these hateful actions are just the tip of the iceberg at the Waterloo Catholic District School Board.

A recent FOI request shows that the board has spent over \$200,000 in the past two years to silence opposing trustees. Their tactic: They pursue a code of conduct charge to keep elected trustees from voting, speaking and attending meetings for months, all this to suppress equity, accountability and transparency. It got so bad that this week, a judge intervened. This style of American politics has no place in Ontario school boards.

So again to the minister: Will you intervene to ensure that trustees stay in their lane and make decisions related to improving student experiences, rather than wasting hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to undermine democracy?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, I completely agree. In fact, politics has no place in schools at all. Unless you’re teaching politics, politics should not be in a school, so I absolutely agree. That was the bargain that we had in this province for a very, very long time. Students respected teachers, teachers respected parents, and parents made sure that students respected their

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teachers as though they were their parents. That was the bargain that we had in this province, and that has changed because politics has entered our schools through school boards.

Again, I agree with the member opposite: Our school boards should be taking the resources that we give, with record levels of funding. But again, parents don't care when a minister says it's record levels of funding; what they care about is that when their kids go to school, they are having all of the resources that they need for maximum achievement, so that they can prosper in the jobs of tomorrow. And when school boards get into politics, when the classroom becomes political, it is the students who suffer.

I can tell you this, Madam Speaker: I will work with the opposition on this new mandate that we all seem to agree upon, to get the politics out of the classroom, put education back in and put students first.