

**Remarks by Drew Finucane, Executive Board Member, Ontario Public Service Employees Union, for a presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs re: the 2017-18 Ontario Budget
January 19, 2017, 2:45 p.m., Courtyard Marriott, Brampton**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good afternoon. My name is Drew Finucane, Regional Vice-President for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union for Region 2, which includes Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, and the communities of west-central Ontario. I have been an Executive Board Member with OPSEU since 2015, and an activist for many years before that. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today.

I want to address two issues with the committee this afternoon. The first is services for students with special needs. The second is developmental services for adults. Each of these groups face different life challenges, but they share one thing in common. Both have been painfully underfunded for too many years by successive provincial governments.

Instead of doing our best to help build better and more productive lives for these groups, we have marginalized them and punished them by starving them of the public services, the tools and support that could help them achieve their goals.

Their goals in life are no less worthy than yours or mine. So, I ask: Why have these groups been starved by a shortfall of services and funding while government focuses on fattening the likes of those business that want to privatize public services?

I have been a residential counselor for the past 10 years at the W. Ross MacDonald School for the Visually Impaired, in Brantford. I am proud to work for the Ontario Public Service in the Ministry of Education. Specifically, I work in the Provincial Schools Branch which governs the operation of all schools in Ontario that serve blind and deaf pupils, and students with learning development needs.

The work that my colleagues and I deliver on behalf of young people with learning impediments can be extremely rewarding; but that same work also exposes us – and the parents and the guardians of our students – to shocking and systemic flaws in the delivery of services to students with special needs.

Let me tell you a bit about the students we serve.

They come to W. Ross MacDonald because they are visually impaired. But the majority of them struggle with additional conditions. They face behavioural and mental health challenges; many have physiological issues; others cope with speech impairment and the lack of access to social workers or psychiatrists.

It's not my intention to single out W. Ross MacDonald for special attention. We implement a fine curriculum and serve our students well, within the means we are given. But the story of my school is, unfortunately, the story found in scores of other provincial schools.

Let me give you a few examples of how provincial schools are struggling to meet demands.

At W. Ross MacDonald, for example, we have a grand total of two behavioural therapists on staff. They are overwhelmed by the workload.

Once upon a time, most special-needs schools enjoyed an in-house physio department. That service has been dramatically reduced. No money, the ministry has said. In place of specially-trained physiotherapists, the government called in low-cost, questionably-trained private contractors whose professional standards are often suspect.

Speech therapy is another need at W. Ross MacDonald. There was no money for well-trained, in-house staff, so the government went bargain-hunting for low cost, ill-trained private contractors.

Many students with special needs come from broken homes, or low socio-economic backgrounds.

These students struggle with acceptance of their compromised physical and mental conditions. In these cases, social workers and psychiatrists play a very important rehabilitative role. They're "superheroes" in the eyes of many of our young people.

So, what's the situation inside the Provincial Schools Branch? At my school, we have one – one! – social worker on staff, and one – one! – psychiatrist who visits irregularly.

The same narrative plays out in school after school. I encourage all of you to visit a special-needs school in your constituency and listen to the stories of frontline workers like myself.

I want to spend a moment now to talk about developmental services for adults. As you might imagine, identifying the shortcomings is easy. What many of us find so troublesome are the so-called “solutions” that are used to shortchange those who badly need well-funded public treatment and support.

OPSEU represents more than 10,000 workers in developmental services. They provide a wide spectrum of tasks, from administering medicines to cooking to counselling and developing group programming. Our eyes are fixed on the frontlines. What we see is a social service sector in crisis.

Yes, a couple of years back, the provincial government announced a couple of hundreds of millions of dollars for what it called “frontline services.” Except it **isn't** frontline services as we understand it. It's called “individualized funding.”

What is individualized funding? Individualized funding takes money out of the public purse and puts it firmly into the pockets of private contractors. In developmental services, it goes by the official name, “Passport funding.”

Passport funding provides individualized funding to eligible adults with developmental disabilities. People who qualify for this program receive a needs assessment, which determines a set amount of money they may use to purchase services. These range from respite care for their caregivers, to daily living support, day programs and job application assistance.

In its announcement of more money for developmental services, the government said Passport funding would eliminate waitlists. It hasn't. While more than 10,000 people have qualified, thousands more remain on wait lists, some for years. As a province, we should be ashamed.

But the problem, bad as it is, doesn't stop there. Passport funding is creating an immense unregulated sector in developmental services for adults. The program provides funds that can be purchased from virtually anyone. There is no oversight, no regulation, no background checks, no criminal record check and no need for qualifications.

If you are a worker providing this private service to a family thanks to Passport, you enjoy no insurance coverage, no pension or benefits, no job security and, more often than not, low wages.

Regardless of whether you are a client with special needs, or that person's service provider, Passport amounts to little more than the privatization of developmental services. It represents a repudiation of the public service infrastructure that former Progressive Conservative Premiers John Robarts and Bill Davis built in the 1960s and '70s to serve the needs of those who rely on publicly-funded social services.

Under those two premiers, ministries and agencies were established exclusively to serve families and children using public dollars. Public welfare was expanded. Public housing sprouted. Public education grew. Public health care services met growing demand.

Ontario's health care services and social safety net quickly became the envy of many jurisdictions in the western world.

Believe it or not, that expansion of the public good was actually paid for with public dollars. Robarts and Davis **didn't** turn to the private sector and say, "We'll pay you to provide the public services our people need. We'll do it ourselves with the best interests of the public in mind; not the best interest of the bottom line."

Unlike the current Premier or her Minister of Finance, I do not accept that Ontario is too poor to provide for the special needs of children, or the developmental services for adults.

Ontario today is far richer today than it was 40 or 50 years ago when Robarts and Davis engineered the expansion of public services.

Gross Domestic Product per capita in our province is higher than it has ever been. Top CEOs are breaking new average annual income records, with those at the top earning 193 times the wage of the average full-time, full-year worker.

Meanwhile, W. Ross MacDonald School for the Visually Impaired, and many, many more similar facilities, struggles to get by with one social worker for 280 special needs students.

Meanwhile, the Passport program throws adults with learning and physical disabilities into the marketplace of privatized developmental services where the guiding principle seems to be: Spend more; get less

Ontario's problem is not a shortfall of money. Ontario's problem is the spending priorities of the provincial government.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy now to take your questions.