

Revitalizing Ontario's Initial Teacher Education Programs:
 Position of the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF)
 and its Affiliates



The Ontario Teachers' Federation is the advocate for the teaching profession in Ontario and for its 160,000+ teachers. OTF members are full-time, part-time and occasional teachers in all the publicly funded schools in the province—elementary, secondary, public, Catholic and francophone.

Ontario Teachers' Federation
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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since the early 1990s, there have been numerous analyses undertaken in Ontario of the preservice teacher education programs offered by the province’s faculties of education. These discussions have taken place under governments of all stripes and have led to wide ranging recommendations and several policy changes regarding the content, length and delivery models for the preservice programs, now commonly referred to as Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

In 1992, the Teacher Education Council of Ontario (TECO) produced a major report, entitled *“Moving from Goodness to Greatness in Teacher Education”*, which recommended viewing teacher education, “not as a series of discrete steps or stages, but as something whole, a continuum.” TECO proposed a formal two-year preparation program, of which one year would be formal study at a faculty of education and the second year, “a guided or mentored introduction into the profession.” No action on implementing the proposed changes was ever taken.

In 1995–96, several faculties of education implemented experimental/pilot two-year programs. These were all abandoned within two years for a variety of reasons, not least of which was a growing teacher shortage.

In 1999–2000, the newly formed Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) conducted a large-scale consultation on teacher qualifications. No substantive recommendations from this consultation were ever formalized. At the time, a widespread shortage of teachers led to the creation

of three new faculties of education in Ontario, and a substantive increase in the number of funded spaces for teacher candidates (TCs) in the province, from approximately 6,000 to 9,000 annually.

In 2004-05, OCT began a new consultation known as the Teachers’ Qualifications Review (TQR), which culminated in the passage in September 2006 of 66 recommendations pertaining to the professional preparation of teachers. OTF and the Affiliates provided extensive input to that consultation.



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The Federation's position on pre-service teacher education included agreement on the following:

- **extending the Consecutive teacher education program from eight months to 10–12 months;**
- **adding two additional half-courses on Special Education and Teaching in the Ontario context; and**
- **requiring at least 60 days of in-school practicum.**

Again, the proposed changes to program length and additional practicum never materialized.

In the Spring of 2012, motivated by an estimated oversupply of approximately 40,000 qualified unemployed teachers in Ontario and under pressure to align the length of Ontario's predominantly eight-month-long ITE programs with those offered in other Canadian jurisdictions (which ranged in length from 12 months to two years) so as to satisfy new Canadian labour mobility provisions, the Liberal government announced unilaterally its decision to expand Ontario's teacher preparation programs. This announcement was followed by six weeks of intensive stakeholder consultations at which the Ministry took the firm position that:

- **the length of the teacher education program would be expanded;**
- **enrolment would be reduced;**
- **the new model would be cost neutral to the government—i.e., no new funding would be provided.**



Over the course of these discussions, stakeholders reached consensus on a three-semester program that would reduce annual enrolment of TCs from 9,000 to 6,000. The Federations agreed that this model would be more responsive to fluctuations in the labour market than the proposed four-semester model and would also not cause as high a jump in cost to TCs. OTF and the Affiliates took the position that the three semesters should be delivered over a 12-month period and should include 100 days of practicum.

In spite of stakeholder consensus, the government chose, nevertheless, to proceed with its original intention to double the length of ITE programs to four semesters and to halve the number of TCs admitted to faculties of education from 9,000 to 4,500. OTF and other stakeholders warned that the changes would ultimately

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lead to severe teacher shortages, especially in high needs subjects and geographic areas, and that the new regime would be deleterious to immigrant teachers and to those from marginalized communities, diverse backgrounds and equity seeking groups. The expanded four-semester program regime was implemented in September 2015.

In May 2019, OTF and the Affiliates conducted a research study examining teacher preparedness and success in Ontario, comparing the impact of the new four-semester programs on beginning teachers' sense of preparedness with those who had undergone ITE in the previous two-semester Consecutive, two-semester Concurrent or two-year Master of Education programs. Publication of the study was delayed due to COVID-19, but was eventually completed in early 2022, appearing in a publication of the Canadian Association for Teacher Education (CATE), which traced the first five years of the expanded ITE programs in Ontario. Although the Federation study was conducted in the early stages of the expanded ITE program implementation (following just three graduating cohorts), our findings revealed little to suggest that the doubling of the program length and overall requirements had led to any significant improvements in the preparedness of beginning teachers.

As the COVID-19 pandemic raged from 2020 to 2022 and shortages of daily occasional teachers (OTs) became increasingly challenging for school boards to manage, the issue of program length found its way once again onto centre stage in Ontario's ITE program policy considerations. In December 2020, ostensibly to address these shortages, the Ministry took the unprecedented

step of allowing TCs who had not yet completed their professional preparation programs to receive teaching qualifications via the issuing by OCT of a Temporary Certificate of Qualification and Registration. Originally set to expire on December 31, 2021, the Temporary Certificate was extended first to December 31, 2022, and then to December 31, 2023. In August 2023, the Ministry introduced a more permanent certificate—the New Transitional Certificate of Qualification—with slightly different criteria, but similarly enabling TCs who have not yet completed ITE to be deemed qualified to teach.



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THE FUTURE: REVITALIZING ONTARIO'S INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

OTF and its Affiliates are not convinced that the expanded four-semester program, mandated in Ontario since the fall of 2015, has led to deeper learning or substantively improved outcomes for beginning teachers and their students. Our own 2019 research shows no significant improvement in key areas of preparedness. Additionally, we question the relatively short time allocated to the practicum in legislation (just 80 days) within the four semesters, which we believe is proportionally insufficient, given the hands-on, practical learning needs of TCs. Considering that system pressures (perceived or otherwise) have recently brought the Ministry of Education to make arbitrary changes to certification requirements and that OCT, the agency charged with upholding the standards of the teaching profession, has agreed to issue certificates prior to program completion, we are compelled to seek changes to the current ITE regime.

Underlying Principles Informing the Federation's Position on Revitalizing ITE in Ontario

It is the firm position of OTF and its Affiliates:

1. **That the professional preparation of Ontario's teachers at publicly funded faculties of education is a necessary and essential first step in professional certification.**



2. **That teacher candidates should not be awarded an Ontario Certificate of Qualification until they have completed all components of an accredited ITE program, except in the case of approved high-needs, multi-session programs (i.e., French First Language, French Second Language, Technological Education, Indigenous Languages) that are specifically constructed to enable this.**
3. **That any and all changes to Ontario's ITE programs and teacher certification be anchored in, and based upon, clear research evidence.**

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4. That any and all changes to Ontario's ITE programs and teacher certification be undertaken **ONLY** following explicit consultation with OTF and its Affiliates, as the legitimate representatives of the teaching profession in Ontario.
5. That Ontario's long-standing practice of preparing teachers in two specific divisions and in specific subject areas at the Intermediate and Senior levels has served students and the K–12 education system well. Under no circumstances should this practice be changed.



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Steps Towards Change

The question of revitalizing Ontario’s Initial Teacher Education program regime may present itself as an exercise that is primarily concerned with program length. At its core, however, it is far more centered on four questions:

1. What constitutes effective teacher preparation?
2. What are the essential elements of the professional preparation process?
3. What is a reasonable timeframe required to accomplish the goals of ITE?
4. How do we ensure that ITE increases representation of teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds, particularly from equity-deserving groups?

Our consideration of the changes to be made to Ontario’s ITE programs are also focused on four main areas:

1. Recruitment and admissions
2. Core program content
3. Program models
4. Enhancing the practicum



1. Faculty admissions as a mechanism for enhancing diversity in the teaching profession

It has long been acknowledged that equity-deserving groups are under-represented in the teaching profession and that systemic oppression is a factor that continues to challenge the teaching and learning experiences of all in our school communities.

For several decades, Faculty of Education admissions have been based primarily on grades. This is not unusual in Ontario, as most post-secondary admissions follow this same practice. While not an absolute solution, we believe that instituting (or re-instituting in some cases) more refined admissions processes could go far towards enhancing diversity in the teaching profession. It is widely recognized that teachers from diverse backgrounds bring

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a richness of experiences, perspectives, and insights that can profoundly impact the education of students. They serve as role models, mentors, and advocates who can connect with and empower students from similar backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and academic success.

These alternative processes could also increase intake of TCs who are committed to the goals of enhancing social justice, equity and inclusion through their teaching—something that would not be apparent in current admissions processes.

Wholistic education expert, Jack Canfield, famously stated years ago that:

The teacher as person is more important than the teacher as a technician. What [they are] has more effect than anything [they do].

This is not to undermine in any way the requirement for individuals to undergo a formalized teacher preparation program. It simply points to the importance of what TCs bring with them to the profession in the form of their characters, belief systems and lived experiences.

2. Core Program Content

The Federation continues to support the view that the content covered in ITE programs should be oriented towards practical, pedagogical considerations, supported by relevant theory. All practice should be informed by theory and theory developed through school-based

research. What is required is both a balance and alignment of theory and practice.

OCT's recently revised *Accreditation Resource Guide* articulates specific areas of content that faculties of education are obliged to include within ITE programs. In recent years, there has been a tendency to add a great deal of content into the programs without removing anything, and some core focus areas may have ended up getting lost as a consequence. Much of what is considered important for TCs to know about the larger world and their place in it as future teachers could be included in the application profiles faculties of education consider for admitting students.

Our position remains that the faculties should focus on providing clear, hands-on instruction on how to teach the subject areas chosen by TCs within their selected divisions (P/J, J/I or I/S), how to integrate special needs students



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into regular classrooms, how to teach diverse populations, how to assess and evaluate student learning, how to use various teaching strategies and methodologies, how to employ and integrate technology in the classroom.

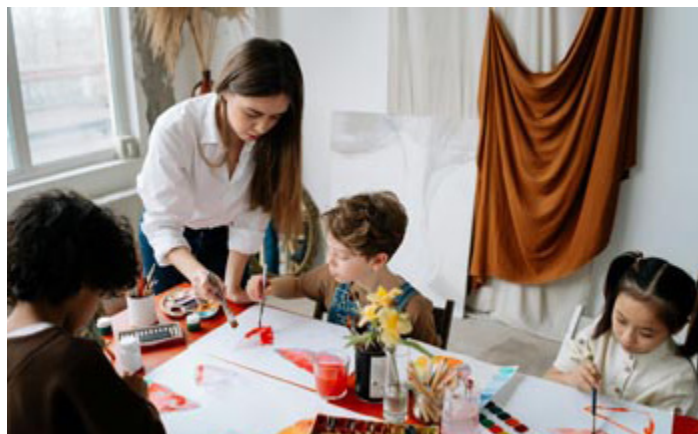
Also important is content addressing school/education law, professional boundaries and parent/caregiver communication. Equity considerations, such as building authentic partnerships with the local community and being responsive to the complex needs of students and their families, are not a one-shot deal and should be embedded across the ITE curriculum. For the French language programs, we continue to advocate for special attention to content addressing the teaching of students in a minority context. TCs who did not do their schooling in Ontario or Canada should receive additional supports to ensure their success, including a course on teaching in the Ontario context.

The delivery of all content should be informed by the teaching profession, qualified teachers and Associate Teachers.

3. Program Models

The Federations support the notion of flexible program delivery models. Our position includes support for the following options:

- **Consecutive program, consisting of one year of study to earn a B.Ed.**
- **Consecutive program, consisting of one year of study with an optional second year to obtain a Master's degree.**
- **Concurrent program, where both the undergraduate academic degree and the B.Ed. are taken together. The total credit requirements for the Concurrent program would align with the Consecutive program options described above.**
- **A stand-alone B.Ed. degree of four to five academic years in duration. This would require a new QECO rating process to be developed.**
- **Part-time and multi-session programs for high-needs subject areas and for enhancing access to the profession by candidates from marginalized communities, diverse backgrounds and equity seeking groups.**
- **Flexible start and end times of the program to enable better access and to avoid the long time-lapse that currently exists between graduation and employment.**



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In terms of program length, it is worth acknowledging that the length of time in which the program is delivered is of less importance than the attainment of the desired outcomes that every graduating teacher should acquire. That said, we believe that the current length of Ontario's ITE programs represents a significant barrier for many.

Program delivery should be predominantly face-to-face, as this remains the best environment for meaningful teaching and learning. Some online delivery would be acceptable, but it should not constitute the majority of the program.

As noted earlier, the Federation strongly supports maintaining the current division specialization, as it is currently constituted (i.e., P/J, J/I, I/S). The Federation does not support the concept of a K–12 certificate.

4. Enhancing the Practicum

The practicum experience is consistently assessed by TCs as the most valuable component of their initial teacher education journey. To be effective, it is essential for the theory and practicum components of the program to be well integrated and for learning from each part to build on the other.

OTF Policy 4, addressing the Practicum and Associate Teaching and our 2017 position paper, *A Practical Vision for Associate Teaching and the Practicum in Ontario*, outline the Federation's position on enhancing the



practicum experience. More recently, our pilot projects to enhance supports for associate teachers have also yielded excellent insights into the essential involvement of associate teachers in the practicum and beyond.

Within a one-year program, the practicum requirement for all teacher candidates should be a minimum of 80 days of in-school practicum in Ontario. While alternative practicum placements may be of value to teacher candidates, such alternative experiences should not be counted towards the required 80 days.

The practicum should be conceived and built as a dynamic and integrated system between faculties of education and schools to support teacher candidates and associate teachers.

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Our recent collaborative work among Faculties of Education, Federation liaison officers, TCs and members of OTF's Curriculum Forum has highlighted the importance of enhancing/supporting the following features of the practicum:

1. **Increased collaboration and coherence by building meaningful relationships between faculties, federations, subject associations and school board leaders;**
2. **Inclusion of Special Education learning and experiences within practicum placements; and**
3. **Embedding meaningful support and mentorship for Associate Teachers.**



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