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What will education cuts mean for kids?

(An open letter to MPP Christine Elliott)

Like many concerned citizens
across this province, I spent much of the past week listening to announcements about changes to our public education system. With each announcement, my sense of unease deepened. What will these cuts mean for our children? What will they mean for a future generation?

I wonder if you and your
colleagues have walked into a classroom in recent years.

My daughter is a teacher who
works in a small alternative public secondary school.

Many of her students come to her
school because the mainstream school system couldn't meet their needs. I have met several of these students. They are bright, creative, sensitive individuals, brimming with potential, but for many of them, their education has been interrupted by severe mental health concerns, by trauma, by economic uncertainty, by illness or injury, by bullying. They come to her school seeking a different environment and personal relationships with caring adults who have the patience to guide them through the last hurdles of their high school years, as they begin to enter the next phase of their lives.

Her teaching environment isn't
what comes to mind when you envision a high school classroom. Her classroom can sometimes look like chaos. There are no neatly arranged rows of desks and chairs, with students obediently taking notes; instead, students enter and exit the classroom freely. Some may be shooting videos in front of a green screen; others, composing photographs in the stairwell, or editing graphics in Photoshop, while others write essays or collaborate on screenplays. There are students wearing hoodies tightly pulled over their heads, too anxious to make eye contact. There are students listening to headphones. For students diagnosed with ADHD; listening to music, according to their IEPs, helps them focus. My daughter and her colleagues interact with mutual respect; students know that the teachers are there to help them achieve their goals.

My daughter teaches elective
courses. To ensure as broad a selection of course offerings as possible and that every student who wants to attend their school is able to have a full timetable, most of her classes are split to incorporate as many grade levels and pathways as possible. She teaches through her lunch hour and often stays well into the evening, helping students who need extra attention, do not have internet or computer access at home, are so passionately involved in a project that they don't want to stop working on it, or for whom home is not a safe or welcoming place.

I want to tell you about some of my daughter's success stories as I have had the honour to meet some of these students at school events. One young man who was failing in his mainstream school graduated school valedictorian with an acceptance to the top animation program in the province. One young woman who struggled academically collected 500 hours of community service and is now studying criminology. Another young man with a history of absences discovered his gift for filmmaking and secured a four-credit co-op with a media streaming service provider.

I wish that you could see the work that my daughter and other classroom teachers?the very frontline workers whose jobs you promised to protect in your election campaign?do every day. Perhaps you might feel empathy and compassion for students who don't fit the mold, for whom back-to-basics just isn't enough. Every student is an individual to be nurtured and educated, not an efficiency to be cut.

Your party speaks the need to modernize Ontario's education system, but a modern education system acknowledges that the needs of students are more complex today than they have ever been, especially as high-needs students with autism integrate in mainstream classes. Students need smaller class sizes, not larger, and a broader range of course options to prepare them for a changing workforce, not fewer.

I urge you to reconsider these funding cuts, class cap raises, and move to mandatory e-Learning courses. Education is expensive, but the cost of ignorance and loss of a young person's potential is exponentially higher.

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