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## Joint Statement on Ontario's Blue-Ribbon Panel

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**TORONTO, June 1, 2023** – The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU/SEFPO), Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers Federation (OSSTF/FESSO), Canadian Federation of Students (CFS-Ontario), Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) are deeply concerned about the composition, lack of transparency, and unknown mandate of the government's so-called Blue Ribbon Panel on postsecondary institutions' financial stability and student experience.

We find the exclusion of current students, staff and faculty from the panel deeply irresponsible and out of touch with the present realities of postsecondary education. Although the panel will conduct consultations, these consultations are not equivalent to being represented on the panel that will make recommendations that will impact Ontario's postsecondary sector for years to come.

Moreover, the very chair of this panel, Dr Alan Harrison, was appointed as a special advisor to the government on the Laurentian University insolvency. He produced four reports, none of which were made public. The insolvency resulted in a massive restructuring which included the elimination of 76 academic programs, affecting the academic careers of more than 900 students and the loss of 340 jobs at Laurentian and the federated universities. Ontario's Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk found the use of creditor protection by Laurentian to be "unsuitable and damaging." The concern for the future of public post-secondary education is justified by the makeup of the panel, excluding key players in the sector and prioritizing those with a history of dismantling public institutions.

We are concerned the panel will call for more privatization of student support services, elimination of select programs, potential mergers between northern institutions, increased precarity of employment, expansion of hybrid and online learning at the expense of quality hands-on learning, and redirection of apprenticeship funding to private training centres. It is reckless to continue underfunding the postsecondary sector and heavily relying on international and domestic tuition fees, placing education and research quality, secure employment and the integrity of Ontario's institutions in jeopardy.

All of the threats above will have deep implications through cuts to staff and faculty, hugely diminishing student experience as well as the social and economic vitality of the regions where the post-secondary institutions are located.

Our experience is that the chronic and systemic underfunding of postsecondary education is causing damage to the student experience and the Ontario economy. Ontario sits last in the country in terms of per-student funding. Only 30 per cent of the operating budgets of universities and 38 per cent of the operating budgets of colleges come from the province. Despite the Ontario's government's regular claims of historic investments and innovation in post-secondary

education, the Financial Accountability Office (FAO) is projecting annual shortfalls through 2027-28 in public funding totaling \$40 billion, including a \$2.7 billion shortfall in funding for post-secondary education.

It is clear this lack of investment in our public universities and colleges is setting up the system for failure, which would set up students, workers, communities and future generations for failure as well. The growing reliance of postsecondary institutions on private funding threatens intellectual standards and harms the quality of student experience.

Now is not the time to shortchange post-secondary education in Ontario. The economic benefits of investing in post-secondary education are, by the government's own admission, too important to ignore. Every dollar invested in education generates a positive economic return on investment of 36%.

There is a better way - a more sustainable way forward for post-secondary education in Ontario, and it will require responsible leadership that invests in public services and institutions.

We urge the panel to ensure robust and sustainable funding for Ontario's public colleges and universities to protect high-quality teaching and student supports. We also call for transparency, accountability, and public funding to allow our public post-secondary institutions to thrive. In order to ensure the longevity and health of Ontario's institutions, education quality and student experience must be prioritized over the interests of the private sector.

It is time for the government to prioritize the needs and expertise of students, academic professionals, support workers and faculty. We ask the panel to address these urgent issues and take immediate action to ensure the future of public education in Ontario.

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Signatories:

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Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)

Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU/SEFPO)

Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers Federation (OSSTF/FESSO)

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