



OTF Says No to Professional Designation

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INTRODUCTION

The Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) is moving forward with plans to introduce a professional designation for members of the teaching profession. The cost to the College, the cost for teachers, the method of attaining the designation - all remain unclear. As for the benefits of professional designation, these too remain unsubstantiated.

OCT first introduced the notion of a professional designation in June 2007, when a background report, entitled Establishing a Professional Designation for Members of the Ontario College of Teachers, was prepared for the College's Quality Assurance Committee. The Registrar also produced a Report to Council on the matter in March 2008. During the 2007-08 academic year, OCT conducted a series of focus groups with teachers and members of the public in Windsor, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Ottawa, as well as an online survey of members, and an extensive telephone survey, all designed to justify the decision by the College to pursue the establishment of a professional designation for teachers. Evidence that the College had pre-determined its course of action on this issue was further substantiated through the College's decision to publish the results of the telephone survey in the September 2008 edition of its magazine, Professionally Speaking, prior to OCT's own deadline of September 8 for its consultation with stakeholders. The headline of the article that went to

press in August – just as the Registrar's letter inviting input went out to stakeholders – read, "Teachers favour professional designation."

None of the information provided by the Registrar and staff at OCT over the last two years or the results of its push surveys have convinced Federation that such a designation is either needed or useful. It is the position of the Federation, in fact, that such a designation could potentially have a negative impact on the profession and on schools.

While OCT may argue that the proposal falls within the mandate of the College (since other regulatory bodies have established professional designations), the College, by its own admission, does not need to establish a professional designation. In his March 2008 report, the previous OCT Registrar specifically states, "A professional designation is not required to further the College's existing activities." He continues, "No clear need emerges for a designation program to assist in fulfilling the College's established duties."

Reports from the Registrar and staff are missing significant pieces of information, and fail to provide a sound rationale for pursuing a professional designation for teachers. Moreover, the conclusions drawn are based on a number of faulty premises. These are described in the sections that follow.



FLAWED SURVEY INSTRUMENTS

The College's strongest argument for moving forward on establishing a professional designation for teachers is that this is what Ontario's teachers want. This conclusion is based entirely on the results obtained by the College from its focus sessions, online and telephone surveys. While the Federation does not have access to the questions asked during the focus sessions, if the biased questions presented to teachers via the online and telephone surveys are any indication, it would have been quasi-impossible for there to have been any outcome other than a conclusion of support by teachers for designation. In both cases, teachers were asked mostly closed questions, with little opportunity to provide explanatory or dissenting views.

On the telephone survey, respondents were not asked to indicate their support for the introduction of a professional designation that carried costs or conditions, but rather whether they would support a designation "if the process were the same as it is to become a member and the cost to the College were minimal." Presented with this low risk, low impact scenario, it is not surprising that most teachers would have indicated consent. The survey then proceeded to provide respondents with pre-determined reasons for supporting professional designation and asked them to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that these represented strong reasons to favour designation. It is interesting to note that in the absence of guided rationale for supporting designation ("Are there any other reasons to support a professional designation for teachers?"), the vast majority (76%) said they did not know, gave no other

reason or did not respond. While it appears that teachers did not seem to support arguments against designation, the distribution of their responses indicates that they were actually quite ambivalent about the specific negative arguments presented by the survey.

The online survey was even more biased towards an outcome supporting designation. Teachers were asked to indicate what they thought was the main benefit of a professional designation by choosing an option from a list, but were not given an option to indicate "none of the above". Similarly, when asked to indicate their preference for possible names for the designation, teachers were not provided an opportunity to indicate lack of support for any/all of the proposed options.

It is interesting to note that the strongest support for having a professional designation came from those newest to the profession (five years or less experience). It is conceivable that beginning teachers, who have not yet gained a thorough awareness of their own status as members of the teaching profession, may have felt that having a professional designation would somehow contribute to their journey towards professionalism.

A final point of particular interest is that the survey conducted by the College itself just a year earlier (summer 2007) directly asked the respondents about a professional designation and resulted in the exact opposite outcome:



Asked whether teachers should be assigned a professional designation akin to that of doctors and nurses, opposition outnumbered support by about 2:1. . . . Among French-speaking teachers, opposition is especially strong, indeed significantly stronger than among teachers as a whole.

And yet, despite this overwhelming opposition, OCT continued to press forward with the idea. The Federation therefore remains convinced that had the questions been framed differently in the 2008 survey, the results would not have indicated unfettered support by teachers for professional designation.

UNSUBSTANTIATED RATIONALE

The Report of the Registrar identifies the following main reasons for introducing a professional designation for teachers:

...the ability of College members, education employers and members of the public to identify qualified teaching professionals, and the profession's cohesion and ability to attract the best new entrants... could certainly be the foundations for the College to pursue a designation regime under the general terms of its statutory objects."

It is the position of the Federation that all three of the above reasons are unsubstantiated. The ability of the College and the public to identify qualified teaching professionals already exists via the Public Register, and by way of the definition of "teacher" specified in the Education Act and in Regulation 298.

Currently, teachers' professional authority to practice their profession comes from their education degrees/diplomas and their Certificate of Qualification. Both the Bachelor of Education degree and the Diploma in Education are professional credentials, and are a requirement for being a teacher in Ontario. Should teachers wish to use a designation to indicate their profession, they are entitled to use B.Ed. or Dip. Ed. after their names, a practice that almost no teacher follows. The question that remains unanswered, therefore, is when would a teacher use such a designation?

As to the claim by OCT that professional designation will add to the cohesion of the profession, our own conversations and surveys with teachers reveal that their feelings of professional fellowship, shared identity and solidarity emanate from their involvement in professional activities at the schools and boards in which they teach, and their involvement in their teachers' federations. It has specifically been suggested that a professional designation would give technology teachers who do not have a degree something to put behind their names. OTF's affiliate, OSSTF, tested this idea with technology teachers. The response was a feeling that such a move was tokenism and would not promote cohesion among teachers. As noted above, teachers do not currently tend to highlight their current professional credentials by appending B.A., B.Ed., Dip. Ed. or even postgraduate degrees to their names. We do not believe that encouraging them to use a professional designation would be a worthwhile endeavour.



To the contrary, OSSTF has indicated that the introduction of a professional designation for teachers may actually have the negative consequence of dividing teachers from other school personnel. Finally, the claim by OCT that a professional designation would somehow attract the best new entrants to the profession is completely unfounded. Members of the profession indicate that they have chosen teaching because they care for students and are committed to helping them learn. It is the intrinsic rewards of a profession in public service that most factor into teachers' choice to enter and remain in teaching. Just as it is not the professional designation of R.N. for nurses or P. Eng. for engineers that brings individuals to enter those professions, we see no evidence that having a professional designation for teachers will factor into the decision of individuals to pursue the teaching profession.

THE COST FOR OCT

While OCT estimates that it can develop and implement this proposal for \$89,000, this number does not include staff time. The August 2008 report of the Registrar itself indicates that the implementation of the plan would require reallocation of staff as well as hiring of new staff. The specific budget implications for the recruitment and staffing for the proposal are absent from any of the current documentation.

The largest line in the budget presented is for Promotion and Communication. If a professional designation were something that was being sought by the teachers of the province, promotion would not be necessary.

Also missing from the report is the cost to the OCT of enforcement. By selecting the nursing profession as a comparator, the OCT expects to have to 15 -20 investigations per year of misuse and two to three prosecutions. Such time and money that this would require is an unnecessary burden for the OCT and for teachers.

THE COST TO TEACHERS

The cost to teachers is perhaps the most misleading part of the reports. Since members' dues provide the OCT's only funding, the fees will have to bear the cost of the additional staff. Also, if the OCT has the \$89,000 it says the program would require for implementation, there are other more appropriate ways of using teachers' money.

An additional point that should be made is that the professional designation, while not currently framed in this light, could provide the OCT with an additional means of raising revenue. Unhappily, the source is the same as it is now – teachers. There is no guarantee that can be given that would bind future Governing Councils not to implement a fee for application for professional designation.

MEANS OF ATTAINING DESIGNATION

One glaring omission from the reports is direct costs, both financial and otherwise, to teachers for the program. The 2007 report references many other professions in Ontario that offer their members professional designations. What is not included in the background information is that the overwhelming majority of these designations are earned by passing exams set by the professional organization, either



provincially or nationally. The costs of applying to write these exams reach as high as \$2900. The cost to nurses, the OCT's preferred professional reference, is \$285.32.

Needless to say, this raises the specter of the dead entrance to the profession exam, the Ontario Teacher Qualifying Test (OTQT). The OTQT was a point of severe contention between the teachers of the province and the previous government. Its dissolution was, in fact, one of the very first acts taken by the new Minister of Education when the Liberal government overturned the Conservatives in 2003. The removal of the OTQT was hailed by many in education as being symbolic of the new government's commitment to attaining peace and stability in Ontario education.

While there is nothing in the report to indicate that it is the intention of OCT to introduce an examination, there is also nothing to preclude the imposition of such a requirement sometime in the future for the use of the professional designation. According to the OCT report, each of the cited organizations' professional designations is established and protected by legislation.

If teachers were aware of this fact, the level of support the OCT thinks it has for this program would soon disappear.

ENFORCEMENT

Ultimately, the only purpose that can be ascribed to introducing a professional designation would be to enable the College to prosecute an individual

who claims to be a registered teacher, but is not. The OCT already has at its disposal the means to deal with people who fraudulently present themselves as members of the profession. School boards are obliged, unless exempt under particular circumstance, to ensure that every teacher in the publicly funded schools of Ontario to be in good standing with OCT. The Federation maintains that the legislative protection currently afforded by the Education Act is sufficient to discourage non-teachers from fraudulently practicing the profession.

CONCLUSION

OTF can find no convincing reason to support the introduction of a professional designation for teachers in Ontario. We believe that the potential negatives associated with designation significantly outweigh any prospective positives. In conclusion:

- A professional designation was not asked for by teachers;
 - It adds no value to the professional status of teachers;
 - Teachers have not been given the complete picture of how professional designations work in other professions;
 - This program has the potential of adding additional unnecessary costs to teachers and to OCT;
 - The cost of enforcing such a program could also add costs to the operation of OCT.
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