

OSSTF 'cautiously optimistic' as students return to class

By Nate Smelle

As students, teachers, and education workers in Ontario prepare to head back to school, the number of COVID-19 cases in the province are yet again on the rise.

Under the provincial government's list of guidelines released Aug. 3, masks will be mandatory for all students between Grade 1 and Grade 12, and recommended for children in kindergarten. In the 26-page document the government also indicates that school boards must be prepared for potential closures; and, have a plan in place to shift to remote learning should the situation with COVID-19 worsen.

Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation District 29 president Scott Marshall has been keeping a close eye on the state of the pandemic in Hastings and Prince Edward counties. Having carefully studied the province's guidelines, and the school board's plan to implement them, he is eager for the schools to reopen, but remains cautiously optimistic. Acknowledging how everyone is looking forward to welcoming the students back to the classroom locally, Marshall said the OSSTF will do their best to work with the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board to see that the return to school is a safe and positive experience one. Describing the Ford government's guidelines as "less than clear"; and, pointing out how their plan seems to shift daily, he expects the reopening of the schools to be a challenge.

"Our communities haven't hit that vaccination number that Public Health would like to see, so we are still susceptible to the Delta variant," Marshall said. "But, I think overall Canadians have still done a good job at recognizing their responsibility to others. Because of that the vaccination numbers are high enough I think, that they're going to allow the resumption of some of the things that benefit the students beyond just the classroom. So, extracurriculars are going to be allowed to get going again. We've heard a lot about the toll that this has taken on students' mental health."

While schools aren't going to be 100 per cent back to normal, Marshall said they will look a little closer to how they were prior to the pandemic as students return to class this year. He said some of the concerns that still remain at the forefront for teachers include: the health and safety of students 12 years old and under who haven't been vaccinated, and those they come in contact with; actual vaccination numbers in the schools; the fact that there will be to be a lot more student contacts because cohorts aren't as restricted as they were before; ventilation; the quality of the safety gear in schools; the safety of teachers and education workers; and, "the role that the schools play in the bigger community because COVID-19 doesn't know any borders."

"We don't want the schools to become places where the delta variant can accelerate," said Marshall. "That's we don't want, and I think that's still a worry, so everyone is going to do their best. The delta variant is highly transmissible. So, even in the students age 12 and older in the high schools, if the masking isn't occurring during the day when they're outside or in close contact with extracurriculars, etc., etc., it could still spread that way, right. Those are things we want to pay close attention to."

While remote learning will continue to be an option for those who do not feel comfortable returning to the classroom yet, Marshall said the virtual school will be much smaller than last year. Witnessing so many students struggle with mandatory e-learning last year while schools were closed, only confirmed the concerns raised by Ontario's education unions during the "No Cuts to Education" campaign in 2019/2020.

"All the worries we had about these mandatory online credits, we got a chance to see firsthand what is like through the virtual school," Marshall said. "As we knew, virtual school works well for some students but definitely not all. It is not an equitable model. So, there is going to be a virtual school running but it's not going to be quite as large as last year. Because COVID-19 is front and centre in the news, people are hearing that the mandated e-learning credits are absolutely set up to be delivered by private companies. So it is what we thought, and it is the start of privatization."

Having also experienced the pandemic as a parent with kids in elementary school, high school, and post-secondary, Marshall understands how much his children and all students have missed out on because of COVID-19. Acknowledging that there is a better understanding of COVID-19, how it spreads, and how to protect people, he is hopeful that this school year will allow students somewhat of a return to normalcy.

Noting that the OSSTF had recently put out a media release with the other education affiliates, declaring their support for mandatory vaccinations, Marshall said if the province were to get on board with mandatory vaccinations, "that would allow schools to get that much closer to what we knew before, sooner."