

Education unions raise concerns about provincial back-to-school plan

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By Nate Smelle

With the start of the 2020/2021 school year drawing near, teachers from both the elementary and secondary level have been raising concerns about the provincial government's plans to reopen schools.

On July 30 the government released a guide to reopening Ontario's schools, which was developed in consultation with leading medical experts that committed over \$300 million in funding to support a safe reopening of Ontario's schools. Acting as a baseline, the provincial guidelines are intended to assist school boards province-wide in developing a plan that meets local needs and supports students and families. Some of the measures defined within the province's guidelines include: in-person classes for elementary school students five days per week for the 2020-2021 school year; masking for students in Grades 4-12; focusing on cohorting and limiting student contacts; and, adapting secondary school delivery for designated boards.

In a statement released on Aug. 13, Minister of Education Stephen Lecce maintained that the government "will deliver the strongest and safest plan in Canada for Ontario students," and that they "will continuously strengthen it over time." He also indicated that by means of the province's investment, and the unlocking of access to \$496-million in reserves for school boards will "enable more social distancing and improve air quality, and ultimately strengthen the layers of protection to keep students and staff safe."

Despite the minister's claims, many educators and education workers throughout the province believe the government's plan falls short when it comes to protecting Ontarians in and outside schools.

Local Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario president Sarah Mackay does not feel the provincial plan to reopen schools goes far enough to protect children, educators, and education workers. She said giving school boards access to their reserve funds less than a few weeks before the start of the school year "is too little too late."

Pointing out that there needs to be more funds available for busing, adequate screening for students and proper ventilation in schools, Mackay said the government should have opened up access to this funding several months ago.

"They have not issued a firm policy on a safe return to school, and this is unacceptable," she said. "They are constantly changing their mind on the protocols they want to see in place. They have left boards scrambling at the last minute to do what they can and parents, students and educators anxious and frustrated."

As a parent, and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation's District 29 president, Scott Marshall has also experienced this anxiety and frustration. Instead of passing on the responsibility of developing a safe teaching and learning model to school boards, he believes the provincial back-to-school plan would be more effective in protecting people if it provided a solid framework based on measures that have proven to be successful in preventing the spread of COVID-19 among the broader community.

Under the current plan, Marshall said everyone has been working hard to do the best they can with what he said are a "lack of appropriate resources" provided by the provincial government.

"We can't pretend that everything we need is here because it's not; and we feel somewhat let down by our government," he said. "Other places around the world where they have had a really quick spread have been places where people are in a confined area together for a prolonged period of time. So, you take a classroom with very little social distancing and a lot of students close together, and there's the risk. These are things we know? You don't want your school to be the spreader for your community, or any of our communities."

Marshall continued, "The safety measures in the school should resemble those that have been effective in the community. So let's put in place the measures that we know have worked."

Mackay agrees. She said ETFO's membership would also like to see the government's plan provide at least the same level of protection measures such as mandatory masks, limited gathering numbers, and physical distancing provide the general public. Mackay said there are several changes to the province's plan that ETFO would like to see.

Providing a couple examples, she said, "There needs to be masks for all students. If children aged 2 and up are being told to wear masks in public, then all school children should be wearing masks if they are able. Distancing is another issue. Having students only one-metre apart is not going to be adequate. Again, everywhere else it is two-metres based on scientific consensus, so why not in schools? The government needs to provide the proper funding in place to make smaller classes sizes and more educators to allow for appropriate distancing."

As long as a safe learning, teaching, and work environment can be provided, both Mackay and Marshall said students will be better off in the classroom when it comes to the quality of the education they are receiving, and their overall well-being.

Explaining the difference between "designated" and "non-designated" school boards, Marshall explained how the ministry had deemed some boards where there are a higher number of COVID-19 cases as "designated boards." Under this designation, he said schools within these boards will have stricter limits on class sizes.

Providing insight into what this means for local schools within the HPEDSB, Marshall said, "We are what is called a non-designated board that means class sizes run where they normally would, so that's been an ongoing concern because you can't keep social distancing if you have say 32 students in a class. If you are out and about in your community people have masks and they are able to social distance. Masks will be there in the high school classes, but social distancing won't be possible in many cases."