

OSSTF local president reflects on how COVID-19 has 'altered' education in Ontario



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By Nate Smelle

Last year at this time, teachers and education workers represented by Ontario's four major education unions were engaged in a province-wide job action in protest of the Ford government's cuts to education. The issues provoking the withdrawal of services, as well as a series of rotating strikes included but were not limited to: increasing class sizes; mandatory e-learning; fixing and making schools safe; teacher and education worker job losses; and, violence in schools.

Recognizing how over the past year the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered teaching and learning in Ontario, in the coming weeks The Bancroft Times plans to connect with those working to ensure that education continues to be provided in a safe manner. For a deeper look into how education has changed for high school students, teachers and education workers throughout the province during these challenging times, The Bancroft Times' editor Nate Smelle recently interviewed Ontario Secondary School District 29 president Scott Marshall.

Smelle: Last year at this time OSSTF members were out on the picket line, standing up for Ontario's education system. Although the COVID-19 pandemic put an end to the job action prematurely, has there been any progress made on the main issues during the past year?

Marshall: There was a lot at stake during the No Cuts to Education campaign, as the government's position would have dismantled the public education system as we know it. The governing Conservative Party wanted to cut thousands of teaching positions, which would have led to significantly larger class sizes and the cancellation of many courses and programs. Their plan also wanted to force high school students to take a significant number of mandatory online courses. When the pandemic became a reality here in Ontario, and the first lockdown was ordered in March, OSSTF abandoned the No Cuts to Education campaign and signaled to the government and school boards that we wanted to work together through the new challenges that we knew would exist.

At that point the government had retreated on many of the changes that they wanted to see, due to strong public opposition to their proposed changes. In the end we accepted an increase in the class size generator from 22:1 to 23:1 (this is an average, many classes remain much higher than this), an increase to class size caps, and two mandatory online credits for students. Ironically these new

contracts have allowed larger class sizes at a time when smaller classes were needed to support social distancing and student safety. Many of the concerns that we raised about mandatory online learning have been realized as students were moved to these platforms during lockdown periods for student and community safety.

Smelle: From your experience as president, what would you say have been the biggest lessons learned by OSSTF members during the pandemic?

Marshall: This pandemic has presented an ever shifting landscape in education as health officials have learned more about COVID-19 and school instructional models have adapted. Teachers and education workers have constantly adjusted their instructional practices in unprecedented conditions to ensure the well being of students at all times. Our schools have worked because of the commitment that teachers and education workers have to their students.

Smelle: I understand that several teachers have filed complaints about students still not wearing masks properly while in class and at school. What more can be done to remedy this situation?

Marshall: We have been very disappointed with our school board as we believe their mask policy could present safety concerns to students, families, and community. Working with high school students we are used to friendly reminders and education about rules. Most students are very good responding to teachers when these conversations occur. At the start of this school year, however, teachers were told by their principals that if students refused to wear their masks while in class (after the education strategy was tried), they would remain in class and teachers would need to try to distance these students two metres apart from others. This created unnecessary anxiety among teachers as distancing can be very difficult in many classrooms, air circulation can be poor, and there was genuine concern for the safety of all other students in that class.

From our research this local board policy seemed out of line with what other school boards were doing. When we raised this as a concern our board did not change this expectation. We went public with this concern through a media release in September as we believed the public expected all students in secondary classes would be required to wear masks for safety. Our local union office was disciplined by the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board for this public media release. This issue has been raised again recently by teachers as we hear about a new more transmittable strain, and we have not been advised of any change to this board masking policy. Our teachers are afraid to speak up given the discipline that was applied at the start of this school year.

Smelle: One of the most important issues raised by teachers during the job action last year was class sizes. Recognizing that the Ford government has limited the size of public gatherings, has there been any progress in this regard?

Marshall: The new contracts allow an increase in class size as the number of teachers generated for each school has decreased. The largest class that we can have has moved from 32 students in a university level course to 35 students. While some additional staffing to support a virtual school was realized at the start of the year, this staffing will trickle back down to base levels established in our contract by the end of the year, and many class sizes remain very high and cramped.

Smelle: With the pandemic forcing students to learn at home instead of the classroom, what have teachers learned about e-learning?

Marshall: The concerns that we raised opposing mandatory e-learning during our No Cuts to Education campaign have been realized this year. Online learning is not for every student. While some do succeed, it is not an equitable learning model for all. Many students who have been successful with their online courses have also commented that it is extremely tiring, and the quality of the experience is not as authentic as what is experienced with in class instruction.

Smelle: How is the Octomester schedule (one class all day every day for five weeks) working out?

Marshall: The Octomester model was created to allow schools to open within the pandemic safety guidelines in place. The Octomester schedule limits the size of each student's extended cohort. As an instructional model the octomester is not ideal, but teachers and students recognize that it is just part of what is necessary to safely manage the pandemic. Assessing student

achievement during the pandemic and in the Octomester model is unique, and can not be compared on par with a more balanced teaching and learning model.

Smelle: Is it true that HVAC/ventilation renovations at NHHS will not begin until July 2021?

Marshall: Yes we are due for a major HVAC renovation starting July 1, 2021.

Smelle: What more could the government, and the school board, do to ensure that students, teachers, and education workers have a safe and healthy learning/teaching environment?

Marshall: We have been consistent from day one of this pandemic that we would like to be at school with students. Many students struggled a great deal learning from home last spring during the first shut down. We have also, however, maintained that the schools need to have the same safety measures in place in the broader community so that not only the staff and students are safe, but also the communities. Having large class sizes as a non designated board, air quality concerns, and the masking concerns that I noted above have presented ongoing concern for us. A fulsome safe return to in-person learning plan would incorporate provincial standards for:

- ? keeping infected individuals out of school settings
- ? providing access to families for paid sick leave and/or financial supports for families to reduce the burden on families to encourage compliance
- ? smaller class sizes to ensure physical distancing is maintained
- ? methods for improving ventilation
- ? procedures for expanding in-school asymptomatic testing
- ? a voluntary prioritized vaccination plan for all teachers and education workers
- ? established and transparent benchmarks that regions, families, teachers, and education workers can rely on to inform school building re-openings and closures.

Smelle: Is there anything else that you would like to say about your observations of Ontario's education system over the past year?

Marshall: Teachers, education workers, and the students should all be recognized for how well they have adapted to the changes forced on everyone by this pandemic. Mental health and well-being has been front and centre with all that we do. The sense of community that has developed in each of our schools to care for those struggling should not be overlooked.