

Schools to remain closed until at least September

By Nate Smelle

In acknowledgement of the "substantial deterioration of mental health status among children and youth" during the pandemic, the Ontario Science Advisory Table recently declared that "schools should be the last sector to close and the first sector to reopen." Despite this advice, on June 2 the Ford government announced that students throughout the province would not be returning to their classrooms for the remainder of the 2020/2021 school year.

Indicating that the province's "top priority is putting the third wave behind us so that we can safely enter Step One of our Roadmap to Reopen," Premier Doug Ford said the government would not risk increasing the number of cases and worsening potential downstream impacts on hospitals and Intensive Care Units. By keeping schools closed, he said it "will allow kids to safely enjoy camps and outdoor activities this summer, and a safe return to school in September."

According to the Premier, the Science Advisory Table's recent modeling suggested that if the government had reopened schools to in-person learning the number of new daily COVID-19 cases could increase by six to 11 per cent. Increasing to the level of risk even further, he said, is the fact that it is unknown how many of these new cases would be of the more dangerous B.1.617.2 variant first identified in India. When asked during the press conference what had changed since the beginning of the week when Minister of Education Stephen Lecce said that schools in Ontario were safe, Ford pointed to the B.1.617.2 variant.

"We see the variants coming in. We saw the cases climb. Obviously there was a reason why public health shut down the schools. They were concerned. I was concerned. And the difference is now we have the variant that B.1.617.2 variant taking hold," explained Ford.

Although classrooms will stay closed until at least September, the government announced that all elementary and secondary students across the province would still be able to complete their studies through remote learning.

Lecce said the decision to keep the schools closed was not made lightly; and, that it was made with one aim: to "protect the summer for families and deliver a stable and safe September for students." To ensure that the potential return to in-class learning in September is more stable and better for kids, he said they plan to continue the vaccine rollout.

"The fact is today, 25 per cent of youth 12 and up, have a vaccine," explained Lecce. "We're going to get that rate much higher. We are working hard to encourage them to be vaccinated. As you know, we have a plan. And today we've confirmed again, every student in Ontario who wants a vaccine; every educator in Ontario who wants a vaccine will receive two doses ahead of September. That is a material change that we didn't have a year ago. We didn't have vaccines one year ago, but we do today. That gives us a great sense of promise. That will help make those schools, and really the community safer, because we know our schools have been safe in this province."

All three of the major education unions representing teachers and education workers in North Hastings expressed their disappointment in the Ford government's decision to keep students out of the classroom.

Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation president Harvey Bischof said the government's announcement "clearly shows that the Premier is prioritizing economic reopening over education and school reopening."

"We clearly see that Doug Ford's so-called consultation with medical experts and education stakeholders last week was never anything more than a political charade in which he attempted to find scapegoats for his decision today," added Bischof.

Bischof said the continued chaos and uncertainty in education over the past year has mainly been due to the government's inability to listen to evidence-informed medical advice and failure to consult education stakeholders. If the government would have

implemented the recommendations proposed by medical professionals, he said the current situation may have been avoided.

"We call on the Ford government to come to the table to listen to the medical experts and education stakeholders to engage in genuine consultations to prepare a school reopening plan for September that will be safe for students, families, education staff and communities," stated Bischof. "Come September, schools must not only be safe; they must also be sufficiently resourced to take the steps necessary to remediate the academic and social/emotional disruptions students have suffered."

Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario president Sam Hammond also weighed in on the government's decision to continue the provincial pause on in-person learning. For more than a year, he said the Ford government has been refusing to adequately invest in the protections and safety measures needed to keep public schools open safely.

Throughout this time, Hammond said this government has also "consistently failed to manage the pandemic by ignoring input from stakeholders, including recommendations from their own science table." Noting how this advice included repeated calls for smaller class sizes, improved ventilation, and adequate personal protective equipment for educators, he said "They also, negligently, refused to acknowledge schools as primary drivers of COVID-19 transmission. Under false pretenses, Minister Lecce spent nine months insisting schools were safe, without any evidence to confirm this. This government's utter disregard for the safety of students, educators and other education workers cannot be ignored."

Looking at the government's response to the pandemic, Hammond it becomes clear that Ontario's lengthy school closures could have been prevented with proper investment in public education. Accusing the Ford government of consistently making students and families an "afterthought," he said "they must stop undermining public education and make it a priority."

Moving forward, Hammond said every minute must be spent preparing for a safe and healthy return to in-person learning in the fall. Speaking on behalf of the union, he urged Ford to immediately convene an advisory table of all education stakeholders to address the health and safety needs of schools, and the learning and mental health challenges faced by students as a result of the pandemic.

Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association president Liz Stuart said the Premier's decision to keep schools closed to in-person learning for the rest of the school year is "a direct result of this government's continued failure to address COVID-19 in our schools and communities."

Describing the situation as "entirely avoidable," Stuart pointed out how OECTA has been calling on the government to keep Ontario's schools open for in-person learning with all appropriate safety measures in place since last spring. In doing so, she said teachers and education workers would have been able to provide "the individual attention and holistic social, emotional, and academic supports necessary to best realize student success and well-being."

Acknowledging how the Premier and Minister Lecce have had more than 15 months to do what is needed, Stuart said, "They could have implemented health and safety protocols, such as smaller class sizes to ensure physical distancing and improved ventilation, to make schools as safe as possible ? they did not. They could have instituted a robust testing and tracing system to understand how the virus was spreading throughout schools and communities ? they did not. They could have prioritized the vaccination of teachers and education workers ? they did not. They could have reopened schools on a regional basis where it made sense to do so ? they did not."

Stuart continued, "Instead, Premier Ford and Minister Lecce chose to cut funding, suppress evidence, and feed Ontarians an endless stream of misinformation in an effort to distract and deceive. And when called out for playing political games, the government pointed fingers, attempting to blame anyone and anything other than themselves."