

Smaller class sizes key to ensuring student and staff safety, says ETFO

Sept. 22, 2020

By Nate Smelle

As of Monday, Sept. 21 Ontario had recorded 90 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among students and staff in publicly-funded schools throughout the province. So far, 75 schools in Ontario have reported cases, however, only one - Fellowes High School in Pembroke - has closed.

While the number of confirmed cases province-wide continues to surge, the number of cases documented by the Hastings and Prince Edward Public Health Unit has remained stable at 52 since Sept. 5. Although the local rate of infection is relatively low at the moment, many Ontarians are concerned that the second wave of the pandemic could enter the schools and endanger the health and lives of students, staff, parent/guardians and the public. As the local president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario in Hastings and Prince Edward counties, Sarah Mackay has been keeping a close eye on how the reopening of the schools has been working out. Despite a few hiccups in the reopening, she said everyone is happy to be back in class.

"I think it is safe to say that teachers and students are glad to be back," said Mackay. "There have been some bumps along the road as we enter our new reality of being back, but for the most part, they are working out." One of Mackay's biggest concerns regarding how the provincial government has moved forward with the reopening of the schools is that many local classrooms in the counties and across the province do not provide kids, teachers, and education workers with enough space to practice physical distancing. Calling attention to how last week Conservative MPPs voted against a motion to cap class sizes at 15 students put forth by Ontario New Democratic Party leader Andrea Horwath, she said it appears the Ford government does not share the same concern for the health and safety of students and staff in the classroom.

Highlighting how SickKids has called for class sizes to be capped at no more than 15 students, Horwath said that the ONDP's motion was about "protecting our children, and protecting their families."

Horwath continued, "Doug Ford announced today that it's no longer safe to have more than 10 people gather indoors, yet he's still forcing classrooms to be jammed full, with 25 or 30 kids, and school buses to be packed with up to 70 kids. Parents, education workers, teachers and students themselves are filled with anxiety. They're wondering if their school is next. They're wondering if their family is next."

Taking into consideration how the province is tightening restrictions on social gatherings, Mackay said she also doesn't understand why they wouldn't implement the same cautionary measures to protect the students and staff sharing a relatively small space for an extended period of time.

"I have been concerned and continue to be concerned that there is just simply not enough space in classes to socially distance to two-metres," she said. "As we have heard of cases increasing around the province and with two school closures in the province already, this continues to be a big concern. With the government moving to decrease the numbers of individual who can gather in other public places, it baffles me why they think that schools are OK to not have limited numbers. The government states that their number one priority is the safety of students but clearly the vote last week on not capping class sizes to 15 speaks louder than their words."

Noting that the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board's "hands are tied due to lack of funding," Mackay said the provincial government needs to help facilitate the shrinking of class sizes by providing more support for education in Ontario. She said smaller class sizes are especially needed in kindergarten, junior and intermediate classes, which in many instances have up to 30 students.

Another unique challenge arising from the pandemic for students in North Hastings participating in virtual learning, explained

Mackay, is the lack of internet services available. She said the board has been providing some support for such families, but the government needs to do more.

The Bancroft Times reached out to Hastings ? Lennox and Addington MPP Daryl Kramp for comment regarding why he and his fellow Conservative MPPs voted unanimously against Horwath's motion to cap class sizes at 15 students, however did not hear back by press time on Monday.