



**Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)**  
**Fédération des enseignantes et des enseignants de l'élémentaire de l'Ontario (FEEO)**  
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January 6, 2021

The Honourable Doug Ford  
Premier of Ontario  
Premier's Office, Room 281  
Legislative Building, Queen's Park  
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

The Honourable Stephen Lecce  
Minister of Education  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
438 University Ave  
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

Dear Premier Ford and Minister Lecce:

Over the past few months Ontarians have witnessed the COVID-19 pandemic surge out of control in their communities. Your government has failed to contain the spread of the virus and we are now seeing more than 3,000 new cases of COVID-19 daily. With many hospitals approaching or even surpassing their full capacity and ICU capacity being overwhelmed, the strain placed on our health care system is approaching a breaking point.

The sharp increase in COVID-19 cases combined with insufficient resources have left several public health units unable to perform contact tracing in a timely manner, which has further limited efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

Despite calls from public health experts, educators, unions and medical professionals, your government has failed to implement asymptomatic surveillance testing in schools across the province. Without widespread asymptomatic testing in schools, and with the large proportion of COVID-19 cases with no known epidemiological links, we simply do not know the degree of spread in our public schools.

Since the summer, ETFO alongside other education stakeholders, parents and public health experts have been asking your government to implement measures that would

make schools safe for students and educators. We have called for smaller classes to allow for physical distancing, appropriate ventilation in all classrooms and masking for all students. These calls have gone unheeded.

Your government's failure to listen to the advice of medical professionals has resulted in the dire crisis we are now facing. The measures your government has implemented have failed to protect residents and staff in long-term care homes, have failed to prevent community spread and have failed to ensure schools are safe for students and educators.

Now, at the height of the pandemic, your government has decided to resume in-person learning for elementary students starting Monday January 11, 2021. We believe this decision, accompanied by a lack of additional safety measures in schools, places students, educators and their families at unnecessary risk.

Educators firmly believe that quality in-person learning, when done safely, is what is best for our students. Unfortunately, due to your government's inaction resulting in the current spike of COVID-19 cases, this is simply not possible in many regions of the province.

According to Dr. David Fisman, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Toronto, the available data does not support a decision to resume in-person learning for elementary students at this time. "There's a 10 per cent daily increase in ICU occupancy in Ontario right now. This is not the right time to restart in-person learning," he says. "We have to assume that there is a lot of asymptomatic COVID-19 in schools. It is irresponsible to send children and educators back to schools without knowing for sure that it is safe to do so."

We have taken the extraordinary step to ask Public Health Units to use their authority to reconsider the decision to resume in-person learning for elementary students on January 11, particularly in communities where the rate of community transmission is high and where other extreme public health measures have been deemed necessary.

We have also requested that when schools can safely resume in-person attendance, they work to implement asymptomatic surveillance testing in schools to ensure that we can better understand the role that schools are playing in the spread of the virus and base future decisions on sound data.

Premier and Minister, we are amidst an unprecedented public health crisis which threatens to overwhelm our health care system. Governments in other jurisdictions have recognized the magnitude of the crisis and have acted accordingly. The province of Quebec has shut down in-person learning, so has the United Kingdom. At the height of

the pandemic half measures will simply not do. We ask that you reconsider your decision to resume in-person learning for elementary students on January 11. We also ask that you implement the necessary safety measures prior to resuming in-person learning, including smaller class sizes to allow for appropriate physical distancing, improved ventilation and air filtration in classrooms, universal masks for all students and asymptomatic school-based surveillance testing.

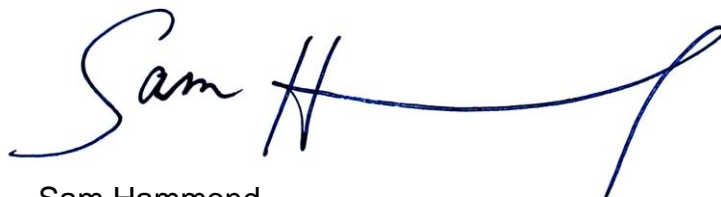
We continue to expect school boards across the province to fulfil their obligations as employers by taking every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of workers. We ask that you work with them to ensure they have the resources to do so.

We ask that your government provide much-needed supports to families, especially during periods when schools are closed to in-person attendance. Many educators and other front-line workers will require childcare during such periods. Finally, we ask that your government acknowledge and address the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on marginalized communities, in particular racialized and low-income families.

With vaccines slowly being rolled out, we must ensure that we do everything we can to protect those who are most vulnerable, especially as we can see the end of these challenging times in the months ahead.

Educators will continue to do all they can to support students and their families. We need you to do your part, and to take the appropriate measures to get the pandemic under control. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Sam Hammond  
President  
Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario

FC: MG

Copy: Andrea Horwath, Leader, Official Opposition  
Steven Del Duca, Leader, Ontario Liberal Party  
Mike Schreiner, Leader, Ontario Green Party  
Marit Stiles, MPP – Davenport  
Kathleen Wynne, MPP – Don Valley West