

January 11, 2022

Ontario's Teacher Unions Demand Schools Reopen Safely

TORONTO, ON — Today, the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), and Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) issued the following statement regarding the government's decision to move forward with reopening schools on January 17:

"The Ford government is once again choosing to roll the dice with the health and safety of students, educators, and families by reopening schools without implementing critical health and safety measures repeatedly called for by education and public health experts.

Ontario's teachers and education workers desperately want schools to open safely to ensure that students can enjoy the many benefits of in-person learning. We share the Ontario Science Table's view that school closures 'should be part of a pandemic control strategy in only the most catastrophic circumstances.'

However, the Ford government's series of belated half-measures and unfulfilled promises jeopardize the ability for schools to reopen and stay open, especially as the Omicron variant continues to pose significant risks to our communities.

The decision to reopen schools, announced via a social media leak in the middle of the night, does little to satisfy the many legitimate questions and concerns people have around what the Ford government has done to ensure a safe and sustainable school year.

Ontario's students do not deserve, and cannot afford, another year of repeated but preventable school closures and learning disruptions.

We urge the government to act immediately and implement the following measures to address COVID-19 in schools in order for students to safely enjoy the benefits of in-person learning:

- increase effective vaccination rates in our school communities by publicly promoting the importance of vaccination for students;
- prioritize access to booster shots for ALL teachers and education workers across the province;
- add COVID-19 to the list of designated diseases in *Ontario Regulation 261/13 Designated Diseases* under the *Immunization of School Pupils Act* (ISPA);
- improve and maintain ventilation and install HEPA filters in ALL classrooms and public spaces in schools and campuses, with publicly available air quality metrics and standards;
- reduce class sizes to promote physical distancing;
- ensure the non-fit-tested N95 mask orders by school boards are filled and delivered immediately;
- provide the best possible masks to all students, with improved guidelines to ensure masking compliance;
- implement stricter screening and isolation requirements;
- implement a more robust testing and contact tracing regime, which includes providing all education staff with regular access to rapid antigen tests and prioritizing PCR test accessibility for both education workers and Ontario's students should they register a positive result on their rapid tests;

- implement a sustainable plan to address an anticipated increase in staff absences due to COVID-related illness and/or isolation;
- reinstitute the requirement for schools to report and notify families of COVID-19 exposures in their child's classroom and school; and
- reconsider the short-sighted decision to decrease the isolation period from 10 to five days, as doing so unnecessarily risks reintroducing the virus into school settings.

Ontario's teachers and education workers will continue doing everything possible to best serve the needs of our students and communities. It is past time the Ford government did the same."

Karen Brown, President, ETFO
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