



Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
Fédération des enseignantes et des enseignants de l'élémentaire de l'Ontario (FEEO)
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February 9, 2021

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

Dear Minister Lecce:

I am writing to follow up on the status of March break for this school year. On February 3, ETFO's General Secretary Sharon O'Halloran wrote to Deputy Minister of Education Nancy Naylor. In that letter, ETFO made it clear that it is opposed to delaying or cancelling March break.

Since then, the government has continued to float the possibility of postponing or cancelling March break, despite unanimous opposition from unions representing educators and other stakeholders in the sector including all school board associations and the Ontario Principal's Council.

The public health argument for postponing or cancelling March break is dubious at best. Despite the limited available data regarding the role schools have played in contributing to transmission of the virus, there is growing evidence that school openings have contributed to the rise of cases during the second wave of the pandemic. In fact, the sharp increase in positivity rates in children started before the winter holiday break. Cancelling March break as an attempt to curb the spread of COVID-19 is not the solution.

The additional pressures experienced by the school community as a result of the pandemic are unprecedented. Students, educators, parents and guardians need a break. The pattern the government has shown in making decisions while ignoring experts and the front-line workers that are most impacted has only served to compound these challenges.

This week, ETFO heard from thousands of our members during telephone town hall meetings. Ontario educators are anxious, stressed and exhausted. They have been asked to work beyond their capacity, often in uncertain conditions, with unpredictable direction from this government. Educators need an opportunity to rest and recharge in anticipation of what will surely be a challenging spring as the pandemic continues to evolve.

Minister, we are gravely concerned about the well-being of students, educators and families across Ontario. A survey conducted by the CTF in October 2020, found that close to 40 per cent of teachers were barely coping with their stress, with almost 80 per cent of ETFO members reporting high levels of stress. Since then, the situation has only worsened. The Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) recently conducted a study among educators on their experience during the second wave of the pandemic. The study found that 59 per cent of ETFO members reported moderate to severe anxiety, and 46 per cent of members met the study's criteria for depression. Burnout amongst educators was also found to be at unprecedented levels. These results were similar for educators working in virtual or in-person learning.

The results of these studies are alarming and raise serious concerns for the safety of our members. Your government has a duty to protect the health and safety of educators. Postponing or cancelling March break could have disastrous consequences for educators, students and their families.

The government has repeatedly made statements about the importance of mental health. This is one of those situations where the government must prioritize the mental health of students, educators and their families. We urge you to put this issue to rest and reassure Ontarians that the much-needed respite during March break will not be postponed or cancelled.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sam H" followed by a long, sweeping horizontal line that ends in a small upward flick.

Sam Hammond
President

SH:FC:KK

Copy: Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister of Education
Andrew Davis, Assistant Deputy Minister of Education, Labour & Finance Division