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Re: Prioritizing front-line education workers during the vaccine rollout

We are writing on behalf of the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), the Ontario School Board Council of Unions - CUPE Ontario, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) and the more than 250,000 education workers we collectively represent. On behalf of our members, students and their families we want to thank you for all your work during this unprecedented public health crisis.

The distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine will be a significant challenge and we want to pledge our full support. The government's stated goal is to keep schools open to in-person learning. As the COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Taskforce considers the order of priority for vaccinations during the vaccine rollout, we are asking that priority access to the vaccine be given to the front-line education workers that make that happen.

We recognize that keeping schools open for in-person instruction is best for students, but only if it is done safely. Vaccination is an added layer of protection, which will help to lower the transmission of COVID-19 occurring in schools and thus reduce the rates of community transmission.

While there is conflicting evidence on the source of transmission in school-based outbreaks, students and education workers continue to be at risk. As experienced in Ontario during late fall and into the winter, positivity rates among children and youth can quickly increase without sufficient measures. We also know that there are increasing risks of airborne transmission with the new COVID-19 variants of concern, which are leading to new outbreaks and school closures, yet no additional precautions are being implemented in our schools.

So far none of the vaccines approved for use in Canada have been approved for children under the age of 16. Considering the increased risk posed by the new variants and the limitations of the prevention measures currently available to schools, we believe it makes sense to prioritize front-line education workers who are working in schools across the province.

Canada's federal guidelines, as well as guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and from other jurisdictions throughout the world, include the need to prioritize the vaccination of education workers alongside other front-line workers, after the vaccination of high-risk groups and health care workers.

It is important for the implementation of a voluntary vaccination program for educators to be well communicated and easily accessible throughout the province, which may present some challenges given that local health units are each developing their own plan. As unions representing education workers, we are constantly in touch with our members and are certainly willing to assist in sharing information with them.

We appreciate that COVID-19 vaccination will be voluntary and that is a positive approach to public health. We would, however, anticipate that education workers, particularly those working in schools, will be eager to get vaccinated.

We know you and your team are facing a monumental task ahead and we thank you for your service. Education workers will continue to do their best to support students and to keep our schools safe and healthy.

Sincerely,

Anne Vinet-Roy, présidente
Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO)

Laura Walton, President
Ontario School Board Council of Unions - CUPE Ontario

Sam Hammond, President
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Copy: Hon. Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education
Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister of Education