



## Statement – Potential Reopening of Schools

May 28, 2021

Yesterday, Premier Ford sent a letter to many stakeholder groups seeking input on the possible return to school by the end of this academic year. In our view, the questions posed can only effectively and competently be answered by medical professionals. However, as front-line school leaders, we do have comments and suggestions to put forward.

First, it is important to note that many schools are still open and have been throughout the entire school year. Students with special education needs, whose learning requires specialized support, continue to learn in person, and there are teachers, support staff, principals and vice-principals who have been supporting them throughout this time. The question now is if and how we can safely welcome the rest of our students, staff and administrators back.

Whether schools can re-open safely depends on several factors – the availability of adequate PPE, continued screening protocols, enough teachers to safely staff classrooms, high quality ventilation systems, continued cohorting, contact tracing by local public health units and the availability of rapid and asymptomatic testing.

It is essential that everyone working in schools has the opportunity to have their first vaccination, and preferably their second, as soon as possible. Vaccinations for eligible students must also be prioritized. The government and local public health units need to ensure that this can be done quickly, for the safety of staff and students.

Given the different number of cases throughout the province, the opening of schools should be done on a regional basis, in consultation with local public health units, based on local medical data. We do not believe it is necessary or acceptable to keep students away from in-class learning if case numbers in their area remain low. We should be ensuring we can welcome as many students as possible, as quickly as possible, back into our schools.

Based on medical data shared to date, including decreased case numbers and increasing vaccination rates, we believe that there may be schools in a position to safely open the week of May 31<sup>st</sup>. Once this decision is made, boards will require at least 2 school days to adequately prepare to welcome students back. However, if schools are not able to open by the week of June 7, then we don't think they should do so this school year, as there would not be adequate time to make the return possible and practical.

Finally, the Premier asked if students should return to class before indoor gatherings resume in July. If it can be done safely – and in many cases we believe it can – then yes, students returning to school, even for a few weeks, should be a higher priority in the province’s reopening plan than outdoor gatherings or retail openings. This is not only about the education of our students, which obviously is extremely important. This is also about the social, emotional and mental health of our students. If we can get them back to school safely, we should do everything we can to make that happen. Doing so will require the support of the government and the commitment to ensure schools and educators have what they need to do so successfully.