



Statement – School Reopening Plans

July 31, 2020

Yesterday, Education Minister Lecce released the government's plan for reopening schools in September. The Ontario Principals' Council, representing over 5,400 principals and vice-principals in publicly funded elementary and secondary schools across the province, supports a return to school for the academic and mental well-being of students. We are committed to ensuring as safe an environment as possible for all. It will require the collaboration and co-operation of students, staff, parents, stakeholders and the ministry.

While schools and boards continue to plan for the reopening of our classes, several factors make it difficult to know how the implementation will play out in September: We do not know what the pandemic case load will be at that time; school boards have until August 4 to submit their plans to the ministry; and until we are actually back in class, it will be impossible to anticipate what additional challenges will arise.

We are pleased to see the government commit an additional \$309 million in funding to help re-open schools. Whether that will be enough money for almost 5,000 schools across the province is unknown. We do, however, know that to safely re-open, schools will need

- a clear plan for how students are to physically distance in small classrooms with little to no room to move around, particularly given pre-COVID class sizes
- additional teaching and support staff to help students who will need to catch up with their studies, due to their long absence from school
- alternate arrangements for students eating lunch at school, since their masks will be off, supervision will be limited and there will be more than 50 students in a setting, making physically distancing impossible
- clarity on how intense cleaning in school buildings and classrooms, as well as for physical education equipment, library materials, computers and other shared equipment in schools, will be managed
- clarity on how classrooms will be cleaned in secondary schools between classes
- an adequate number of supply teachers, support staff and administrators to fill in for staff who may become ill (due to COVID or otherwise) once school starts, and assurance they will remain in one school only so as not to potentially cross contaminate sites
- sufficient cleaning equipment – including hot water, soap, paper towels, disinfectant wipes and sanitizer – to ensure students and staff are able to wash their hands multiple times per day

- a safe and workable plan for high needs/special education students to return to school full-time, as is the expressed goal
- clear protocols for how before- and after-school programs will be accommodated
- clear protocols provided by public health officials as to how schools are to deal with suspected or new cases of the virus
- clear protocols provided by public health as to when students may return to school if they or their family members have symptoms or test positive for the virus and
- in partnership with boards, the ability to be empowered to make decisions about schooling according to consultations with local Public Health Units.

Following three and a half months of remote, emergency learning, many challenges were identified. When online learning is re-introduced in the fall, those issues will arise again.

- For families who choose not to send their children back to school, how will online instruction work and who will provide it?
- Will teachers providing online learning for students other than those in their own classes have the proper training to teach the subjects assigned?
- Will there be enough devices for every student who needs one, and how, when and by whom will they be safely distributed?
- Will the government ensure there is reliable and available internet coverage available for all students, especially those in rural and northern areas of the province?
- How will synchronous learning be offered safely and efficiently by teachers?
- What will the ministry do to ensure that hands-on/practical courses such as construction, automotive, hospitality, healthcare, cosmetology, music etc. can be safely available for students?
- How will the ministry ensure co-operative and work-based alternative education opportunities are safely available?

Given all the unknowns at this time, it may be necessary to implement a staggered return, whereby students cumulatively start classes over a two-week period in September, so that schools can address any challenges as they arise and build the confidence of our school communities.

In addition, it is imperative that educators not be responsible for acting as quasi medical professionals. We are not trained to diagnose illness and cannot be responsible for taking temperatures or caring for ill students. Families must ensure they are keeping children home when they feel unwell and contact their personal health practitioners immediately.

The Minister needs to recognize the impact that these decisions will have on principals and vice-principals, who now must review and adjust timetables and scheduling to accommodate online learning, hire additional teachers and support staff, mobilize resources, receive and provide training, all within a very short period of time.

While we acknowledge that consulting with the medical community is necessary to ensure safety for our students, it is essential that the Minister is also regularly consulting with front line

educators – principals, vice-principals, teachers and support staff – who will be in schools when they reopen, and who can provide the best and most accurate depiction of the situation as classes resume.