

## Ontario's Return to School plan doesn't go far enough: advocates

August is a time when most parents and their kids turn their focus on getting back to school.

As planning takes place this summer with a little bit more certainty in the air, Ontario's Ministry of Education last week released new guidelines that are intended to support a safe return to in-person learning this September.

All public and private schools will return to full-time in-person learning for the 2021-2022 school year with health and safety measures in place, said the Ministry. Remote learning will continue to be an option for students and families. Elementary school children will attend school in person five days per week. Students will be in cohorts, which means they will be with the same group of children and have one teacher. Other programming, such as physical education or French, will continue while students are in cohorts.

Students in secondary schools will attend school in person five days per week. School boards will ensure schedules have only two in-person classes. [School boards] might have to make an exception to the rule for having two in-person classes if the student goes to a school where contact size can be limited by cohorting grades or overall size of the school is small, making contact tracing manageable.

Students returning to school from Grades 1 to 12 will be required to wear non-medical or cloth masks indoors, including in hallways, during classes, and when on school vehicles but will not require the wearing of masks outdoors.

Kindergarten students will be encouraged to wear masks indoors and on school vehicles.

School staff, unless there are medical conditions to the contrary, must also wear masks outdoors and should use eye protections like face shields or goggles, the Ministry notes.

Once the school year begins, health and phys-ed classes will resume with high and low-contact activities allowed. Clubs and other activities will resume and students will be able to socialize with other cohorts outdoors during recess and indoors with physical distancing.

Music programs will resume, as will day trips and overnight field trips, with students being screened for COVID-19 symptoms.

Students, teachers and staff will need to self-screen for symptoms of COVID-19 every day before heading into school. A Provincially-launched screening tool will be in place which will determine if the individual should attend school and stay home, as well as outline the next steps.

It will be up to schools and school boards to continue to ensure adequate ventilation measures are in place in all classrooms, [including] keeping the windows open, increasing fresh air intake, operating HVAC systems for longer hours, and using standalone HEPA filter units to ensure adequate ventilation in classrooms and other school spaces, like cafeterias, gyms and music rooms.

The plan, however, did not get a passing grade from teachers' unions, with representatives from the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) issuing a joint statement stating the measures do not go far enough and do not reflect what has been learned over the last year-and-a-half.

For months, teachers and education workers have been saying that in-person learning is the best and most equitable way for students to learn, they said. Although the Ford government is saying the same thing, its actions do not back up their words.

The government's ventilation announcement [of a further \$25 million to improve ventilation in schools] is too little and too late.

Why wasn't this investment made 18 months ago? It's clear that they do not know what schools need, how schools operate, nor how to keep students and education workers safe. They've ignored our calls for an advisory table and dismissed frontline education workers, but our offer to be consulted stands.

By releasing an incomplete and inadequate plan, instead of assuring families, staff and students that schools will be safe, the Ford government has attempted to create the illusion of normalcy. We are still in a pandemic, with the potential of a fourth wave driven by the Delta variant. Entire sections of the guidance document are missing at a time when some students are already back in class and others will be returning within four to five weeks, including a plan to manage COVID-19 outbreaks in schools, learning recovery and renewal supports and resources, and a comprehensive plan to support student mental health and wellbeing.

The plan, they concluded, loosens some protective measures, ignores the need for ongoing funding to ensure a safe return to school, and is an example of the government downloading its responsibility to school boards and local public health agencies without providing adequate direction, time or funding.

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter