

OSSTF/FEESO calls on Ford government to change course on their deeply flawed education plan and invest to keep schools open, safe, and effective

December 9, 2020 – As cases of COVID-19 in Ontario schools rise sharply, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) calls upon Minister of Education Stephen Lecce and the Ford government to recognize that their plans for education during the COVID-19 pandemic are failing students, parents, educators, and communities. Rather than take meaningful action to address this sharp increase, the government has prematurely shut down the Provincial Legislature and is ignoring the crisis at hand.

On December 8, the government reported a record 333 new school-related cases in Ontario. To date, almost one in five schools in Ontario have reported cases of COVID-19. In the meantime, the Minister and the Ford government continue to ignore much of the expert medical advice provided to them well before September to reduce class sizes, improve ventilation in schools, and a host of other recommendations from medical experts.

Additionally, teachers and education workers continue to struggle to provide high quality education and services for students under the weight of a poor Ford / Lecce plan, which includes unreasonably large class sizes. As well, the government has failed to provide the necessary resources and funding to allow school boards to establish better learning environments for students during the pandemic. Different learning conditions, including hybrid, concurrent, and split online and in-person classes have led to tremendous upheaval for students and educators.

Meanwhile, the Minister of Education continues to attempt to convince people in Ontario that his plan is working and that his government will “continue to take action.” Even yesterday, Lecce tweeted that, “we have worked together to keep schools safe,” but the truth is, Lecce has failed to work with unions and educators as the number of schools reporting cases of COVID-19 has risen to 853.

“The education system in Ontario is teetering under the weight of COVID-19, despite the outstanding efforts of education workers and teachers,” said OSSTF/FEESO President Harvey Bischof. “Educators are doing their absolute best to keep students safe and to offer a high-quality learning environment for them despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. However, Stephen Lecce and Doug Ford continue to demonstrate a high level of persistent ignorance to what is actually happening in schools.”

“The Ford government continues to sit on more than \$12 billion of unused contingency funds, some specifically earmarked for education, as verified by the December 8, 2020 report of the Financial Accountability Office. These funds could have helped to reduce class sizes to keep students and staff safe. They could have been used to improve ventilation in schools well before they opened in September. Since March, we have

offered to provide insights and advice to this government on behalf of the educators in Ontario schools. Instead, we continue to be shut out of the process, and the education system is paying for the disrespect that Stephen Lecce and Doug Ford demonstrate for those who work on the frontlines of education. In short, education workers and teachers feel abandoned and completely unsupported by the Ministry of Education,” continued Bischof.

The Canadian Teachers’ Federation recently released the results of their Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey. Of the OSSTF/FEESO participants in that survey,

- 76% said that they do NOT feel supported by the Ministry of Education at all
- 18% said that they feel BARELY supported by the Ministry of Education
- 6% said that they feel SOMEWHAT supported by the Ministry of Education
- Less than 1% said that they feel very or extremely supported by the Ministry of Education

In conclusion, Bischof stated, “The current Ford government education plan is unsustainable for education workers and teachers, as it is for students and families. We are not calling for the government to close down the education system. On the contrary, we strongly believe that schools need to remain open as long as possible for the sake of students, families, and the well-being of our communities. However, Stephen Lecce is failing the publicly funded education system and he is failing Ontario. It is time that the government truly listened to educators and parents, and change course immediately on this deeply flawed plan. It is time to invest in the safety of students and educators, and it is time to invest in providing a high quality of education.”

GF/DE/mo cope343