

October 9, 2020

A Message to OSSTF/FEESO Members from the Provincial Executive

As the second month of the school year unfolds, the OSSTF/FEESO Provincial Executive thanks you for the work you continue to do for the students in Ontario's publicly-funded education system. Your professionalism and dedication are appreciated by the students, parents, and communities you serve.

We know that many of you are stressed and fatigued at the end of each day because of the challenging circumstances that the COVID-19 pandemic has put before you. These challenges are exacerbated by a weak and flawed school reopening plan from the Ford government; a plan that left school board and university employers scrambling right up to the last minute to implement. It is a plan that continues to stretch all of us who work in education to our limits as we do our part to keep students engaged and safe.

OSSTF/FEESO, along with other education union affiliates, brought forth an appeal to the Ontario Labour Relations Board to force the government to bring in province-wide minimum safety standards to schools that included smaller class sizes to allow for proper physical distancing, proper ventilation standards, and other important safety measures to keep staff and students safe at school. Implementation of these standards would, in the view of the medical experts we sought counsel from, further help reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 in our communities. These standards would go a long way to keeping schools open in a sustainable way and therefore doing their part to keep our communities safe.

Unfortunately, the Ontario Labour Relations Board dismissed our appeal stating that they did not have the jurisdiction to force the government to implement these standards under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. However, this does not mean we will stop fighting to keep workers and students as safe as possible.

OSSTF/FEESO will continue to work closely with other education unions and community allies to press this government to invest the funding and resources necessary to have a sustainable plan to keep our schools open during this pandemic. Our local leaders continue to work with school board and post-secondary employers to keep staff, students and communities safe, and to deliver the education and supports that students need. Their efforts on your behalf cannot go without recognition; thanks must be given to them for all they are doing in your Districts to help lessen the stresses that this return to school plan is placing on all of you.

As we continue into the school year, the work that you do to help keep schools safe and engaging places to learn will be of ever-increasing importance. It is because of you that our schools are open, and students are receiving the education and supports that they need during these difficult times. While this burden is significant, we know you are all dedicated to what you do, and that you will give all you can to the students you serve.

As the holiday weekend approaches, we urge you all to carve out a moment of reflection, consider the incredible impact your efforts have had on students, and understand that your successes may not look the same as they have in past years. You deserve to take some time to be kind to yourself, to try and turn off from the hustle and the uncertainty. Our own wellness is our strength and we need to honour it by taking a bit of time to recharge.

While the Ford government, including Minister of Education Stephen Lecce, continues to focus on dividing teachers and school boards, all the while ignoring the importance of support staff in Ontario's publicly-funded education system, we will remain focused on pressuring the government for safer schools and campuses. Safety for you, our members, means safety for students, families, and communities. Again, we thank you all for your dedication and determination to the students you serve.

Yours in Federation



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