

OSSTF/FEESO Statement—Ford fails to fortify the public school system to protect students and communities

January 3, 2022—Despite the fact that today's announced restrictions and measures are necessary to help address the Omicron variant's impact on our health care system, Premier Doug Ford and his government have, once again, failed to recognize all that is needed to keep schools safe. We have known about the virulence of this variant for over a month, and yet, even last week the Premier failed to acknowledge its impact and implement a meaningful plan for schools.

Premier Doug Ford told us today that we need to "brace for impact" but has failed to fortify the public school system to keep communities safe. Today's announcement does not go nearly far enough. Without increasing access to COVID-19 testing, providing full access to enhanced PPE, guaranteeing priority access to booster vaccines for educators, ensuring HEPA filters are in place in schools, and reducing class sizes to allow for physical distancing, the Premier cannot say he is doing everything he can to protect students, staff, and communities.

Ford acknowledges, "that online learning isn't ideal." We are entering the third calendar year of the pandemic, and yet urgent and direct action to implement the required safety protocols to get students back to in-person learning has not happened. With the extended pause of in-person learning, the government has additional time to finally step up and protect students, staff, and communities.

Special education teachers and other education workers, including some educational assistants, custodians and other support staff, are returning this Wednesday to school buildings without assurances that proper safety measures will be in place on time. When students return to in-person learning in the coming weeks, they are still returning to large classes with limited ability to physically distance, varying access to PPE, inconsistent ventilation, and a lack of pro-active rapid testing and reporting.

The government has failed Ontario's schools by:

- Cancelling contact tracing;
- Reducing access to PCR testing;
- Ending transparent reporting of case counts in schools;
- Excluding schools from occupancy caps similar to those for households and businesses;
- Failing to reduce class sizes to ensure REAL cohorting and physical distancing can be established and maintained;
- Failing to have N95 masks ready for deployment;
- Leaving education workers and teachers without priority access to vaccinations and boosters.

If the Ford government had implemented these protocols months ago, they would not be in this position. Instead, Doug Ford is lurching from crisis to crisis, and continuing to see the erosion of the public's confidence in the government's ability to handle this pandemic. We need the Premier to initiate lasting, effective actions to get us through these challenges. Our hope is that this government will provide more information and details to the public in the coming days. Today's announcement, while necessary, insufficiently addresses what is required to make schools safe.

OSSTF/FEESO will continue to advocate for the safety of students, communities and its members.