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ETFO calls on Ford government to take immediate action to ensure safety of students, educators

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TORONTO, ON - Given the deeply concerning rise in COVID-19 cases in areas across Ontario and the government's negligent decision to keep schools open without additional enhanced safety measures, education workers and other essential workers must be prioritized for vaccinations. Until this happens, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) calls on the Ford government and public health units (PHUs) in hot spot areas to take immediate steps to ensure the safety of educators and students, including a temporary move from in-person to virtual learning.

"The Ford government's shutdown announcement did nothing to assure Ontarians that it has their best interests at heart. Instead, it left many feeling abandoned, frightened, and unsure about the future," says ETFO President Sam Hammond. "As medical experts have said, there is no excuse—no valid reason—to not begin vaccinating all essential workers today; this includes all education workers. Failure to do so, with so many available vaccines sitting in freezers, is negligent and dangerous."

ETFO is continuing to monitor the situation on an urgent basis and will be meeting tomorrow to discuss next steps if the Ford government fails to prioritize education workers and other essential workers.

The province's decision to continue in-person learning despite alarming increases in COVID-19 cases in hot spot areas defies logic. "Educators firmly believe that quality in-person learning, when done safely, is what is best for students. Unfortunately, due to the Ford government's repeated refusal to make necessary investments, this is simply not possible in many areas of the province. The government, school boards and PHUs must take immediate action to ensure students and staff are safe, up to and including moving learning online, if that's what's deemed necessary," notes Hammond.

Medical experts have repeatedly said that schools are not mere reflections of community transition, but drivers of it, and that variants are being transmitted by children. "By downplaying the transmission of COVID-19 in schools and refusing to provide necessary funding, despite having billions of dollars in unallocated contingency funds, the Ford government continues to prove that they are incapable of managing the pandemic and keeping us all safe," adds Hammond.

ETFO calls on the provincial government to:

- focus on the hardest-hit regions;
- prioritize vaccinations for education workers and all other essential workers;
- implement temporary virtual learning in areas where numbers are increasing at alarming rates;
- reduce class sizes to ensure two metres of physical distancing;
- fund N95 masks, instead of medical masks, which do little to prevent aerosol spread;
- fund improvements to ventilation and air filtration;
- ensure broad uptake of COVID-19 testing;
- implement paid sick leave; and
- provide financial support for families who need it while lockdown measures are in effect.

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“While elementary educators have shown incredible commitment during these difficult times, they must not continue to be put in situations where their safety and the safety of students is at high risk. Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, all workers have the right to refuse work if they believe it to be unsafe,” notes Hammond. In the case of COVID-19, a potential danger includes risk of exposure that is not being properly managed. The [Ontario Federation of Labour’s Guide to Health and Safety for Education Workers](#) provides a clear understanding of their rights.

Adds Hammond, “Teaching during a pandemic is incredibly challenging, and educators’ commitment has been unwavering. I want educators and other education workers to know that we see you, we hear you, and we will continue to do everything we can to stand against a government that has repeatedly failed you. Unsafe conditions, endless disruption and chaos for educators, students and their families must end.”

ETFO represents 83,000 elementary public school teachers, occasional teachers and education professionals across the province. Its *Building Better Schools* education agenda can be viewed at [BuildingBetterSchools.ca](#).

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