

ETFO renews calls for safety measures that ensure safe, sustainable return to in-person learning

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TORONTO, ON – Over the winter break and following last week’s announcement, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) advocated for a short delay to the restart of in-person learning so that additional protections could be in place before students and education workers return. Given the rapid spread of Omicron across Ontario, today’s announcement is a safer decision than the one made last week, but additional action is still needed.

“As the pandemic surges, the Ford government must invest in infection prevention and control measures that ensure in-person learning can continue safely and sustainably,” says ETFO President Karen Brown. “Last week’s decision came dangerously close to risking the safety of students and ETFO members. We share the belief that in-person learning is the best and most equitable way for students to learn, but it must be safe.”

Nearly two years into this health crisis, we must, once again, pivot to remote learning to help stem the spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant. “This shift to remote learning is frustrating because we know it could have been avoided had the province funded and implemented safety measures at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and not half-measures,” says Brown. “We recognize the hardships that come with another round of remote learning. To ensure this is the last time we need this emergency measure, we will continue to call on the Ford government to invest in adequate infection prevention measures.”

To safely return to in-person learning, and to provide the greatest level of protection to Ontario’s students, teachers, other education workers, and communities:

- N95s must be available to all education workers;
- Everyone working in, or attending a school or campus who is eligible and can be vaccinated safely, should be vaccinated;
- Access to booster shots should be prioritized for education workers;
- HEPA filters should be installed in all classrooms and public/shared spaces in schools;
- Rapid Antigen Tests must be provided to students and education workers to minimize absenteeism and learning loss;
- The province must continue to monitor and report COVID-19 cases/outbreaks in schools and ensure they are communicated to close contacts. The suspension of this practice has resulted in grave concern and hesitancy about a return to in-person learning, especially because additional infection prevention and control measures, like N95 masks, are not yet in place;

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- There must be a plan to address staff absenteeism, which we can anticipate given the impact of isolation requirements on the health care sector and the spread of Omicron; and
- The Ford government must expand the paid sick leave program immediately.

Without the addition of these layers of protection, we are not confident that safe in-person learning can be sustained. Notes Brown, “We want to welcome students back to school as quickly as possible, but schools must be safe, and we need to see more than a press conference or two to be assured that they are.”

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, ETFO members have gone to extraordinary lengths to teach and support students, whether in person or online. “We know our members will continue to show great leadership and care, working to address the devastating impacts the pandemic continues to have on communities, especially on those who are marginalized,” adds Brown. “I want to acknowledge ETFO members’ efforts and assure them that our commitment to protecting them and the students they serve is unwavering.”

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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