

Ford government confirms return to in-person learning without consultation

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TORONTO, ON – Last night, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) learned, from reporters on social media, that the Ford government is moving ahead with a return to in-person learning on January 17. The lack of direct confirmation is both disheartening and troubling, especially since ETFO members have been on the front lines throughout the pandemic, and have valid concerns about their safety and that of students.

“After witnessing the Ford government’s repeated failure to slow the spread of COVID-19, we aren’t surprised by last night’s return-to-class announcement, if we can call it that,” says ETFO President Karen Brown. “We’re left asking, once again, what has been done to ensure in-person learning can return safely and sustainably, and why isn’t the Ford government consulting with ETFO or sharing its plans with us directly? From the onset of the pandemic, we have indicated our interest in working together so we can keep students learning in person, safely and, without disruption.”

Despite assurances from the Ford government that additional safety measures have been implemented in schools, ETFO remains concerned about:

- the low vaccination rate for five- to 11-year-olds;
- the government’s failure to reinstate monitoring and reporting of COVID-19 cases/outbreaks in schools, and communication with close contacts and families;
- the lack of confirmation that N95 masks have been delivered to every Ontario school;
- the need for a concrete plan to address the anticipated increase in staff absences due to COVID-related illness and/or isolation;
- the absence of a robust testing program for students and school staff;
- the unknown status of the additional 3,000 HEPA filters announced by the government on December 30; and
- the ability of education workers to receive their boosters this week given how late the decision came to prioritize them.

Throughout this health crisis, the Ford government has demonstrated its complete lack of understanding about how schools work. They have continued to download responsibilities to school boards and public health units that are already overwhelmed.

“We don’t know how Omicron will impact schools because the majority of students and staff haven’t been in school buildings for over three weeks,” notes Brown. “We’re seeing massive disruption in school systems across America due to staff illness and isolation, and cohorts being collapsed as a result. This is not a safe way forward.”

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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, ETFO continues to call on the Ford government to:

- make N95 masks available to all education workers;
- mandate masks for all students and education workers;
- ensure everyone working in or attending a school who can be safely vaccinated is vaccinated, and those who are unvaccinated are being tested per Ministry guidance;
- improve ventilation and install HEPA filters in all classrooms and public/shared spaces in schools;
- reduce class sizes to promote physical distancing;
- implement robust testing and contact tracing programs;
- ensure education workers and students have access to rapid antigen tests;
- return to monitoring and reporting COVID-19 cases/outbreaks in schools, and ensuring school communities are made aware of these cases/outbreaks, especially individuals who are close contacts;
- address an anticipated increase in staff absences due to COVID-related illness and/or isolation; and
- expand the paid sick leave program immediately.

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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