



**ONTARIO PUBLIC  
SCHOOL BOARDS'  
ASSOCIATION**

**Leading Education's Advocates**

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**OPSBA Submission Regarding  
Ontario's Plan to Reopen Schools**



The Honourable Stephen Lecce  
Minister of Education

Dear Minister:

As respected and long-standing advocates of public education, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) wants to ensure the voice of school boards and trustees are considered as the Ministry of Education works to provide the sector with a plan regarding the transition back to school following the closures after March Break and the decision to have schools remain closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

The current pandemic is not a situation anyone working in the public education system has had to manage before, and the long-term impacts to mental health, well-being and student achievement are yet to be fully understood. The pandemic has highlighted how central and stabilizing the school system is to our communities, children, youth and their families. It is worth noting that the public education system was able to pivot fairly quickly to the impact of the pandemic and implemented recommendations and policies of the government and public health officials. We are extremely proud of the monumental work done by our teachers, education workers and school board staff who have done their very best to provide continued learning opportunities and support for their students.

For this submission, we have engaged our trustees from our consultative work teams, the Education Program and Policy Development Work Teams. These teams comprise trustees from across the entire province and include representation from our Indigenous Trustees' Council and student trustees from OSTA-AECO. In addition, we have been in discussions with our fellow CSBA members whose provinces have returned to school – British Columbia and Québec. It is our hope that the ministry has also been reaching out to their counterparts in these provinces to learn from them about what has worked well and what challenges remain.

Furthermore, we have also looked to experts including the [framework](#) developed by UNICEF and partners in other Canadian provinces, as well as leading international educational experts like [Pasi Sahlberg](#) who are providing credible advice about considerations for any return to school.

We are also aware of the government's recent decisions to reopen child care centres and summer day camps. These announcements came with strict guidelines and we would expect there to be common aspects concerning health and safety protocols affecting children and youth. We would also expect some consistency with any final decisions regarding plans for colleges and universities.

Our submission includes suggestions and recommendations for a Ministry of Education framework, operational details that need to be addressed, other return-to-school considerations, thoughts for next steps and an appendix that includes highlights from our internal survey.

Our common goal is to mitigate risks and have students and staff healthy and safe while at school. We all also want to build confidence in the public education system so students and their families feel comfortable returning to school. From our discussions with our work teams, we noted common framework components for schools to reopen. These include:

- Making decisions based on the professional advice of public health experts. We must defer to and respect their recommendations.
- Providing local school board flexibility for implementation and not a one-size-fits-all approach. We support recommendations and guidelines, but not regulations. (It should be noted that currently some school board jurisdictions have communities and schools in both Phase 2 and Phase 1).
- A phased-in approach for students to return to schools.
- A PD/PA day(s) in advance of the school year for teachers and administrators to collaboratively plan, learn and prepare for a mixed learning model and new safety protocols, would be beneficial.
- Respecting and considering all individuals connected to the school community. This includes students, parents and families; teachers and education workers; school board

staff; and elected school board trustees, who are responsible for school board governance and provide the community voice.

- Continued and increased mental health supports and services for staff and students.
- Real solutions to identify and address issues of equity, accessibility and inclusion for all students (e.g., special education, technology, marginalized and at/in risk students).
- A differentiated transition and support model for learning and/or mental health needs for more vulnerable students.
- A clear, regular and transparent communication plan that is designed to build public confidence and reduce anxiety for students to return to school.
- Clear, concise and regular communication with all school boards that includes a co-constructed action plan with significant lead time that allows for effective planning.
- Promoting and facilitating cross-sectoral partnerships with local public health units and school boards with the return of public health nurses with greater connection to schools.
- Using research and evidence-based practices to inform decision-making.

*“Any plans being released by the government need to be flexible, need to have adequate resources available, and need to have plans for more PD for all staff. Decisions need to be made on a timely basis so that the school boards and staff have ample opportunity to prepare.”*

### **Framework Suggestions**

Following the example of British Columbia and Alberta, we would also support a framework that includes Guiding Principles aimed at ensuring safe and healthy work environments, and continued education supports for all students, but also provides consideration for those vulnerable and marginalized students and communities, including Indigenous communities. The B.C. framework also provides for a staged or phased-in approach to a return to school. This begins with a staggered approach of students and grades building up to a full return. Alberta’s plan considers three scenarios that could potentially exist in September where in-class learning resumes, partially resumes, or continues with home learning.

Any approach should consider local issues and what can be done in practical terms. There are differences across the province in terms of school capacity with some schools having plenty of extra space and others beyond or over capacity. Some schools/school boards may be able to return to full capacity sooner than others.

Building on the UNICEF document, Ontario’s framework needs to include sub-sections that address:

- **Why reopening schools is important:** Most children thrive on routine and structure, including social interactions with their peers and caring adults. The evidence of the impacts of prolonged school closures includes negative impacts on mental health; the need for a well-supported continuity of learning; and the impacts on students with special needs and marginalized students.
- **When, where and which schools to reopen:** This should describe how schools/school boards implement regional approaches based on their local context.
- **How to reopen schools:** This should include the list of operational details for schools/school boards to consider.

## **Important Operational Details**

We are aware of the ministry's several working groups and tables that are contemplating all the various operational issues involved with a return to school plan. School boards have also been able to share concerns with the ministry and Minister of Education via regular teleconference and these have been appreciated. We also know that many school boards have prepared reports that contemplate and plan for the following issues:

- Creating a supply inventory of safety equipment and determining where to purchase if needed or if individuals are to provide their own.
- Use of Personal Protective Equipment\* (PPE) – will this be a public health directive or left up to the employer?
- Appropriate number of students/class and proximity of students and staff, classroom set up to allow for physical distancing. This will need to be specific as there are currently conflicting reports about the requirement of physical distancing for younger children.
- Cleaning and disinfecting schools – timing and cost considerations.
- Transportation\*\* – school board consortia buses, as well as municipal transit challenges with respect to social distancing.
- Use of volunteers and protocols for other school board staff and community professional support staff entering during school hours.
- School cafeterias, breakfast and other food and nutrition programs.
- The use of outdoor space for instruction.
- Child care, before and after school programs, and recreational programs.
- Community use of schools and permits – consider phasing these in over time after schools are back on track. How does the framework apply to other onsite school day services e.g., immigrant services settlement workers, Big Brothers Big Sisters, etc.?
- Procedures for dealing with outbreaks in a school – what is the advice from public health regarding cleaning, closure length, the use of communication templates, etc.?
- How to incorporate Daily Physical Activity (DPA) and downtime, including recess to take into consideration the importance of breaks from learning.
- How to implement possible mixed models of learning – how to respond to students and families that do not engage in person and/or online learning?

\*Personal Protective Equipment is a huge issue that will need clarification sooner rather than later. Other provinces are not requiring this now (or expect to in the fall), nor do the guidelines for child care centres and summer camps in Ontario. However, we know that some public health units are now requiring or recommending face coverings for anyone entering commercial establishments and transit systems. There are concerns about the availability of PPE and the equity of its distribution. There will be a need for consistency and clear communication on any final decisions.

\*\*Transportation was another prominent issue mentioned by school board trustees from across the entire province. Rural and northern school boards have the issue of long bus rides and being the main way students get to and from school. Additional buses would be required to allow more students to physically distance. Urban schools may also need additional buses to allow physical distancing and many students also use their local municipal transit system. Additional buses mean there will be a need for more drivers.

*“Mental health is of utmost importance and needs to be on the forefront of the planning stages to ensure all supports for students are in place during these changing times.”*

### **Other Return-to-School Considerations**

*Mental Health:* The most significant consideration concerning the pandemic, school closures and re-entry identified by trustees was the need for mental health supports and services for staff, students and their families.

The important correlation of mental health and well-being to student achievement and learning has never been so highly magnified as it has been during the pandemic. The significant change in routines, physical activity, and social interaction, as well as the reduction of student-teacher interaction and the number of caring adults beyond immediate family has had varying impacts on students and their families.

OPSBA is a member of the [Ontario Coalition of Children and Youth Mental Health](#), which has well-established cross-sectoral partnerships that have been exceptionally beneficial throughout the pandemic locally and provincially. OPSBA strongly supports the continued infrastructure and work of School Mental Health Ontario, which has provided many excellent resources and training opportunities for staff and resources for families.

OPSBA supports the tiered model of support, which remains an effective approach as we contemplate a re-entry to school for students. This model differentiates across the continuum of need, recognizes that students will not be affected in the same way and helps to direct and ensure that there are adequate safety nets for students with greater mental health needs. Student voice and engagement in the re-entry and support processes are important elements to the overall plan.

Although it is difficult to predict the actual need for mental health supports and services in the fall, the school system needs to be adequately prepared in terms of staff training, professional learning, mental health supports and timely access to community-based services. Funding levels need to reflect this increased need.

*Indigenous Education:* While the current pandemic and impact on schools has affected all students and staff and their families, we also feel it has highlighted challenges that have long faced Indigenous students. Concerns around internet connectivity and access to learning and technology are historical barriers for many First Nations and their children and youth.

Mental health needs, including anxiety, and concerns around isolation have only been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. The Indigenous Trustees' Council of OPSBA has long advocated for the needs of Indigenous students, many of whom are represented at the extreme end of need in the province. We ask that this extreme need be reflected in a coordinated response, especially as it pertains to continued learning at home, and in the re-entry to in-class instruction within school facilities.

*Student Supports:* We ask the ministry to continue its work on providing students with remedial opportunities, credit recovery and other student success supports. This also includes teaching students, especially younger children, how to play and interact safely in a revised classroom

and school setting. It may also include keeping some primary class compositions as similar as possible to last year to provide continuity.

*Professional Development:* Beyond increasing the opportunities for staff to develop and expand their strengths in teaching in an online setting, other suggested areas for PD included supporting the new math curriculum and mental health literacy training. Staff support also includes training teachers, education workers, and other school staff how to work in a school and classroom settings that could look fundamentally different with a mixed learning model and specific health and safety guidelines. Having dedicated time in the first week of school without students to develop staff capacity in these specific areas will increase staff and public confidence.

*Funding:* Although school closures may have provided for some cost savings, many boards are experiencing increased and unexpected costs including the provision of technology/connectivity provided to students and families. Please see the appendix for other funding implications.

*Synchronous learning:* The ministry and all stakeholders need to continue working to solve and mitigate remote learning challenges, including access to and stability of technology, student engagement and staff confidence.

*Assessment, report cards, and EQAO testing implications:* These will all need to be considered carefully to ensure all students are treated fairly.

*Loss of international students:* Due to imposed travel restrictions, many school boards will experience a loss in revenue from these international students. We will attempt to seek what that funding loss will amount to for our member boards.

*Graduating Students:* There is concern regarding the transition of the current cohort of graduating students to post-secondary and other settings. Inter-ministerial collaboration is required to support this transition, including educational supports and the provision of mental health supports and services.

*“The social-emotional well-being of all our learners during the recent isolation has been compromised - and those who started the isolation identified as most vulnerable have had this vulnerability exacerbated. The support needs to be for students AND their families who are likewise more vulnerable as a mitigation and remedial strategy for those at risk.”*

### **Next Steps:**

School boards and trustees continue to seek regular communication with the Ministry of Education and the Minister about school-related pandemic issues. We are willing and interested partners and bring valuable expertise and community experience to these discussions.

We value the opinions of our health experts and will continue to build local relationships with our public health units. We do believe the province should urgently develop an Ontario-wide COVID-19 testing strategy based upon clear objectives and scientific evidence that efficiently and effectively supports the transfer of information to local public health units to enable local case and contact management improvements that will protect students and staff.

Ongoing communication with, and input from, stakeholders is critical to moving forward together. We ask that when the Ministry of Education wants school boards to communicate provincial health-related messaging this be coordinated with coterminous local public health units.

As part of our ongoing work we are also conducting separate polling of Ontarians about their thoughts on students and staff returning to school and have also partnered with Master of Political Science students at Wilfrid Laurier University on a separate written and telephone research initiative regarding the inequities that some students and families have in accessing adequate Wi-Fi and technology both at school and at home. The results of both of these studies will be shared with the ministry.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission and the comments expressed to us by our trustees, member boards and senior staff. There is much to be considered to ensure a smooth transition for all. There will be a day soon when much of this is past us and we can look ahead to the future. Perhaps this pandemic has given us all some things to consider – how does the education system need to change to better address the needs of students and society? How might we re-imagine schools, and what, where and how students learn?

We look forward to the release of “*Ontario’s Plan to Reopen Schools.*” Please do not hesitate to contact me or the OPSBA staff if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Cathy Abraham  
President  
Ontario Public School Boards’ Association

cc.

Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister of Education  
Yael Ginsler, Assistant Deputy Minister (Acting) Student Achievement Division  
Denise Dwyer, Assistant Deputy Minister, Indigenous Education and Well-Being Division

*The Ontario Public School Boards' Association represents English public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million public elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA is seen as the credible voice of public education in Ontario and is routinely called on by the provincial government for input and advice on legislation and the impact of government policy directions.*

## Appendix A - Key Findings from OPSBA Survey of Work Team Members

- 90% of the trustees surveyed felt appropriate social distancing guidelines, increased school cleaning and maintenance and added hand washing stations were important or somewhat important. More than 87% also felt that greater availability of hand sanitizer was important or somewhat important, and 92% said appropriate mental health supports for students were important or somewhat important. Nearly 90% of respondents said that appropriate mental health supports for education workers were important or somewhat important.
- More than 8 in 10 trustees say school boards need a month or more to prepare for schools to be ready for students.
- Two-thirds of trustees support a mixed model of education delivery in which a portion of the student's education is delivered in-person and a portion is delivered remotely.
- 83% of trustees feel it's important or somewhat important for Kindergarten to Grade 12 students to have real-time/live interaction with their teacher and other students.
- 100% of the trustees surveyed said it's important for the advice of healthcare professionals to be taken into account when reopening schools for in-person instruction. More than 90% said it's important or somewhat important for extra supports to be provided to vulnerable and marginalized students and remote communities.
- 92% of respondents are concerned or somewhat concerned about the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health. The same number are concerned or somewhat concerned about the effect on teachers' and education workers' mental health.
- More than 95% of respondents said it's important or somewhat important for the mental health needs of children and staff health/worker safety to be taken into account.
- In terms of the government providing additional or increased funding, the percentage of respondents who said the following are important or somewhat important is provided:
  - Caretaking and cleaning supplies – 96%
  - Technology – 96%
  - Special Education needs – 96%
  - Creativity in learning environments (i.e. outdoor classrooms) – 95%
  - Remote-learning professional development for teachers – 83%
  - School bus transportation – 83%
  - Remote course options for secondary students – 79%
- 88% of trustees support school staggering nutrition breaks, recess and lunch hours to support social distancing.
- More than 83% of trustees said it's important or somewhat important for childcare to be provided in order to reopen the economy.
- 92% of respondents said it's important or somewhat important for school-based child care centres, before-and-after-school programs and recreational programs to reopen. However, those numbers drop to 48% and 70% respectively when it comes to gymnasium rentals/permits and outdoor facilities like sports fields and tracks.