

News Release

CATHOLIC TEACHERS CALL FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION TO PROTECT SCHOOL COMMUNITIES AND FIGHT THE THIRD WAVE OF COVID-19

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TORONTO - The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) is calling on the Ford government and public health units to immediately prioritize the vaccination of teachers, education workers, and other essential workers, particularly in hot spot public health units, and to move schools in these regions from in-person to virtual learning until this process is complete.

"While a third wave is tearing across the province and new restrictions are being imposed on businesses and other public spaces, the Ford government continues to go against all evidence by insisting that schools are somehow immune to the spread of COVID-19," says OECTA President Liz Stuart. "This is not only disrespectful of students, teachers, education workers, and their families, it is downright dangerous for all Ontarians."

Medical experts have repeatedly called on the Ford government to implement stronger health and safety measures in schools, including smaller class sizes to facilitate physical distancing, better ventilation, and widespread testing. Premier Ford and Minister Lecce have promised that more robust protocols are on the way, but they have consistently failed to follow through. As a result, transmission within school buildings is one of the main drivers of the third wave.

"The benefits of in-person learning are clear, which is why the education community is so thoroughly opposed to the Ford government's plan to make virtual learning the new normal post-pandemic," continues Stuart. "But until proper health and safety measures are in place, including vaccination of teachers and education workers, it is simply not safe for schools to remain open, especially in hot spot regions. Our Association will continue calling on the government to act; in the meantime, Catholic teachers will continue to be supported in exercising their legal rights to refuse unsafe work, where appropriate."

OECTA and others in the education community have been trying for more than a year to work with the Ford government on a plan for safer schools. They continue to urge the government to convene an advisory table of all education stakeholders, to address the health and safety needs of schools, as well as the learning challenges being faced by students because of the pandemic.

"The Ford government has consistently shown that the safety and quality of publicly funded schools are not a priority, most recently releasing a budget that includes \$1 billion in cuts to core programs over the next few years," says Stuart. "Teachers are doing everything we can to help students and families navigate these challenging times, but with evidence mounting about the role schools play in the transmission of COVID-19, it is more important than ever that the Ford government finally get their act together and do their part to protect our school communities."

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OECTA represents the 45,000 passionate and qualified teachers in Ontario's publicly funded English Catholic schools, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

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