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Education unions call on Ford government for a new comprehensive and transparent plan to keep students, educators, and communities safe

TORONTO—The Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) released the following statement today.

AEFO, ETFO, OECTA, and OSSTF/FEESO call on the government to convene an advisory table of all education stakeholders immediately to develop a clear action plan for Ontario's return to schools. Specific benchmarks must be in place for triggering any moves between virtual and face-to-face learning, benchmarks that recognize the different needs of all students. The Ford government cannot continue to abdicate its responsibility.

All stakeholders, including union representatives, must be part of any discussions prior to the implementation of a plan by the Ford government. Establishing a clear and consistent plan will reduce the chaos and confusion caused by this government's failure to respond appropriately to this pandemic.

We firmly believe in-person instruction and support is the ideal and most equitable model of learning for students. We urge the government to take this extra time to immediately implement the necessary measures to ensure a safe return to in-person learning is possible. This includes reducing class sizes to ensure physical distancing can be maintained, improving ventilation and air filtration, enhancing sanitation and cleaning, making masks mandatory for all students, introducing broad, school-based asymptomatic testing, and improving COVID screening protocols.

As COVID-19 numbers continue to surge, it has become abundantly clear that a new plan is needed for Ontario's publicly-funded education system, one that prioritizes community safety, is transparent, evidence-informed, and focuses on implementing new safety measures in Ontario's schools. In addition, for those families that are struggling with balancing work obligations with caring for their children at home, we call on the Ford government to provide immediate assistance for all families who require emergency child care or income support during this lockdown period.

There must be a specific vaccination plan that prioritizes when and how teachers and education workers will have access to a vaccine. The ongoing failure to provide metrics for decision-making undermines public trust in this government's ability to take every reasonable precaution to provide high-quality instruction and to protect the health and safety of students, workers, and communities in this province.

While many educators are getting ready for two more weeks of online learning, some will continue working in person with students with special education and medical needs. In the North, teachers and education workers are getting ready to restart in-person learning, despite the lack of additional safety measures. This is a significant concern during the height of a pandemic and in the absence of a comprehensive and transparent plan.

The extraordinary efforts made by teachers, education workers and families to support students are the only reason the public education system continues to function despite the lack of government support.