

October 7, 2020

EXPERTS SHARE THEIR VIEWS ON PROVINCE'S FLAWED RETURN TO SCHOOL PLAN

TORONTO- In the aftermath of the disappointing decision by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to dismiss on jurisdictional grounds the health and safety complaints regarding the re-opening of schools, Ontario's four major education unions gathered to make public information that would have presented at the hearing. The four unions, 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), firmly maintain that the OLRB hearing should have proceeded to allow for the presentation of substantive evidence and expert testimony, where the case could have been decided on the merits of the unions' complaints.

The experts the unions were preparing to bring forward would have presented information based on their professional expertise that supported the need to establish provincial standards on class size and distancing, cohorts for students and teachers, masking, ventilation, and busing. If the hearing had moved forward, the OLRB would have heard compelling evidence of the provincial government's lack of protocols to ensure the health and safety of Ontario's schools, in violation of their obligations under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*.

In her remarks, Dr. Amy Greer, Canada Research Chair in Population Disease Modeling and Associate Professor Department of Population Medicine at the University of Guelph said, "As a result of the loosening of restrictions on gatherings over the summer months, school re-opening in Ontario has coincided with increasing community transmission of COVID-19. It is now more critical than ever to fully implement the infection prevention and control measures that are necessary to reduce the risk of SARS-CoV-2 spread in schools. These measures include the need for smaller class sizes in order to achieve improved physical distancing and smaller student and staff cohorts in Ontario classrooms."

In addition, the provincial government has failed to take adequate steps to ensure the health and safety of staff and students in schools by not ensuring that the filtration and ventilation systems are updated. Dr. Jeffrey Siegel, Professor, Department of Civil and Mineral Engineering at the University of Toronto added, "The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to ensure that our school spaces are as safe as possible for students and staff. Filtration and ventilation are an important component of an overall risk mitigation strategy. The American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) Schools Reopening documents provide an internationally recognized evidence-based approach that should be applied to all Ontario schools."

In his comments, Dr. David Fisman, Epidemiologist at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto, and Consultant in Infectious Diseases at the University Health Network said, "We all want to see back-to-school succeed in Ontario. That's why masking and reduced class sizes are so important for the protection of child health, the health of teachers and staff, and the health of our wider communities."

Despite the setback at the OLRB, the four education unions will continue to demand that the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and the Ford government do everything they can to make schools as safe as possible, especially as we see cases of COVID-19 surging in our communities. Our students, educators, and their families deserve nothing less.