

DÉJÀ VU – #SAFESEMPTEMBER 2021

JULY 6, 2021



Normalizing the next school year with enhanced safety measures is not a priority for the Ford government

It has been a rough year for Ontario students, parents, teachers, and education workers. In the past 15 months, Ontario students have only been in school for approximately five months. Despite the best efforts of teachers and education workers, learning losses were inevitable. The many learning disruptions and lack of planning on behalf of Ford's Conservative government also led to increased mental health issues among students as well as challenges at home. Many parents, especially women, had to leave the workforce to care for their school-age children. Our most vulnerable and marginalized communities were hardest hit.

Sadly, not much has changed in education since last September, which is evident when reading Labour Council's education statement from September 2020. Throughout this pandemic, Ford and Lecce, continued to mislead the public by stating that schools were safe, that their government made historic investments in education, and that unions wanted schools closed. The reality is that there was mismanagement of the pandemic: "there are few places in the world where kids have been out of school more than Ontario, and **no other Canadian province** has had school closures this long." This government always had the opportunity to make other choices to safely re-open schools earlier but chose not to, instead deliberately deceiving the public.

Ford flip-flopped between when to re-open schools and when to keep the economy open. In June, he chose to keep schools closed and expand business openings. These closures could have been avoided if the government made better choices earlier. When asked why the provincial government waited so long to issue a stay-at-home order in the third wave, ignoring calls from doctors to do so sooner, Ontario's Solicitor General Sylvia Jones said: "We wanted to make sure that the modelling was actually showing up in our hospitals." This government is in constant denial of scientific advice and evidence, focusing on business profits and reducing public spending.

The government has had an entire school year to plan for this September, and we are back to where we were a year ago. Déjà vu.

Schools still need safety protocols such as improved ventilation systems, windows that open, contact tracing and testing protocols. Class sizes must be reduced to ensure safety for students and a return to regular classes as this will help students' mental health and learning losses. Class size is a topic the government does not want to discuss because it requires investment in education, monies the government does not want to spend to help students, and ultimately the economy. We know that the Ford government does not prioritize education as they cut \$1 billion in the education budget this past spring because they refused to account for inflation and student growth.

Despite all the time the Ministry of Education had to prepare, Ontarians will not know until late July or early August details on a return-to-school plan for Fall 2021. Throughout this pandemic, education unions called on the government to meet with all stakeholders to discuss school safety and the re-opening of schools. To date, Lecce and Ford have not consulted with any

identified stakeholders. This approach is not only anti-union, but also anti-community as many parents and students' concerns continue not to be addressed.

One clear lesson from the pandemic is that online learning is a negative experience for most students. They require reliable devices and internet to learn, but in many households, devices had to be shared and internet access was unavailable or unreliable. Online classes do not allow students to experience the holistic learning they need to succeed: social, emotional, and academic growth is not achievable. Education unions fought against mandatory online learning in the winter of 2020 and continue to demand approaches that will work for students.

Yet, this government continues promoting online learning, either subtly or openly. They kept schools closed, resulting in expanded online learning during a pandemic without assessing the impact of crisis learning.

Now, Lecce and Ford are allowing school boards to decide which learning models will be used in September. Some Ontario boards, including York Region District School Board and York Catholic District School Board, have adopted the fractured learning model known as the "hybrid" model for September for some or all students. Teachers and education workers must simultaneously teach both online students and face-to-face students in a hybrid classroom, splitting their attention. Some school boards feel they had no choice but to implement this model due to a lack of funding from the government, and perhaps insufficient students to run a stand-alone virtual program for those students and parents who prefer online.

However, many school boards have chosen to listen to parents and students and not adopt the hybrid model. This ultimately causes a tiered system in the quality of publicly funded education delivered to Ontario students, with inequities across the province.

In another online change, the government is contracting online learning to TVO as a "choice" for parents, which will divert public monies from school boards to TVO; perhaps ultimately to the private sector. In September 2018, Ford's government released a report by Ernst & Young Canada which laid out their playbook for governing the province: private profit at public expense through "efficiencies". Without pushback, the government will likely use the pandemic as the "shock doctrine" to privatize education by slowly starving publicly-funded education.

To make things worse, Ford's government has taken drastic steps to limit our freedom of speech and ability to criticize this government's performance over the last three years. From now to June 2, 2022, Bill 307 requires anyone who spends money to criticize Ontario's education policy, to register as a Third-Party Advertiser. For the first time in Ontario, our government used the notwithstanding clause to prevent us from accessing our constitutional rights. This is not the first time Ford's Conservatives have shut down democracy to prevent Ontarians from having a voice so that they can maintain their power in the province and secure a re-election.

The government must not normalize pandemic learning. Instead we need to return schools to their pre-pandemic learning environment, but with enhanced safety protocols and smaller class sizes. After a chaotic school year parents, teachers, education workers, and students want to return to a normalized school year in September. The government must use every effort to make schools safe and eliminate any learning models that hinder a student's ability to access a holistic educational experience. If this is not corrected, we could be facing a generational catastrophe.

On July 6, 2021, the Labour Council resolved to:

1. Call on the Ford government to show leadership by planning and providing funding for smaller class sizes, improved ventilation, sound hygiene processes, and busing safety;
2. Call on local school boards and trustees to stand up for the standards necessary for a safe return to school;
3. Call on affiliates to encourage union members to communicate their concerns about class sizes and other education issues to their elected representatives, particularly their MPPs, and ultimately at the ballot box on June 2, 2022;
4. Join and support community and parent organizations like York Communities for Public Education, demanding more from our public education institutions to permit a safe return to school, end to normalizing pandemic learning and eliminate fractured learning models like the hybrid model, and ongoing quality public education for all;
5. Call on the government to provide adequate training and resources for the new de-streamed grade 9 math curriculum to ensure the success of this initiative called for by racialized communities;
6. Call on the government to re-instate the curriculum writing teams for Indigenous curriculum as well as the create writing teams to de-colonize the curriculum for all grades and all subjects;
7. Join education unions and allies to protect publicly funded education and demand reform to the outdated education funding formula and to give students what they need to succeed and recover from pandemic learning, especially for our most vulnerable and marginalized students; and,
8. Call on the Ministry of Education, school boards, and faculties of education to institute a process of dismantling anti-Black racism, anti-Islamophobia racism, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-LGBTQ2S+ and any other forms of systemic racism and hate in our schools in collaboration with affected communities, groups, and individuals.