



January 21, 2021

A Message to OSSTF/FEESO Members from the Provincial Executive

The continuing chaos and confusion created by the Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, and the Ford government has only served to increase the stress and anxiety that many members are feeling. This is most apparent to those members who are required to enter schools to support students during the remote learning period or in Northern Ontario school boards where many buildings are open fully to in-person learning.

We know that some educational assistants, office and clerical staff, psychological services workers, custodians, technicians, teachers, and other members of the education team are currently in schools that are considered “closed” by the government. At the same time, many education workers and teachers in some northern school boards have returned to in-person learning.

Concerns about a limited or full return to providing in-person learning, supports and services to students are not isolated to individual schools boards. These issues are province-wide. However, inconsistencies in government planning and school boards left to make decisions on their own without clear Ministry of Education direction has perpetuated confusion and anxiety among our members, students, their families and local communities.

OSSTF/FEESO and many other education stakeholders have called on the Minister of Education and the Ford government repeatedly to listen to the voices of frontline educators. They continue to ignore you. We have also called for a full pause to in-person learning until meaningful, clear benchmarks for worker and student safety are established and met.

Public Health authorities appear reluctant to intervene or challenge the government on its decisions. Government decisions on how to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, including decisions on what to do with schools, are made without transparency, and we are offered unclear rationale. We continue to call on the government to base its decision-making on evidence-informed health information when it comes to stopping the spread of COVID, especially in schools and communities.

We understand that members may feel defeated and downtrodden by the combination of government ignorance and the pandemic itself. But, there are things that we can all do individually and collectively to ensure our concerns are heard through the noise created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Monday, January 18, a letter was delivered to Minister of Education Stephen Lecce to request a meeting with our President as soon as possible to discuss the urgent circumstances we all find ourselves in. This action accompanies a number of other steps taken by the Provincial Executive and Provincial Office staff to highlight member concerns publicly and to reach out to other education stakeholders and allies to amplify our messages, build coalitions and explore options available to the federation to protect our members and the safety of the communities they work in.

Your local union leaders are working behind the scenes to cite broader safety concerns and are working with local Joint Health and Safety Committees to address them. They are filing grievances and complaints using the legal processes afforded to them. They are engaged in advocacy through your local media, with trustees and with managers. Although these processes take time and can be incredibly frustrating, your input, support, and solidarity are crucial if we hope to achieve success and improved safety now and in the future.

You, the members, need to express your individual concerns if you find yourself in an unsafe situation at work. Talk to your local leaders about using provisions in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* appropriately to point out to managers, principals, supervisors, and Ministry of Labour inspectors any unsafe situation at work. Our advocacy is strengthened when members identify health and safety concerns through the legal processes that are afforded to workers.

We must remember that students have a right to an education. We agree completely and wholeheartedly. However, we also believe that students and staff must be safe when receiving that education, and that learning, supports and services to students are best when done in person. It is because of your work that the publicly-funded education system remains strong. It is because of your work that we continue to provide the best learning, supports and services possible to students under the circumstances. It is because of you that we will persevere together. Together, we have strength.

Yours in Federation



Harvey Bischof
President



Paul Caccamo
Vice-President



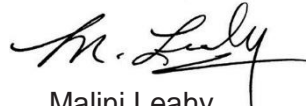
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