

REOPENING OF SCHOOLS— REPORT ON MINISTRY OF EDUCATION DISCUSSIONS

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Meetings were held with the Deputy Minister of Education and senior ministry officials participating in Ministry of Education workgroups during the weeks of August 24 and August 30. We continue to raise significant concerns at all tables we participate on. In most instances, the Ministry is providing very few agenda items and it is left to the unions to add issues to the agenda. In other words, there is no real consultation happening. When we do raise issues, we are invariably told that they are important concerns and they will take it back. We rarely hear back. You will find below a list of some of the issues that were raised and the responses.

Meetings with the Deputy Minister of Education

These meetings are now following a repeated and common pattern whereby the General Secretaries from the education union affiliates raise a number of concerns with factual examples. We are repeatedly told that they are important concerns and that they will be raised with the government, but rarely, if ever, do our concerns get addressed in a meaningful way.

- We expressed strong concern that for the second time in a few weeks we were not invited to a technical briefing on funding. They thanked us for raising the issue and said they would share it with the government.
- We raised concerns that we were not consulted on the *Guide to reopening Ontario's schools*. There was no commitment to actually consult us or share the documents in advance of their release. We suggested that they send the guide to the Provincial Health and Safety Work Group. They responded by saying it was a good idea.
- We expressed concern that in the funding guide issued at the beginning of August there was reference to “non-permanent time limited supply teachers.” We indicated that this term did not exist in the *Education Act* and that it referred to permanent teachers, long term occasional teachers, and occasional teachers. We insisted that any new teacher be hired under the provisions of collective agreements. They indicated that it was not their intent to create new categories of teachers or to not respect collective agreements.
- We raised the concern that the Ministry did not share the B12 Memo on air quality when it was distributed to school boards. They subsequently did send us a copy. We raised concerns about the lateness of that guidance as it related to school reopening and the vagueness of the content. We again reiterated the need for clear standards on ventilation. They explained that they continue to learn about this issue and that the medical officers of health are “catching up like we all are.” We emphasized that direction and clear standards should come from the province.

- We raised concerns about the number of school board reopening plans that are being rejected by the Ministry. They explained that the plans are neither being approved nor rejected, but rather they are simply pointing out the shortcomings of board plans and leaving the choice up to the boards in terms of revisions, or not. Our takeaway from the conversation was that it was mostly a question of semantics and that the Ministry is indeed in the driver's seat, but is reluctant to own it.
- We raised concerns over access to personal protective equipment (PPE) – timeliness of delivery, quality, usability, and access. In particular, we gave specific examples of:
 - hand sanitizer not appropriate for repeated use with children and pregnant women or not on approved lists of hand sanitizers;
 - no soap found in staff washrooms;
 - PPE not yet received by school boards;
 - masks labelled in a different language without English translation.

Ministry officials explained that they have shipped 31 million items recently and they anticipate that most will arrive to boards in time. With respect to our concerns on hand sanitizer, they will look into to it and get back to us.

- We raised serious concerns about some boards where mandatory wearing of masks by students will not be enforced and appears optional. We emphasized that this approach by some boards is a very serious concern. The Ministry agreed with our concern and did commit to following up with the boards.
- We raised concerns about member morale (examples from Admin Support, ECEs, EAs, PSSPs, Custodial/Maintenance, Teachers). We emphasized that workload is a real issue with the ever increasing demands on members and that people are justifiably worried. We explained that in a crisis someone needs to take charge and we are not observing it on the ground. Boards are blaming the government, and government is putting responsibility on boards. We provided feedback on the apparent contradictions in direction within and across school boards. We emphasized the apparent lack of coordination. We also emphasized that the lack of meaningful consultation with unions is hampering reopening plans and hurting member morale. They indicated that they we were raising valid and serious concerns and that they would take our concerns back to the decision makers.

Custodial and Maintenance Working Group

Union representatives raised a number of concerns during the last meeting of this working group:

- The Ministry of Education's *Guide to reopening Ontario's schools* indicates medical masks and face shields will be provided for ALL staff and we asked if it was the case. The Ministry representative could not confirm if face shields have been ordered for all.

- As expected, the medical grade masks that are being purchased and shipped to boards are level 1 (they go up to level 3) and then there are N95 respirators.
- We asked about availability and shipments of PPE and it was confirmed that the boards have made their requests centrally but, not all have been shipped to boards as of yet. They indicated things will be better for October.
- We were told that TDSB is doing “active” screening whereby each person that enters the building is being asked screening questions by an individual. It is unclear, however, if they also have to do the online self-assessment.
- We reiterated our need for a minimum provincial cleaning standard/guidance and that more staff are needed. We brought to their attention that at least one school board is actually laying off custodial and maintenance workers.
- When we asked about provincial guidance on fire drills/lockdowns, disposal of PPE, locker use, and funding for additional staff and supplies there were no answers other than they will get back to us
- We expressed frustration and disappointment because no meetings were scheduled for this working group during the summer months, and we asked about the future of the working group. At this point, it is unclear.
- We expressed concern that professional activity (PA) day health and safety training is inadequate and/or was delivered to employers late – Public Services Health and Safety (PSHSA) materials only went out a couple of days before the training. Their server experienced an overload and crashed.

Continuous Learning Working Group

A list of questions and concerns was provided to the Ministry, two weeks ago but we have not had any response to most of the items raised. The following issues were discussed during the latest ministry meetings:

Teaching on-line

- We requested clarification regarding where on-line teachers would be expected to physically work. The Ministry and school board expectations appear to be that teachers will work in schools and we wanted to know how they will find spaces for these teachers. We noted that teachers will need appropriate spaces and necessary resources and this must be planned and not an afterthought. School boards also must consider those staff members who need to be accommodated by working at home.
- Education union affiliates raised significant concerns about any expectation that live streaming a classroom is an appropriate way to provide on-line synchronous learning. The Ministry indicated that this was not the model they were suggesting, but that they have not prohibited it.

Reporting

- We raised questions about expectations regarding reporting requirements for all grades, particularly for those secondary schools going to *quadmester* or even *octmester* schools, where a course is finished in as little as 22 days.
- We suggested that *Growing Success* expectations (e.g. regular communication re: progress) would make sense.
- We also raised the importance of messaging to the system that expectations need to be consistent with the fact that students and staff will be dealing with more than just curriculum right now

Moving to On-line delivery

- We raised questions about pivoting back to online and distance learning when an outbreak is declared, and students and staff are sent home. While the Ministry feels that educators are aware of, and have some training for, online learning, OSSTF/FEESO and affiliate partners raised the issue that some transition time will be required for staff and families to prepare for online pedagogy and instruction.

Instructional Support Working Group

The Instructional Support Working Group met on September 4 for one hour. This was our first meeting in a month – August 5th was our last meeting. The following is a summary of what the Ministry reported to us, and the issue we raised with Ministry officials:

- All boards have finalized their return to school plans
- Federal government is willing to entertain issuing international student visas as long as schools follow newly released protocols;
- screening tools are being updated so that symptoms linked to non-COVID diagnoses are excluded
- Outbreak/Quarantine/Closures : public health unit will make decisions based on risk; the expectation is that students continue with remote learning

We asked about a number of issues and concerns, including:

- Direction or guidelines about what staff are to do if students arrive at schools before PPE is available for staff. They said they would get back to us.
- What they deemed as appropriate face covering. Their response was that the expectation is medical grade for staff and cloth for students. Clarity as to what they considered “medical grade” was not provided.

- Direction to change play-based programming for younger students. The response was that boards are to make decisions that respect public health advice on items available, and surface cleaning.
- Specific direction for kindergarten classes and cohorts has not been helpful. The response was that the Ministry has been clear in elementary that “the class is the cohort.”
- The training of staff on health and safety measures. The response was, “the expectation was that there be a full day of content devoted to health and safety and Brightspace (online) materials were provided... we do not have the legislative authority to require that the PD days happen prior to instruction days.”
- The lack of acknowledgement from the Ministry regarding the high level of stress and work that educators are experiencing. Ministry staff expressed their personal appreciation of educators, and will make sure future communications include a positive tone.

Learning Resources Working Group

Our most recent meetings were on August 26th and September 2nd. Questions are received by Ministry of Education officials from the education affiliated unions, but are rarely answered immediately.

Some of the main issues and concerns raised at the most recent meetings include the following:

- Health and safety training for support staff taking place, but mostly not until PD days in early September. A number of boards are holding a transition day for some special needs students. Staff supporting students during these transition days may miss that training. As of the meeting dates, many workers had not received training. Boards are to ensure that health and safety training is in place, and additional resources are on their way.
- Many boards may not limit itinerant staff to one or a few schools. Some will be moving from one school to another, which will increase contact with multiple students and staff, and will surpass the 100-student cohort guideline regarding direct and indirect student contacts. The Ministry suggested that the 100-student cohort guideline is only for students, not education workers. The Ministry expects that frequent hand washing and use of masks will be adequate to protect these workers. This concern is similar to the issue in Long Term Care facilities when some of those workers were employed at multiple facilities. We were told that both the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health are having discussions about this concern.
- The Minister of Education is only focusing his public comments on students and teachers. There is an apparent lack of attention and focus on education workers, some

of whom may see many students in a day (i.e. Library technicians). Ministry staff said they will bring those concerns to the attention of other officials and the government.

- We asked about support for office and clerical staff if PPE is delayed in arriving at schools and worksites. The Ministry responded by saying that the staggered start to the school year in many boards should buy enough time for PPE to arrive, and they would take this concern back for further consideration
- Some support staff may be returning to work prior to receiving proper health and safety training – what should they do in the meantime? Again, the Ministry responded by saying the staggered starts should enable staff to get the training on time, and they would bring this issue back to ministry staff for further discussion.