



Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
Fédération des enseignantes et des enseignants de l'élémentaire de l'Ontario (FEEO)
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January 6, 2021

Medical Officers of Health
Ontario Public Health Units

Dear Medical Officers of Health:

On behalf of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and our 83,000 members, I want to thank you for your tireless work over the past 10 months. We know that you, alongside the staff in public health units across the province, have been working under incredible pressure and often without sufficient resources to keep Ontarians safe.

Over the past few months Ontarians have witnessed the COVID-19 pandemic surge out of control in their communities. The provincial government has failed to contain the spread of the virus and we are now seeing more than 3,000 new cases of COVID-19 daily. With many hospitals approaching or even surpassing their full capacity and ICU capacity being overwhelmed, the strain placed on our health care system is approaching a breaking point.

The sharp increase in COVID-19 cases combined with the lack of resources from the provincial government have left several public health units unable to perform contact tracing in a timely manner, which has further limited efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

Despite calls from public health experts, educators, unions and medical professionals, the government has failed to implement asymptomatic surveillance testing in schools across the province. Without widespread asymptomatic testing in schools, and with the large proportion of COVID-19 cases with no known epidemiological links, we simply do not know the degree of spread in our public schools.

Since the summer, ETFO alongside other education stakeholders, parents and public health experts have been asking the government to implement measures that would make schools safe for students and educators. We have called for smaller classes to

allow for physical distancing, appropriate ventilation in all classrooms and masking for all students. These calls have gone unheeded.

The provincial government's failure to listen to the advice of medical professionals has resulted in the dire crisis we are now facing. The government has failed to protect residents and staff in long-term care homes, has failed to implement adequate measures to prevent community spread and has failed to ensure schools are safe for students and educators.

Now, at the height of the pandemic, the provincial government has decided to resume in-person learning for elementary students starting Monday January 11, 2021. We believe this decision, accompanied by a lack of action on the part of the government to implement additional safety measures in schools, places students, educators and their families at unnecessary risk.

Educators firmly believe that quality in-person learning, when done safely, is what is best for our students. Unfortunately, due to government inaction resulting in the current spike of COVID-19 cases, this is simply not possible in many regions of the province.

According to Dr. David Fisman, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Toronto, the available data does not support a decision to resume in-person learning for elementary students at this time. "There's a 10 per cent daily increase in ICU occupancy in Ontario right now. This is not the right time to restart in-person learning," he says. "We have to assume that there is a lot of asymptomatic COVID-19 in schools. It is irresponsible to send children and educators back to schools without knowing for sure that it is safe to do so."

Public Health Units have both the authority and the responsibility to protect our communities. We ask that you use that authority to reconsider the decision to resume in-person learning for elementary students on January 11, particularly in communities where the rate of community transmission is high and where other extreme public health measures have been deemed necessary.

We also ask that when schools can safely resume in-person attendance, you implement asymptomatic surveillance testing in schools to ensure that we can better understand the role that schools are playing in the spread of the virus and base future decisions on sound data.

Given that the government has failed in their responsibility to protect Ontarians, it is up to each Public Health Unit to implement measures that protect people and prevent further spread of the virus. With vaccines slowly being rolled out, we must ensure that we do everything we can to protect those who are most vulnerable, especially as we

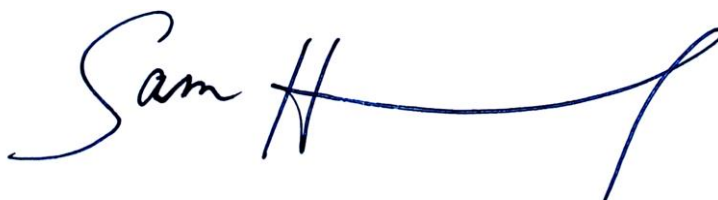
can see the end of these challenging times in the months ahead.

We continue to expect school boards across the province to fulfil their obligations as employers by taking every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of workers.

We will continue to demand that the provincial government provide much-needed supports to families, especially during periods when schools are closed to in-person attendance. We will also continue our advocacy to ensure that the government acknowledges and addresses the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on marginalized communities, in particular racialized and low-income families.

Once again, thank you for all your work, and for shouldering the responsibility to keep Ontarians safe. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sam Hammond". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

Sam Hammond
President
Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario

FC:MG

Copy: Directors of Education, Ontario Public School Boards