

Renewing Ontario's Education System

For the past two years, Ontario's students have moved from in-person to online to emergency remote learning due to the pandemic. Some of these students spent almost the entire time learning at home. Some moved back and forth between in-person and online, seamlessly for some and with great difficulty for others due to the numerous changes to learning style, teachers, restrictions and uncertainty. All of them underwent a constantly shifting learning experience which, while necessary, has created significant challenges both in terms of their well-being and learning. We believe it is our collective responsibility to readjust, re-align, restructure and renew our education system for Ontario's students.

Students missed graduations, proms, class trips, sports, clubs, social events and concerts. They missed their friends, their socialization and the benefit of attending school every day, in person, to learn, share, connect, support and engage.

They missed being able to meet with their teachers in person, stay after class or arrange additional time to ask questions, ensure they understood the curriculum or catch up.

We are hopeful, based on medical and scientific projections, that students have now returned and will continue to be in school, face-to-face, on a full-time basis. And while we welcome this, we also know that things are different. Students, staff and schools need to readjust. We need to connect with those who are not working at their expected grade level/potential. We need to identify those who continue to struggle mentally and socially.

The Ontario Principals' Council, representing 5,400 principals and vice-principals in the province's public elementary and secondary schools, believes there is a way forward. We propose that the next government implement the following recommendations to renew our education system, ensure all students have an opportunity to be successful, assess health concerns for students and staff, address staff burnout and re-engage all learners.

- **Immediately address staff shortages** across all employee groups that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Students need the consistency and ability to form stable relationships with educators to maximize their learning and support their mental well-being. We need facilitated stakeholder conversations to understand where and why there are shortages with a focus on solutions that are best for students. This could be accomplished by
 - returning to a one-year Teacher College program and offering a two year part-time option to allow students to continue to work in education
 - allowing Social Worker/Service students to supply as EAs and count this time towards the hours they require for their school placements/practicums

- seamlessly facilitate the entry of internationally trained teachers by addressing the structural, cultural and social barriers that stand in the way of their transition
- extending the number of days educators can work without pension penalty to 95 per year for a further three years.
- **Provide additional staff resources** – such as Education Assistants, Early Childhood Educators, Child and Youth Workers and Child Development Counsellors – to ensure all students are learning at the appropriate age/grade level and to help students make up any learning loss. School staff are best equipped to recognize and fill gaps on an on-going basis.
- **Delay the implementation of PPM 167** (making two online courses optional rather than mandatory for graduation) to allow students to fully re-adjust to in-person learning, and assess whether this requirement should be mandatory for all students.
- **Engage more broadly with the education sector on revisions to PPM 81**, which in its current draft downloads medical responsibilities on to educators and education workers who are neither trained nor licenced to perform these procedures.
- **Pause EQAO**, starting September 2022, for a period of two years so that teachers can concentrate on the curriculum instead of on test preparation, recognizing that any data collected at this time would be unreliable and would not accurately reflect student performance. During this period, data could be gathered from assessment tools currently used for reading, writing and math. EQAO resources should be re-allocated to support teacher learning on assessment.
- **Reduce principals' and vice-principals' operational duties** to focus on student achievement and well-being, which will help to address difficulties attracting and retaining school leaders and address physical and mental health issues, by
 - substantially reducing the numerous reporting procedures required from the ministry and school boards; identifying other people who could more effectively and efficiently complete this work
 - ensuring P/VPs are not required to do the work of any other employee group, particularly when services are withdrawn during labour disruptions
 - canceling the implementation of any new initiatives for the 2022-23 school year while students and staff re-adjust to fully in-person learning.

In addition to the preceding shorter-term recommendations, we also believe it is critical for the government to call a **Royal Commission on Education**, with a particular focus on Post-Pandemic Learning. Like many other countries around the world, it is time for Ontario to determine whether our current system is still relevant. Are we adequately preparing our students for the future? Is our system still relevant in the 21st century? We also need a complete review of how the pandemic has impacted teaching, learning, wellness and achievement.

The issues facing education are so complex and interconnected that they require a comprehensive examination of the entire system and structure. While not exhaustive, this should include a review of standardized testing, curriculum, streaming, pathways, online vs in-person learning, wellness, equity, opportunities for community integration, age cohorting, assessment practices and the school year calendar.