

Ontario government risking lives of educators and students by reopening schools

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Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced Wednesday that the hard-right Ford government is intensifying its homicidal drive to reopen all of the province's schools. By mid-February, students will even return to in-person classes in Toronto and the neighbouring Peel and York Regions. The Greater Toronto area has been hit especially hard by COVID-19 due to large workplace outbreaks and cramped living conditions.

Lecce's announcement was the culmination of a dishonest propaganda campaign designed to convince parents and students that schools are safe.

Well aware of the widespread opposition to cramming pupils from dozens of households into small, poorly-ventilated rooms on a daily basis, the Ford government delayed school reopenings after the Christmas break.

To divide teachers and parents and feign that it was adhering to a science-based policy, the government reopened educational institutions regionally, beginning in sparsely-populated northern Ontario on January 11. Between January 25 and February 1, more than 250,000 students returned to the classroom in various parts of southern Ontario. Thirteen districts, including Hamilton and Windsor, are now set to follow on Monday, before Toronto, Peel, and York join them on February 16.

The most cynical aspect of the back-to-school drive is the government's attempt to claim that it is being driven by concerns about children's well-being. Education Minister Lecce said in a statement last week, "[The] government agrees with the growing consensus in the medical community that returning students to in-person learning is essential to the well-being, development and mental health of children."

This is a lie. The reality is that the government "agrees" with big business that students must return to school so that their parents can be freed up from childcare responsibilities in order to go back to work churning out profits for the capitalists. This was more or less spelled out by the chief medical officer in Renfrew County in eastern Ontario, Dr. Robert Cushman, when the local school district reopened last month, "These kids need to go back to school," said Cushman. "They need it for their education, they need it for their mental health, their social lives. And not only that, the parents of so many students are working parents so this is a driver of the economy."

Thousands of teachers, parents and students across the province are well aware of the fact that they are being sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit. They are troubled by the dangerous conditions

they will confront in schools, as shown by last week's walkout by special education assistants at Beverley Public School in Toronto. But the opposition to school reopenings has been smothered by the education trade unions, which have opposed worker job action as "illegal" and instructed school staff to put their faith in the pro-employer Ontario Labour Relations Board to ensure safe working conditions. Accepting the right-wing propaganda that "we must learn to live with the virus," they are now urging the government to accept their proposals for reduced class sizes and other minimal safety measures so it never has to close schools again!

The Ford government gained ideological fodder for its push to resume in-person learning in a report from the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto (also known as SickKids Hospital), released in mid-January. SickKids has been advising the provincial government on children and COVID-19 throughout the pandemic.

Dr. Ronald Cohn, a contributor to the report and the CEO of SickKids, summed up the report's outlook, noting, "It is our strong opinion that schools should be the last doors to close and the first to open in society."

Central to the report's argument is the adverse effects of social distancing on the health of children, particularly young children. "It is critical to balance the risk of direct infection and transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) in children and youth, school staff and the community with the harms of school closure, which is impacting children and youth's physical health, developmental health, mental health and learning," states the report.

The authors claimed it is possible to reopen schools with "enhanced infection prevention and control strategies and a robust testing strategy." However, this "enhanced" strategy does not even include mass testing for asymptomatic students, a critical measure given that the vast majority of infections among children are asymptomatic.

The study also called for teachers and support staff to be prioritized for vaccination.

The report accepts the continued spread of the virus in schools as a given, writing, "It is anticipated that we will continue to detect cases of symptomatic and asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 infection in schools and it is important that public health authorities and schools be prepared to respond to cases involving both students and staff." Astonishingly, the report observed that even if positive cases were detected at a school, this should not be considered reason enough to close it.

Much of the report is a rehash of earlier recommendations given to Queen's Park as the new school year approached in late summer, and many of which the government chose to ignore. However today, the nationwide seven-day average of cases is approximately ten times greater than it was then. The government has not marshalled nearly enough resources to establish an adequate testing and tracing system that could reasonably allow for the reopening of schools even in a scenario where community transmission was under control.

The same week the SickKids report was published the Pediatricians Alliance of Ontario released its own report calling for the reopening of schools as soon as possible. The doctors cited the increase in "suicidal attempts, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, overdoses, eating disorders" and other maladies among their patients during the course of the pandemic.

The shedding of crocodile tears by the ruling elite over the health and social impact of the pandemic on children and families should fool no one. It does not appear to have occurred to any of these medical experts that the mental health crisis and related social problems are the product of decades of savage cuts to public spending and social services by the very same political parties who now pose as protectors of the well-being of "our kids." The social, educational and health disaster created by these policies has been exacerbated over the first year of the pandemic by the funnelling of hundreds of billions of dollars into the coffers of the major banks, big business and top 1 percent, while families and the public services they rely on have been starved of resources.

Despite the claims that the topic of school reopenings remains controversial, scientific studies have clearly established that children play a critical role in community transmission of COVID-19. A study of Montreal area schools found that the increase in general community rates of infection during the fall were preceded by a growth in infections among students. "Our analysis suggests we can expect a further increase in COVID-19 cases once schools are reopened in person," the authors wrote. Notably, they argued that school reopenings could negate other policies aimed at restricting spread and "could therefore accelerate the exceeding of hospital capacities."

Moreover, the spread of new variants of the novel coronavirus renders some recommendations made by SickKids even less effective than they once were. For example, at this point there is a large question mark over whether non-medical masks are at all effective against the British B.1.1.7 variant of the virus, which is more transmissible.

At the same time, the federal Liberal and Ontario governments have badly bungled the vaccination program, making the SickKids report's appeal to inoculate educators akin to pushing on a string. Delays in the production and distribution of the Pfizer vaccine resulted in no new doses being delivered last week. Less than 300,000 doses have been administered so far in a province of nearly 15 million residents.

In truth, the provincial government has consistently ignored its own inadequate measures on schools during the pandemic. An investigation by the *Toronto Star* published on January 21 uncovered internal documents dating to last summer from Lecce's office that showed how the government quickly abandoned its

initial plans for controlling the spread of the virus. The planned widespread surveillance testing of students was dramatically downsized; the proposal to test all teachers—initially floated by Ford—was quickly abandoned; and the government refused to cap the sizes of classes at 15, or indeed impose any class-size reductions.

Predictably, the news media has marched in lockstep with the Ford government. The Liberal-aligned *Toronto Star*, a strong supporter of the McGuinty-Wynne Liberal governments which gutted education budgets and attacked teachers' working conditions during their 16 years in power between 2003 and 2018, published an editorial entitled "Let's not fail our children, it's time to open their schools." Cynically using the fact that the Ford government has allowed wide swathes of the economy to remain open throughout the pandemic, the *Star* demanded that it do the same for schools. "Toy-making factories are open while our children rot in front of their Zoom school," it complained.

The effects of the pandemic and social distancing on childhood development and mental health are real and considerable. However, they will only be worsened by a full reopening of schools, which will result in skyrocketing infections among children and young people, who will carry the deadly virus home to their parents and other vulnerable family members.

The only way to protect child welfare and development during the pandemic is to provide billions of dollars in resources to guarantee high-quality online learning for all and full wages to parents who must remain home to look after their kids. The resources for such policies must be expropriated from the super-rich, who are wealthier than ever after a year of mass death and misery.

The WSWS calls on teachers, education workers, parents, and students to resist the Ford government's reckless reopening of schools. They must mount a struggle to shut down all nonessential production until the pandemic is brought under control, and redirect the vast wealth being hoarded by the financial oligarchy to meet critical social needs, such as education, health care, elderly care, and social services. To fight for this program, teachers and support staff should establish independent rank-and-file safety committees in every school to begin preparations for a general strike that will unite fellow educators across Canada and North America, including the teachers currently battling the drive to reopen schools in Chicago, in the fight to prioritize lives over profits.



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