

July 28, 2020

Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
Ministry of Education
438 University Avenue, 5th Floor
TORONTO, ON
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Dear Minister Lecce:

Trustees at Lakehead Public Schools have had weekly update meetings with our senior administrative team. We are proud of the work they have done to develop workable plans for reopening schools. It has felt like a roller coaster for all of us. Trustees are supportive of the Ministry of Education determining how schools will reopen across the province. It provides clarity and confidence when the Provincial Government is making that decision. We have questions and concerns as trustees. Our overriding and most important concern, and the one that we are tasked with as trustees, is the safety of our students and staff. Our questions here are with staff and students in mind at all times.

A) SCREENING TOOL:

Awareness of safety protocols will need to begin at home to ensure the safe entering of busses and school premises. Parents and all staff will require specific daily guidelines/checklist on Covid19 symptoms. They will need to follow guidelines before sending children to school and as they enter the bus or school building. Other provinces, such as Newfoundland, Labrador and Nova Scotia, have provided these lists.

Will the Ministry provide specific guidelines/checklists for parents, bus companies and schools?

B) HEALTH AND SAFETY PROTOCOL:

- i) Schools will require enhanced cleaning and disinfecting. There is a difference between the two and they require specific considerations. This is necessary to meet the protocols that are required by public health guidelines. Currently, the Ministry of Education is saying that there will be additional staff for cleaning, but this is only a return to prior staffing numbers in the last collective agreement (2016).

Will the Ministry of Education be providing specific new funding to cover the cost of necessary increased human resources and extra cleaning and disinfectant products?

.....2

- ii) Masks are an important and scientifically legitimate way to help prevent the spread of Covid19. Masks will, no doubt, be required in certain circumstances when moving throughout the school with class changes in secondary and as required in elementary settings. As the decision for masks lies in the health field and the government is strictly following their direction, it is also an area where a clear direction from the provincial government will make it streamlined and consistent. In some school settings across the world, masks have been mandated to be worn full time.

Will the Ministry mandate masks for all students, or specific age groups of students to be worn all day?

Will the Ministry mandate mask wearing for certain situations in schools?

Will the Ministry provide additional money for masks?

- iii) There may a need for personal protective equipment (PPE) in our schools. Equipment such as, but not limited to, N-95 masks and gloves are single use. Personal protective equipment is an additional cost that we have not had to account for in our budgets.

Will the Ministry provide additional money for PPE?

- iv) Our school offices will need to have protective Plexiglas for our secretarial and office staff. Other situations, such as counselling, may require protective barriers.

Will there be additional money for providing safety barriers for our staff?

- v) Schools will require huge amounts of hand sanitizer.

Will there be additional money provided for hand sanitizer?

C) TRANSPORTATION:

School busses will require enhanced cleaning and disinfecting.

Will the Government provide specific money to bus companies for enhanced cleaning and disinfecting of school busses?

.....3

D) PHYSICAL DISTANCING:

As we all know, physical distancing is one of the key government recommendations to prevent the spread of Covid19. Parents have many questions regarding how schools will be able to provide physical distancing in classrooms. Trustees have received questions from parents wanting to understand how their child will be safe in a room full of children. Parents are also concerned about the return to school models – conventional, adaptive or learning-at-home. They want to know the Ministry’s decision for the scheduled reopening of school in September. Safety is their main concern, as is trustee’s.

Many parents still think there will be smaller class sizes for their children if, and when, they return to school. Not having a province-wide plan produced is making it difficult to imagine the setting in which their children will be returning to school.

Will the Ministry provide a province-wide guideline to physical spacing protocols in classrooms and on school busses that clarify and give parents a sense of what the daily environment their children will be facing?

E) SPECIAL EDUCATION, WELL-BEING AND EQUITY:

Trustees have had numerous discussions with senior administration about concerns with special education during at-home-learning and as we move to re-opening. We have applauded the Ministry’s focus on special education and well-being throughout the learning-at-home situation. We expect the Ministry to address, on a provincial scale, the unique needs of special education students and ensure additional funds continue to address those needs. We would like to see equity of learning addressed on a provincial scale: systemic racism, issues related to poverty, those traditionally under-represented, challenges Indigenous students may face and their learning, and other areas of equity. We would expect the Ministry to address these and other related areas of equity in specific and guided ways so that parents and boards have a sure plan to follow and rely upon.

Will the Ministry ensure that there are specific details to ensure that equity of learning is provided for all students in specific and clear guidelines?

Will the Ministry provide additional funding as needed for special education, well-being and equity?

.....4

F) MATH CURRICULUM:

Trustees welcome the new math curriculum.

We urge the Ministry to postpone the delivery of the new math curriculum until the next school year so that teachers and school boards can concentrate on the monumental task of returning to school in the midst of a pandemic.

Will the Ministry delay the implementation of the new math curriculum?

G) TECHNOLOGY/ON-LINE LEARNING:

All school boards must be prepared to deliver the three options for learning and be able to implement a different model if directed by the Medical Officer of Health. If we return to learning-at-home, or an adaptive model, or we have a percentage of students who cannot return physically to school or whose parents are not comfortable sending them, we will need support for on-line learning and potentially more technology to implement those learning models. From the OPSBA Nanos survey: *“One in ten Ontarians with one child, and more than one in ten Ontarians with two or more children in the public school system say they are likely to keep their child home from school this coming September.”*

Will the Ministry provide additional funding for on-line learning supports and for additional technology?

Trustees are grateful for the government’s decision to have consistency in how schools will open in the fall. Having consistency and providing guidelines that support schools and staff throughout difficult times are vitally important and the importance of such actions cannot be stressed enough. Trustees are the ones who represent students and are often the communicators of the concerns of parents. We have received many calls from parents who express their deep worries about safety for their children and whether a plan to return to school is safe. The OPSBA recently conducted a province-wide Nanos survey (<https://www.opsba.org/Shared%20Documents/Media%20and%20Resources/Documents/2020-1668%20OPSBA%20June%20-%20Report%20with%20tabs.pdf>) to gather information on the feelings of the public on returning to school. Cathy Abraham, OPSBA President says of the report: *“The results of this polling tells us that the public recognizes the critical societal importance of public education, especially during a pandemic... **With the support of the public behind us on this, we know our school boards and schools will need appropriate levels of funding for a number of arising issues, including cleaning supplies, support for technology and students with special education needs, and student transportation.**”*

.....5

Trustees across the province have been asking for direct answers to our funding questions. We are asking that you answer our questions in a direct and timely matter. These answers are needed to ensure the safety of students and staff, to aid our return-to-school plans, to provide clarity for constituents and parents, and to portray an image of unity in education in Ontario.

Sincerely,

Trustee Ellen Chambers, Chair
Trustee Trudy Tuchenhagen, Vice-Chair
Trustee Arnone
Trustee Doughty-Smith
Trustee Massaro
Trustee Oikonen
Trustee Saarinen
Trustee Sitch
Indigenous Student Trustee Keira Essex
Student Trustee Sierra Gaudreau

cc: Deputy Minister, Nancy Naylor
MPP Michael Gravelle
MPP Judith Monteith-Farrell
Cathy Abraham, President, OPSBA
Michael Judge, President, LETO
Rich Seeley, President, OSSTF
Rod McGee, President, CUPE
Diana Baker, President COPE
Kari Simpson, President SSPs
Shelley Crupi, President ECEs