

## #UnsafeSeptember: Ontario parents fear province's school reopening plan

*Veronica Appia*

Many parents considering sending their children back to school in September are expressing their disappointment with Ontario's latest guide for reopening.

The province revealed its plans July 30, which includes dedicating \$309 million to assist schools in reopening safely amid COVID-19, with funds being put toward hiring additional staff, cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment and having public health nurses present in schools, among other measures.

But many parents across the province say the details of the plan are inadequate, especially with regards to elementary schools, which will be retaining their original class sizes, with only one metre of physical distance between students and no plans to address ventilation issues already prevalent in many schools.

When asked about the efficacy of the one-metre of distance rule Thursday, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said, "The aim is to preserve one metre of distancing in conjunction with masking." He added that "the overwhelming consensus when I sought perspective" indicated the importance of "doing a suite of actions."

Lecce was referring to recommendations by medical experts, including a [report by experts at Sick Kids released Wednesday](#) that recommends children and youth return to school with "risk mitigation strategies in place." It also highlights that children account for a small percentage of COVID-19 infections worldwide (less than 5 to 10 per cent).

With regards to physical distancing rules in schools, the report states that "strict physical distancing should not be emphasized to children in the school setting as it is not practical and could cause significant psychological harm."

The report recommends smaller class sizes, where feasible, as one of the recommendations to aid in physical distancing.

"That's just a complete failure," Jessica Lyons, of the Ontario Parent Action Network, said of the province's announcement, adding that children will be in classrooms with upwards of 30 students in a room who are likely unable to mask effectively.

She said while she is in support of children going back to school full-time, she is not supportive of that happening with the current safety measures being proposed by the Ontario government.

"This government, I feel, is really sacrificing our youngest learners in order to prioritize an economic reopening rather than their health and well being," she added.

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Lyons said by her calculation, the \$309 million being dedicated is only about 10 per cent of what would actually be required to keep the children safe. She said she would like to see smaller class sizes in elementary schools, solutions to ventilation issues, additional funding put toward caretaking and the option for each school to have their own dedicated nurse, rather than the proposed maximum of 500 nurses for all schools across the province.

“That's what our children deserve,” she said.

Toronto parent Rachel Huot agreed, adding that she would also like to see the province mandate paid sick days for parents and workers.

“A lot of the strategies around school reopening involve you screening your child in the morning and keeping them home if they exhibit any of the symptoms of COVID-19 and, in kids especially, those can really vary,” she said. “It's going to mean you're going to need to keep your kids home quite regularly for common cold or stomach issues, or fevers — really routine childhood viruses and sickness.”

When parents don't have access to paid sick days, they may have no other option but to send their children to school sick, she added.

Hundreds of other concerned parents and educators have been taking to social media to respond to the province's hashtag of #safeseptember with their own #unsafeseptember to show their disapproval.

Good morning, @Sflecce. We don't have desks and there's no front of the class in #Kindergarten. Belonging, community, and collaborative play and problem solving are at the heart of the Kindergarten program. You'd know that if you ever visited a classroom. #UnsafeSeptember #onted [pic.twitter.com/EL9zXabjas](https://pic.twitter.com/EL9zXabjas)

Thank you for making the decision to pull my child from school this easy.  
#UnsafeSeptember <https://t.co/MtK93YlHkU>

Parents are being put in a horrible situation and there is no right answer for many of us. Our government will not protect our children, that much is clear.  
#UnsafeSeptember <https://t.co/XKQBIjsHJM>

Huot said she hopes the province can make amendments to the plan before September and allocate more funding toward safety measures.

“We've seen the plan changed many times since school closures in March,” she said. “It should and can change again.”

