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The Israeli system, which re-opened as parts of Ontario soon will be, was forced to quickly shut down.

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2020: The year of living dangerously for educational workers in Ontario

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I cannot imagine what my former colleagues are thinking about the 2020 calendar year.

This has probably been the toughest year ever for Ontario educational workers. The public seems to have forgotten that the year began with a series of job actions by unionized educational workers from across the province hoping to convince an intransigent government to negotiate in good faith.

Teachers were winning the battle for public opinion and the government was on the back heel until COVID arrived last March throwing the school system into chaos.

The initial school closure for the pandemic dragged on from weeks to months to eventually the cancellation of the remainder of the school year. Teachers, with little support from the boards and the province, provided stop gap learning on the fly. While the government claimed it was e-learning, for most educators the 'e' stood for emergency.

Educational workers and their students discovered very quickly the vagaries of the various software and hardware that were used to deliver programming. Locally, anyone paying attention quickly discovered the outrageous differences between urban and very limited rural broadband.

Some students without reliable rural internet were told to drive to their schools and sit in the parking lots to do their work, hoping to utilize the board bandwidth. Results of emergency learning were not satisfying for teachers, students or their parents.

Late spring saw the four teachers unions signing three year collective agreements with the provinces that gave up more than they preserved. Ministry insiders

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teachers agreeing reluctantly and only after they were presented the “nuclear winter” option of a pandemic-ravaged and bankrupt Ontario voiding the collective agreements in their entirety, and teachers falling prey to contract stripping that hadn’t been attempted since the dark days of Mike Harris.

There was palpable anger in the rank and file at the deal presented, and close to a quarter of all teachers, led by a number of local district presidents, voted against the deal. Resentment still remains, particularly regarding jobs that were bargained away and will likely never return.

The summer has brought the “Stephen and Doug show” to centre stage as the education minister and the premier lurch from one re-opening plan to the next, creating utter chaos in boards across Ontario.

With 72 publicly funded boards in the province it would have made sense for the provincial government to provide a template, particularly to all the non-designated boards, as to what the school day should look like. They abdicated that responsibility and wasted thousands of hours of senior management time across boards like our own as everyone attempted to re-invent the wheel.

Educational workers calculated it would take \$3 billion to return to school safely. The province countered with a little over \$300 million.

When teachers began to rally public support the province “allowed” cash strapped boards to spend a portion of their accumulated reserves on pandemic related items. Many boards had already committed these reserves to humble but important projects like fixing their crumbling schools as the fall approached, and had little to add to the insufficient provincial pot.

The province claims they have consulted the best health care people in Ontario in preparation for re-opening. They also crow about their on-going consultations with hand-picked groups of parents. It seems very curious to me that at no time since the pandemic struck, has Stephen Lecce, the education minister, entered into meaningful talks with educational workers regarding how to open safely.

Lecce and Premier Doug Ford recently ignored the united call of all three principals’ organizations, all four teachers’ federations and CUPE to put off the re-opening of school another couple of weeks while workers prepare for a year like no other.

Teachers are being pilloried by disgusting online trolls who have declared open season on both the pandemic as a hoax, and teachers’ concerns as the unions trying to make the Ford government look bad.

I never had to be afraid to return to school. While I was sad to leave the cottage each summer, I welcomed the return of teaching and coaching in all my 31 years that I worked for the local board. This year I

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would be afraid...for my health and the health of my extended family including my elderly mother.

Educational workers are being asked to go back to school with less protection than most retail workers currently enjoy. Many stores in Kawartha Lakes are still limiting their places of business to crowds of no more than five to 10 people. Masks are compulsory and the adult compliance rate with the mask order has been high right across the city.

Our bus drivers are being asked to deal with buses running at full capacity with very little protection. Our teachers are being asked to spend five hours a day with groups of young people who could number in excess of 35.

The Israeli system, which re-opened as

parts of Ontario soon will be, was forced to quickly shut down. Quebec high schools have barely had a chance to begin operations and are already looking at sick staff.

There are going to be tragedies caused by Ontario schools re-opening too quickly and with too few precautions. That is all but assured. The only question will be how many and how quickly schools are forced to shutter their doors again when a predicted second wave arrives in early winter.

Educational workers have had a horrific year and what they now need is our support in lobbying for a safe and fully funded re-opening. They deserve nothing less after the year they and their students have had to endure.

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Kirk is a retired high school history teacher and coach who has had a lifelong interest in politics at all levels. Since retiring, Kirk has spent the last three years doing freelance writing of all kinds for various platforms. Kirk can often be found sitting in the press gallery at City Hall observing and reporting on the vagaries of local government.

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