

STUDENT, STAFF WELL-BEING PRIORITIES IN BACK-TO-SCHOOL PLANS

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The province's plan is for schools to reopen in the fall. Uncertainty about the successful curtailment of COVID-19 by September, however, underscores the difficulty in predicting what educational format will be implemented once the time comes.

School boards across Ontario have been asked to prepare for three possible scenarios: a regular school day with health protocols in place; a modified school day; and a full online delivery.

Contingency plans are being developed for all three education models, commented superintendent of education, Scott Podrebarac, at a recent board meeting.

Besides what classrooms will look like, there are a host of other issues that are top of mind for trustees and education workers as they look ahead to the beginning of a new and very different school year.

At the top of everyone's

list, it would appear, is the well-being of staff and students.

"The mental and physical health of staff and students needs to be kept at

the forefront of planning for our return in September," said Cindy Gage, president, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) district 20, Halton teachers' bargaining unit.

The challenges will impact students differently, both in terms of what was experienced during emergency distance learning, as well as what they'll face in September, commented Tom Golightly, bargaining unit president of Professional Student Services Personnel, OSSTF district 20.

"We need to be prepared to support that, while also remembering this still won't be an ideal learning or working environment that we are returning to. We need to be OK with that, and remember that students, parents, and education workers are doing their best while trying to

function in an unprecedented situation."

In a recent letter to the ministry, Halton District School Board (HDSB) chair Andrea Grebenc said funding for well-being support is needed "so that students and staff can get timely and immediate help, as needed."

Grebenc also suggested the two PD days at the beginning of the board's school year calendar would be well suited for professional development and training for all staff and teachers, which is "imperative" given required new ways of teaching and learning.

"In any of the scenarios, there will be necessary supplies and training that will be needed by both staff and students," said Gage. "We want to see an increase in staff to meet the needs of learning gaps, mental health, and additional cleaning."

A plan also has to be in the works for those teachers with underlying medical conditions who will not want to return to the classroom because of the risks,



Torstar File Photo

The HDSB is developing three contingency plans for a back-to-school model for next year. One thing's for sure - classrooms will not look anything like the above come September.

board has an obligation to provide it and I'm not sure where the school boards are going to get PPE for September," she said.

"I know the kids and teachers are anxious to get back and work together and see one another. Hopefully, if the department of health says that it's safe to do that in the fall, then that's what will happen."

Funding for adequate staff, equipment, cleaning solutions and PPE, as well as support for access to devices and connectivity for some families, and budget flexibility for "extraordi-

nary expenses related to restarting schools safely and effectively," was also addressed by Grebenc.

The need for reflection on what was successful during the hastily adopted distance learning is necessary in planning for next year, said Golightly.

"Child and youth counsellors, teachers, and behaviour analysts for example, are the ones with front-line experience delivering the educational program. They will know best what the real impact on students is, and how to make September as successful as

possible," he said.

Parents should be counted on to discuss physical distancing and hand-washing techniques before kids return to school, said Proctor.

"So, there's lots of conversations that need to go on at home before they come (back) so they understand as best they can."

Parents have the option of not sending their children back to school and school boards are expected to provide remote learning in such cases, according to the ministry.

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