

Considerations for re-opening Ontario schools – principles, ideas, and strategies

This paper represents a collection of thoughts and ideas about the re-opening of Ontario's K-12 schools. It is not a position paper, but a discussion of items that the writers believe should be addressed. The views in this paper represent the views of the writers, and not necessarily those of the organizations for which the writers work.

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During the pandemic, Ontarians have been prepared to accept the additional costs within our public infrastructure of lost revenues for public transit, additional health care, and financial assistance to individuals and businesses. Similar considerations will need to be made for Ontario schools.

Ensuring good learning conditions, reasonable safety, and some flexibility to deal with unknown and unexpected requires new thinking, planning, staffing and logistics. If the Ministry and school boards can look for opportunities to coordinate with municipalities (recreational facilities, child care, public health), and Ontario's faculties of education, it may be possible to find new models for providing the best possible services and experiences for our children and youth.

This paper attempts to describe the puzzles to be solved for a return to school in Ontario and to identify some ideas and strategies that might be useful in solving the puzzles. The ideas contained are neither exhaustive, definitive or exclusive. Our intention is to invite thinking about possible solutions.

“We know this much to be true”

It will not be possible to have a “normal” return for early September 2020. Education will look and feel different than in the time before the pandemic and will not return to the old normal in the months ahead. Solutions need to be at-hand for safe learning experiences for all, including vulnerable children, for transportation where required, and for after school care for young children, to name but a few. Schools and parents need to be able to communicate directly about the changes, expectations and supports that will be available. Schools will need to be able to welcome students back and help students and staff adjust to the new normal(s) without immediate pressure to pick up where the school year would normally begin (See the Gentle Return paper). Attention must be given in the early days/weeks to assessing individual student learning to see where there are gaps that require additional support.

Face-to-face, in-school learning in a controlled, safe and supported environment is the preferred choice, recognizing that alternative arrangements will be necessary for some students.

School plays an important role in the acquisition of social skills and the maintenance of mental health and well-being for students. Daily interaction with peers is important for social and emotional development but will need to be managed and controlled because of the virus. Online learning can be used to support students who are particularly vulnerable or who become ill on an individual basis, or as a temporary measure in the event of an outbreak. Online learning may also be part of the supports for students who have fallen far behind over the past months.

In addition, there will be some parents who will not want their children to be in the normal school environment for non-medical reasons. There should be a standard process to request this, and for the school to make appropriate arrangements for online instruction. No student should vanish from school without the knowledge of school or board or a conversation about the student's plans.

What are these controlled, safe and supported conditions for the learning environment?

1. **Smaller classes to allow distancing.**
2. **Face-coverings/masks for students and staff, with sufficient supplies at the school to provide or replace as necessary.**
3. **Improved ventilation of indoor spaces, combined with outdoor learning to the extent possible**
4. **Limitations on some activities (e.g. choirs, contact sports, locker access, etc.).**
5. **Frequent cleaning and disinfection of learning spaces and school facilities, (as well as buses or other transportation).**
6. **Ready access to handwashing and sanitizing for all working in the environment.**

The essential foundations of a successful re-opening:

1. Approaches will, of necessity, vary from region to region and board to board, and even from school to school based on population size and resources. The threat varies widely across the province because of differences in population density, access to health services and other factors.
2. Education unions and professional associations must be part of the process of finding appropriate solutions, at both the provincial and local levels.
3. The approach(es) selected should be sustainable for the 2020-21 school year, with provision for short-term measures in the event of a new outbreak, or critical absences of learners and staff.

4. The approach(es) should align with public health advice and decisions should be made using the best available data for the community/public health region and the best available research (present and emerging).
5. The approach(es) (provincial and local) should address:
 - existing or expanding inequalities among learners, including students with special needs, English (or French) Language Learners, indigenous, marginalized and racialized students;
 - Opportunities for learners to catch up or remediate lost learning;
 - Well-supported alternatives to in-school attendance for individuals in the event that students or staff become ill or are quarantined;
 - Determinations must be made about whether some programs or activities will need to be curtailed for 2020-2021 (contact sports, choirs, lunch programs).
6. Schools and school boards should work collaboratively with public health units to assist in monitoring and contact-tracing, in the event of outbreaks.
7. The provincial government should support increased collaboration between school boards and municipalities to leverage available resources for education, recreation and childcare.

There will be a need to recruit additional teaching staff and to redeploy some current teaching staff, non-classroom teachers and board staff

Instructional and support staff can be recruited and deployed in different ways:

1. Current teachers may be assigned in one of the following ways:
 - Regular face-to-face instruction within a truncated student schedule, with independent study assignments part of secondary school teaching;
 - Remote teaching for those staff who are considered vulnerable in a face to face environment, for those students whose vulnerabilities do not permit attendance, or those needing additional remediation, catch up or credit recovery;
 - Providing support both in classrooms and out of class – librarians, math and literacy coaching, student success and guidance.
2. Occasional teachers, qualified board personnel and recently graduated teachers could be employed as a cadre of additional instructional support at the school level to be used in the following ways:
 - To be assigned to a new class grouping that meets the lower class size requirements;
 - As a stable source of replacement teachers within a school;
 - To provide additional supports for learners needing catch up or credit recovery. This could happen by having the additional teacher in the regular classroom, or by providing additional support outside of the student's classroom time; and/or
 - To provide additional monitors and managers of activities and of the safety of the school spaces.

The traditional deployment of occasional teachers is to fill a short-term absence, using automated dispatch systems. Reconceptualizing the deployment/use of occasional teachers as part of a school's team could add value to the new school operation. Instead of scrambling to find an occasional teacher when the absence arises, having a group of occasional teachers in school and available provides for classroom support, additional teaching assistance for students (when not replacing a teacher) , and a deeper knowledge and understanding of the school and its students. Occasional teaching is a significant piece of the education spending picture – between 5 and 10 % of the whole of spending on teacher salaries, depending on whether long-term replacements are included or not. ¹

3. Qualified teachers seeking employment in Ontario's publicly funded schools. Many teachers who have graduated in the past ten years have sought employment elsewhere and may be available and interested in teaching in Ontario.
4. Teacher candidates, especially those in their second year of the expanded preservice programs, could similarly be used to provide additional teaching and other supports to students. There are currently 9,500 teacher candidates enrolled in Ontario faculties of education, roughly half of whom have already received one year of teacher education, and all of whom will be seeking in-classroom practicum placements of a minimum of 80 days. If this time were to be configured as a paid or unpaid internship of 80 days duration, it could provide substantial assistance in lowering the size of class groupings, and in further extending support for students. This would require cooperation between the Ministry, school boards, unions, and faculties of education to ensure that the teacher candidates were available for substantial blocks of time and could be paid.

Enabling reduced class sizes and other environmental supports will pose space and logistical challenges

Space and logistical challenges will vary, and the solutions will vary, even within the same school board. Transportation may be necessary to take advantage of available, underutilized school space in one board, and a school with limited space in another neighbourhood may want to make arrangements with a community centre. Each school and each board will need to identify where there is room and where there is insufficient space and explore specific solutions.

1. With the availability of additional staff, non-classroom space (library, gym, corridors) and special purpose classroom spaces can be used. Provision may also be needed to use community spaces, university and college campuses, preferably at no or low-cost, and with liability protection for school boards and space providers.
2. If necessary to permit smaller class groupings, the elementary school day could be shortened: students would attend in shifts (e.g. 8a.m. – 12:00; 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.) for a marginally reduced school day. The specific schedule would depend on the time required for cleaning/disinfecting between shifts. Adequate provision of childcare for younger children

would need to be addressed by the school boards, municipalities, unions and provincial government in partnership.

3. For secondary schools, offering four face-to-face classes per day of 55 or 60 minutes would preserve a semester model (and could also work with some full-year models). Secondary schools could then include independent study modules in all courses which would complete the required hours for the credit.. Another possible modification is a concentrated “quadmester” system (2 credits over 10 weeks), although the impact of any absence in a time-compressed course is intensified.
4. Intensification of instruction and reduced class sizes will require the cooperation of the education unions and additional staff to honour collective agreement provisions, even as schedules, assignments and delivery modes may be altered (with agreement). It will require additional teaching personnel (see preceding page).
5. Provision will need to be made for teaching and other staff who may be considered vulnerable, or who have responsibility for vulnerable family members to have alternative assignments, including teaching remotely or assisting with intensified administrative responsibilities from home.
6. Regulatory flexibility or exemption will be required if the school day/hours of instruction or credit composition (secondary) are to be altered.

There will be additional costs

Reopening in a controlled, safe and supported environment will involve additional costs. Some of the resources for these costs may be found in existing budgets, but not all – some will require new money. Costs include:

1. Additional staff (teachers, health workers, support staff (e.g. CYWs), occasional teachers, education assistants, custodians and some administrative staff, at a minimum) for the following purposes:
 - To reduce class sizes to permit physical distancing and manageable student cohorts;
 - To monitor student and staff symptoms and health;
 - To replace staff who become ill or have been exposed;
 - To ensure that there is an appropriate complement of support staff;
 - Providing clear directions to staff and students who are experiencing symptoms;
 - Ensuring that facilities are cleaned appropriately and regularly as per public health guidelines;
 - Providing educational support for students who have fallen behind or who are having difficulty adjusting to being back in school;
 - Communicating clearly and directly with students, parents and guardians, caregivers and staff. Families must understand the available choices and the changes in previous routines.

Budgets should be examined at all levels to identify where there are funds that could be used with greater impact. As previously mentioned, deploying (some) occasional teachers to specific schools on a continuing basis to be used against the needs of the day, rather than sporadically on a daily basis to cover an individual absence, might be an example of a more effective use of that budget.

2. Transportation and childcare operations will need support in areas where schools operate on shifts, or where present transportation models do not meet physical distancing safety standards.
3. Additional learning supports are necessary. Particular attention will need to be given to schools in low income and racialized communities, where access to online learning and an appropriate learning environment (technology, space, quiet, parental assistance) during the shutdown may have been challenging.

School re-opening and childcare availability are essential to Ontario's economic recovery

The interconnection between school attendance and childcare requires attention. Both school and childcare play an important role in enabling the participation of parents in the economy.

Where childcare is not readily available or affordable, parents who would otherwise work face difficult choices: stay home or have relatives, friends or older siblings responsible for childcare (caring for a sick child, getting younger children to and from school.) When an older child or youth must assume these responsibilities, their own attendance at school is affected.

Present guidelines for safe childcare centre reopening pose many of the same logistic and financial challenges that schools are facing: limitations on group size, increased staff requirements, increased health and safety requirements. Leveraging the support of municipalities, provincial resources, school boards and the community with additional funding could help make new models work, and permit efficiencies in space, supervision and transportation beyond the existing childcare and afterschool care services.

Collaboration, imagination, resources and a commitment to our students are necessary

These are extraordinary times, and will continue to be so for months and perhaps years. Ontario has a strong education system, with excellent teachers and administrators and a provincial government with a history of strong support for publicly-funded schools. Harnessing the will, the imagination and the expertise of the larger education community can help create solutions that will work and serve Ontario's students well.

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