

A safe return for all:

OSSTF/FEESO's framework
for reopening schools
in 2020-2021





Foreword

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There's an old saying about the two Chinese brush-strokes that comprise the word "crisis." One is the character for "danger" and the other the character for "opportunity." Whether this is a correct interpretation of the Chinese etymology or not, the lesson rings true: with every crisis comes an opportunity. Let's talk about the danger first, because, when it comes to returning to school, the danger is real. We must assure the health and safety of students and staff in Ontario's almost 5,000 schools. We must handle concerns about equity with sensitivity, care, and appropriate policy reforms. We must strengthen communication between school officials, health officials, community boards, teacher associations, parents, students, and community members. And we must ensure there is adequate funding to make all this possible. A pandemic is dangerous and we can and will come together to mitigate the harm as best we can.

This report takes a thoughtful, pragmatic, and evidence-based approach to planning for school re-entry in the Fall, in whatever form that takes. From health and safety to training, communication, and pedagogy, the OSSTF/FEESO has laid out the essential issues. Most importantly, they draw on the practical knowledge of their members to zero in on the issues that matter and to suggest ways to begin to tackle the immense transition we are all going to face in September. The report handles the danger. And it also hints at the opportunity: to re-think our priorities as educators, citizens, and human beings. This world-wide pause in life-as-usual affords an unprecedented opportunity to focus on what is most important to parents, educators, and society. We've spent the last 25 years over-scheduling kids, over-testing kids, putting undue pressure on them to achieve more and more and play less and less. The result? Too many children and young adults who are stressed out, medicated, alienated and depressed.

I will leave the public health matters to my colleagues in those fields. But from an educator's perspective, midway through this report comes what, to my mind, is its foundation: "Educators' professional judgement should be at the centre of the planning and delivery of the curriculum." This sentence should not need to be here. There should never have been a time when we did not see educators as professionals; when educators' knowledge of individual students was ignored while standardized delivery models were pressed forward; when distant technicians who have never taught children sought to dictate the procedural minutia of everyday classroom life; when the importance of the educator-student relationship was deemed less important than a few percentage points on dubious standardized measures of achievement. Students are going to come to school in September (whether online or in-person) with a wide array of needs—educational, emotional, developmental, and economic. It will take all of us working in a concerted effort to address these issues effectively and equitably. The best thing those of us outside of classrooms (those of

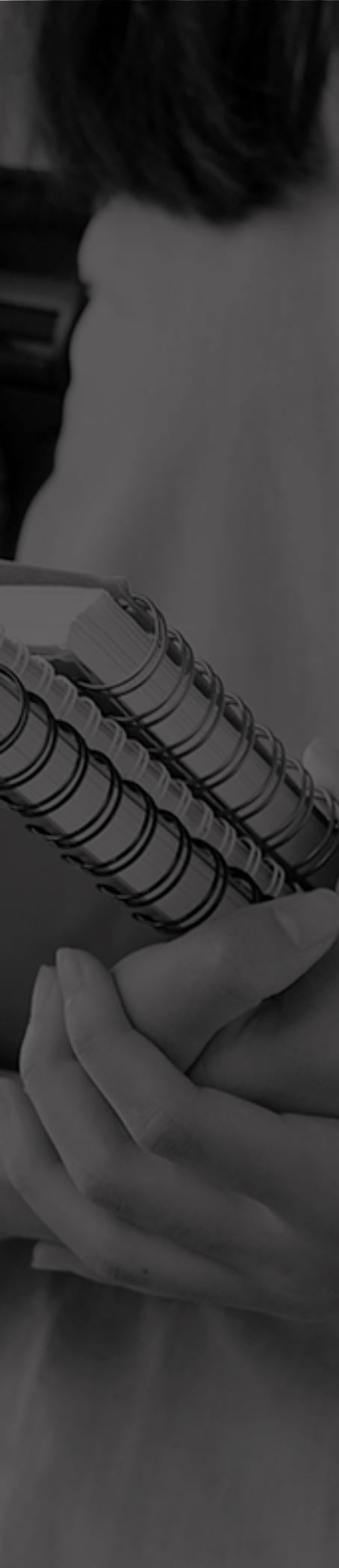
us not in direct contact with students on a daily basis) can do is this: come together to create the best possible working conditions for teachers and educational workers to do their job and to make decisions based on what they know to be in the best interests of their students. Then get out of their way.

Here's the interesting thing about the COVID-19 pandemic: everything that was impossible just a few months ago is now possible. Crises have a way of doing that. In the United States, calls to find one trillion dollars for healthcare were deemed naïve and impossible. Today, two and a half trillion dollars (and more to come) are being spent for the social and economic benefit of ordinary citizens. In Canada, homeless people in some communities are being sheltered and prisoners are being released from overcrowded jails and funneled into alternatives to incarceration; and in both countries, commitments to social spending on criminal justice is now competing with ideas about social spending on reducing inequalities and on infrastructure that benefits everyone. Anything is possible.

But it is not guaranteed. Opportunity does not mean destiny. This report points us in the right direction. When school returns in September, let's give teachers a great deal of latitude in what, how and when to teach their subject matter. Let's ensure that educational workers have what they need to support students. The primary job of teachers and educational workers should be to restore a sense of safety, nurture a sense of possibility and rebuild the community lost through extended social isolation.

Joel Westheimer, Ottawa
June 18, 2020





Introduction

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) is a strong, independent, socially active union that promotes and advances the cause of public education and the rights of students, educators and educational workers. While establishing working conditions for its members, OSSTF/FEESO also works to build strong public services, preserve academic freedom, prevent the privatization and commercialization of our educational institutions, ensure that students receive an education free of bias and discrimination and provide an equitable opportunity for all students to succeed in a strong, well-funded public education system.

Since the Government of Ontario enacted emergency measures in March and all schools in Ontario shuttered their doors due to COVID-19, teachers and education workers have had to shift to emergency remote learning. Now, as the Ministry of Education has announced that schools will remain closed until September, all education stakeholders are contemplating the question “what will the school year look like next year?” It is widely recognized in the research examining the current pandemic that we will only start to feel normal once our institutions are reopened. At the same time, many publications stress that there are clear risks involved with resuming our pre COVID-19 routines, without appropriate health and safety procedures in place. The publicly-funded school system, in Ontario, has unique issues we must grapple with prior to returning to bricks and mortar classrooms in the fall.

There is no doubt that cooperation from all stakeholders will be necessary in this endeavor. On behalf of the 60,000 members of OSSTF/FEESO, we welcome the opportunity to provide our expertise as educators and educational workers. As the Government of Ontario develops a plan to reopen schools, we have repeatedly offered to cooperate fully with Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce, and local school boards to find solutions that will ensure students and the educators who work with them remain safe as we reopen the province's publicly-funded schools. The collective experience and expertise of OSSTF/FEESO members can help to ensure a learning environment that is both safe and effective. We have reviewed the experiences of other jurisdictions, as well as consulted many frontline workers and local leaders from across the various sectors of our membership.

This paper presents OSSTF/FEESO's position on the reopening of schools, providing recommendations and raising concerns that must be addressed by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and local employers in order to ensure a safe return for our members and our students.



Guiding principles

OSSTF/FEESO has four guiding principles that the Ministry of Education must address before reopening schools.

1. Health and safety

The health and safety of students and staff must be protected. All health and safety requirements from the Ministry of Health and/or Local Public Health Units and all safety requirements contained within the *Ontario Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) must be met. Examples include Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), cleaning, disinfecting, physical distancing, testing for COVID-19, and self-isolation for those with symptoms or who are immuno-compromised. Union leaders and members must be aware of what these measures are and how they will be implemented in their school boards and job sites. Effective communication strategies from the government and employer in this area are necessary and essential.

2. Equity

OSSTF/FEESO is committed to protecting and enhancing public education. Equity must be at the centre of planning for the next school year and beyond. The impact of the pandemic is not experienced equally across populations. Increased efforts should be made to provide support to students and staff who require it.

3. Funding

Additional funding will be required. This additional funding must be provided by the provincial government to school boards, and it must be outside the parameters of what has been agreed to in the central collective agreement. For example, additional funding will be needed to address COVID-19 related health and safety costs, to repair and replace technology equipment, and to enhance staffing in all areas. The Ministry of Education should provide full funding for a fifth year (or additional credits) to allow students the flexibility and opportunities for catch up.

4. Collective agreements

All collective agreements must be respected. Central collective agreements have just been ratified and the conditions negotiated within these must continue to be followed. Any changes being contemplated due to the extraordinary conditions presented by COVID-19 cannot supersede what has been agreed upon by all parties. Many local collective agreements are still being negotiated. Decisions being made during these negotiations should not take into account the circumstances of the pandemic as that would mean that specific clauses relating to the pandemic would live on in collective agreements when they are no longer necessary or relevant. Rather, processes such as Memoranda of Agreements could be discussed which would be apart from the local collective agreement and can be used to address time-limited circumstances.

In addition to the issues addressed above, the following recommendations and concerns are being advanced as the OSSTF/FEESO position on the reopening of schools in the public secondary school system.

These points are presented in two parts:

1. Health and Safety
2. Pedagogy

**Some points may be repeated in places as they pertain to intersecting issues.*



PART 1 – HEALTH AND SAFETY

Health and safety protocols must be well-planned and put into place prior to the return to school. This includes protocols required in the safe transportation of students, training requirements, facility considerations, and mental health supports for students and staff.

Communication

- Joint Health & Safety Committees (JHSC) must be consulted about all return to school plans. The JHSC must ensure that risk assessments and building inspections are done before a return to school in the fall, including notification of any new cleaning products or chemicals that may be entering the workplace.
- Appropriate signage will be required inside and outside worksites regarding hand-washing, physical distancing, etc.
- Employers will need to provide all of the resources, materials and supplies recommended by the JHSC and public health officials.
- Decisions must be made in coordination with public health officials, but input and plans for implementation must be done in consultation with representatives from all employee groups.
- A communication plan to ensure that clear communication to all members of all health and safety protocols established by the school and public health officials, OHS, and Ministry of Health must be established.
- Protocols must be established regarding students and staff members who are ill, identified cases of COVID-19, outbreaks in the community, when schools or boards will close.
- Protocols for students who are ill must consider all staff who would come in contact with the student including office clerical and administration.

Training

- Training on health and safety protocols must be provided for ALL staff including reporting workplace hazards, reporting worker exposure to such hazards, engaging in work refusals under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, and how to file Workplace Safety and Insurance Board claims for lost time arising from exposure to hazards.
- This expert training must be provided during work hours and prior to the return of students to the school or worksite.
- Training may be necessary for students.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Adequate supplies of sanitary and PPE supplies (masks, gloves, hand sanitizer) and equipment will be required and they need to be maintained for the school year. Necessary procedures and supplies for the on-going maintenance and sanitizing of PPE must be provided.
- Appropriate PPE should be available to support the needs of ALL support staff. For example, the facial protection that an interpreter or speech & language pathologist will require may differ from that of a teacher or an educational assistant.
- Additional protective equipment will be required for staff dealing with students who have high/complex needs.

Transportation

- Protocols must be considered for buses, taxis, and other modes of transporting students with respect to physical distancing and cleaning.
- Cleaning and sanitizing procedures must be established between pick up and drop off for students who are bussed, in consultation with public health officials and JHSC.

Facilities

- Specific entrances should be identified and used for entering and exiting buildings.
- Boards will need to hire additional custodial and maintenance staff as more rigor will be required with regard to cleaning, disinfecting, sanitizing, and maintenance.
- Plexi-glass barriers should be installed in areas such as board offices, school main offices, cafeteria, offices used by speech language professionals, etc.
- The employer should ensure an increased rate of maintenance and inspection of ventilation systems in worksites.
- Protocols must be established and clearly communicated for physical distancing, class set-ups, movement in hallways, access to lockers, etc.
- Protocols must be established and clearly communicated for special education/life skills classrooms, high needs/complex needs students that address health and safety of both students and staff.
- Protocols must be established and clearly communicated for non-classroom spaces—main offices, guidance offices, libraries, washrooms, change rooms, cafeterias, etc.
- Protocols for board offices and non-school locations must be established.
- Stringent visitor protocols must be established and clearly communicated to both staff and the community.
- There should be no sharing of materials in the classroom.
- Toys should be disinfected and individual play promoted.
- Hands-on work, science lab work, food lab work, work in technology classes should be limited or not permitted without appropriate consideration of sanitizing equipment in between usage by students.
- Resources such as textbooks, Chromebooks, and other instructional materials need to be disinfected regularly.
- Protocols will be required for cleaning/disinfecting specialized equipment (e.g. wheelchairs, mobility equipment, therapy materials, specialized technology, equipment that travels back and forth from home).

Mental health supports

- A tiered approach to meet the needs of all students will be necessary. It should not be assumed that all students will have been traumatized by the events of the pandemic. Supports for all students will be needed recognizing that there is a higher baseline for feelings of anxiety and worry right now.
- Additional supports will be needed for some students who may be more at risk because of social determinants, COVID-19 experiences (e.g. parent(s) are essential workers or have health concerns), and some students will require formal supports because of existing, elevating or emerging mental health issues.
- Plans to support caseload management will be required and must include clear communication and coordinated plans for detailing work priorities that are shared with school teams and parents.
- Additional staff will likely be required, including mental health professionals, educational assistants, and behavioural specialists to meet the increased needs of students.
- Confidentiality issues regarding mental health services must be addressed. Student information must be protected.
- Many school mental health staff are itinerant. Plans will need to be in place regarding the assignment of multiple schools, caseloads, and protocols if travelling between schools and worksites.
- Time during the work day should be allocated to provide training to all staff regarding the mental health impacts of the pandemic on students (and staff) and best practices for responding—could be provided in consultation with School Mental Health Ontario and JHSC.
- The mental health needs of all staff must also be considered. Many staff will be experiencing similar challenges as students as they deal with the effects of the pandemic. All staff (including temporary and casual workers) should have access to mental health supports, including access to Employee Assistance Programs and any necessary accommodations.

Other considerations

- All staff, visitors, and students may be required to complete a self-assessment survey before entering work/school sites.
- Protocols must be established and clearly communicated for all itinerant staff regarding movement between classrooms, movement between schools.
- Immuno-compromised staff must be properly accommodated.
- Physical distancing for staff in all worksites and school or board locations must be addressed and clearly communicated.
- Staggered lunch periods, snacks, recesses, class times may be necessary.
- International students—protocols (e.g. quarantine) should be developed before they are accepted into the school.



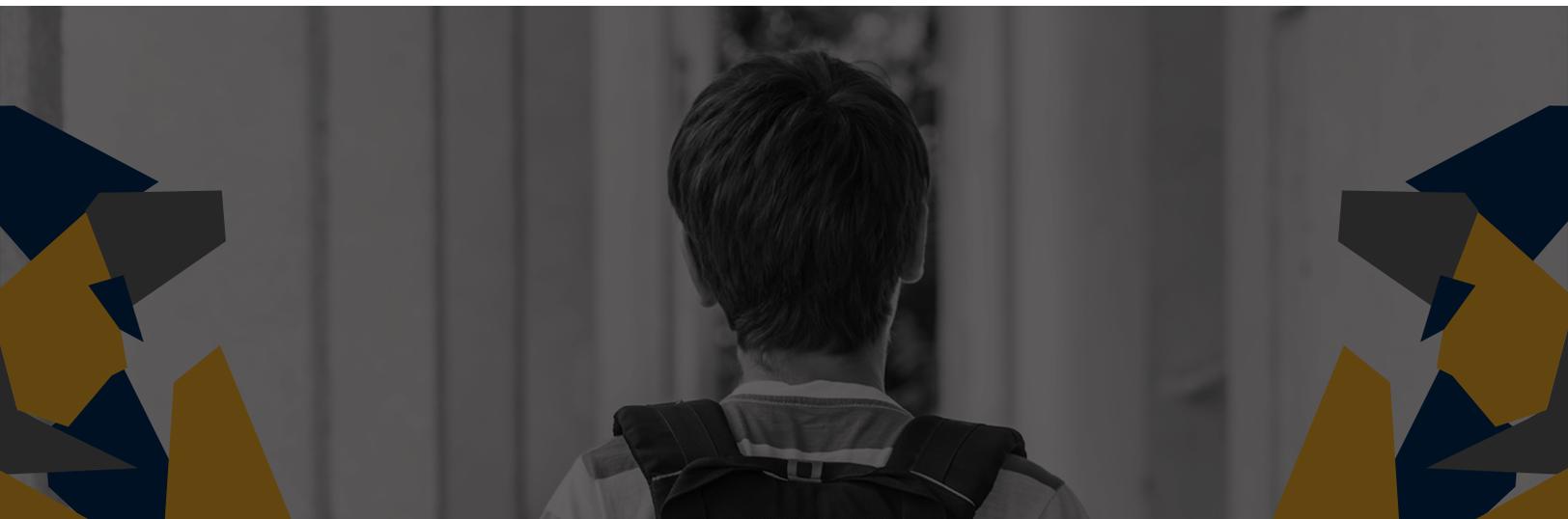


PART 2 – PEDAGOGY

This part is focused on several aspects of student learning: planning for the new school year (or years should this situation continue), the structure of how the school year could look, the curriculum adjustments that would need to be made, the staff needed in these extraordinary times and the special considerations that need to be given to inclusive education. In this context, an “educator,” refers to teachers, occasional teachers, instructors, and early childhood educators who are tasked with the preparation and delivery of instruction to students.

Planning for the pandemic year(s)

- Extra planning time during work hours will be necessary. Educators and education workers should be provided with a number of days at the beginning of the school year and, in a semestered/quadmeasured system, at the beginning of each semester/quadmeasured before students return to class.
- Planning is necessary to learn about the processes, training, and implementation of transfer of content to digital and distance learning formats as necessary.
- Planning time is also needed for schools to reduce class sizes, plan alternative schedules, as well as for second wave closure preparation.
- Educators and education workers should be provided with appropriate professional development opportunities especially as it relates to learning from home.
- Opportunities for all staff groups to receive information and participate in discussion and collaboration should be provided.
- Guidelines for physical distance during staff meetings should be consistent with the guidelines for students in classrooms. This may require that staff meetings are held online pending public health direction.



The structure of the learning:

- The priority should be the safety of and security of students including social and emotional development.
- Flexibility for blended or hybrid learning will need to be considered.
- Development for and a clear communication of an attendance policy will be required—some students may choose not to attend in-person; attendance records may be needed for contact tracing.
- A cohort of educators and education workers who are immuno-compromised, for example, and not able to return to their work assignments in-person could be assigned to those students who are not returning to school in-person. These educators and education workers would “keep” their students even if the school is shut down due to an outbreak. They could be centrally assigned by the board so their virtual students could be from anywhere in the board.
- This provision of working from home should also be available to educators and education workers who have younger children in the school system who have been allowed back to school on an alternate schedule, for example, which does not allow them to return to work. This cohort should also include clerical staff and OSSTF/FEESO members who work out of the board offices.
- If a school is shut down due to an outbreak, there would be an expectation that all educators and education workers in that school revert to distance learning. However, educators will require one to two days of planning to be provided before distance learning begins.
- An educator or education worker who is quarantined, but not ill, may choose not to use sick days and should be provided with accommodations that allow them to work from home. They might join the cohort of vulnerable educators and help with delivery of instruction or material preparation. An occasional worker will replace the educator in the classroom. The same applies if the educator’s or educational worker’s child is attending a school which has been shut down due to an outbreak.
- If a student decides to switch platforms (from in-person to distance learning or vice versa) a notice period must be provided to the school in order to accommodate the request.
- No educator or education worker would be expected to teach or provide support to students in the in-person school setting and provide distance education to students at the same time. As is currently the case, educators may be required to provide work for a student who is simply absent for a few days and needs help catching up before they return to the in-person classroom.
- A plan to centralize subject specific resources/lessons in digital formats so that they can be accessed within a school and across the board should be considered.
- All staff who may be required to provide services to students remotely should be provided with an up-to-date laptop, necessary equipment (e.g. document cameras, mics, headphones, etc.), and any software required; ergonomic considerations and assessments may be necessary.
- Access to internet sticks or financial considerations for educators and education workers who will be using their personal networks should be considered.
- Confidentiality issues when using devices and online platforms must be thoroughly examined by the board and clear communication on how to use them must be sent to all staff after consultation with local federation leaders.
- Specific platforms for regulated health professions that adhere to professional college guidelines must be provided.
- IT support should be provided to educators and education workers by board personnel. There will likely be a need to hire more IT professionals for this.
- Decisions on changes to the school day structure that would work within the collective agreement should be a local decision. For example, having students attend school on alternate days with Fridays being reserved for distance learning for all to allow for deep cleaning of the building. Decisions should be based on the Public Health Official’s recommendations and consider physical distancing, limiting the number of students in a school per day (e.g. alternate days is better than alternate half days), limit group mixing when possible, etc.).

The curriculum

- Educators' professional judgment should be at the centre of the planning and delivery of the curriculum.
- Using their professional judgment, educators will identify the core expectations required for each course. Educators must set realistic academic expectations. Identify what parts of the curriculum will be covered in priority order.
- There should be flexibility in the requirement of courses to be 110 hours in length. This flexibility would allow for the need for shorter courses/classes to allow for cleaning/alternating days, additional school closures, etc. This may be especially important for adult education or quadmester programs where students may have additional obligations.
- Students should be allowed the option of carrying a reduced number of courses for 2020–2021 (maintaining full funding).
- Appropriate staffing resources will be required for special needs and at-risk students that includes, but is not limited to, educational assistants, professional student services personnel, resource teachers, guidance counsellors.
- Educators would plan their lessons with the understanding that students may not have acquired the core learning expectations from the prerequisite course if it was taken in Semester 2 or if it was a non-semester school. Educators will need to address missed learning and a wide range of skills entering new courses and assess the knowledge gap that may exist.
- Time needs to be built-in to address learning gaps.
- Educators would transition to new curriculum expectations when, based on their professional judgment, students have demonstrated that they are able to do so. The “transition time” will vary from course to course and class to class.
- Educators should be granted access to teaching equipment that would allow for such as a document camera.
- The Culminating Activity or Exam for secondary courses could be changed from the current 30 per cent (as is currently the case for spring of 2020).
- There should be a recognition that Health and Safety protocols may lead to less group based work.
- As is recommended in many jurisdictions, standardized testing (i.e. EQAO testing) should be suspended.
- Part-time course loads should be permitted for students who may be struggling with the return.
- Additional credit recovery opportunities will be needed.
- Additional student success classes should be offered to support those struggling.
- Protocols for co-operative education placements must be provided.
- Protocols for rehabilitation services must be developed.
- Space for rehabilitation services (e.g. speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, and physical therapy) may be an issue within school buildings—having a private secure area to meet professional college and health and safety requirements for assessments, therapy, interviews will be needed.
- Any protocols developed must allow staff to adhere to professional college requirements/guidelines.
- Training and appropriate technology must be provided if virtual delivery is necessary.
- A consideration of the validity of administering assessments online should be fully explored and discussed before any implementation.

Staffing needs

- If distance and online learning continues, educators and education workers on medical or other leaves should continue to be replaced with an occasional worker.
- As with other itinerant staff, protocols should consider whether or not staff should be able to move from one worksite to another and if so, should there be a limit.
- Boards will need to hire more custodial and maintenance staff as more rigor will be required with regard to cleaning, disinfecting, sanitizing, and maintenance.
- Additional staff will likely be required, including mental health professionals, educational assistant, and behavioural specialists to meet the increased needs of students.
- Many school mental health staff are itinerant. Plans will need to be in place regarding the assignment of multiple schools, caseloads, and protocols if travelling between schools and worksites.

Inclusive education

- Additional protective equipment will be required for staff dealing with students who have high/complex needs.
- Appropriate staffing resources will be required for special needs and at-risk students that includes, but is not limited to, educational assistants, professional student services personnel, resource teachers, guidance counsellors.
- Protocols must be established and clearly communicated for special education/life skills classrooms, high needs/complex needs students that address health and safety of both students and staff.
- Space for rehabilitation services (e.g. speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, and physical therapy) may be an issue within school buildings—having a private secure area to meet professional college and health and safety requirements for assessments, therapy, interviews will be needed.
- Protocols will be required for cleaning/disinfecting specialized equipment (e.g. wheelchairs, mobility equipment, therapy materials, specialized technology, equipment that travels back and forth from home).
- School boards should be directed to provide additional consultations and supports for targeted populations to address their specific needs and to facilitate their continued engagement or reengagement in school (e.g. First Nations, Métis and Inuit students who are required to board to attend school).





Resources

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Additional online resources/media publications

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