

# Working conditions in the virtual context and the return to schools in Ontario

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I'm going to speak today from the perspective of Canada but will focus more on the province of Ontario. Education is the jurisdiction of the provinces in Canada, so my talk will be a bit more of an Ontario case. But listening to my colleagues from across Canada, it's clear that we share many of the same struggles and issues around virtual learning and returning to school in a safe way.

This is a quick summary of the conditions we have faced over the last 18 months in Ontario and across Canada. Schools closed mid-March of 2020 and then everyone switched to on-line.

I think Eduardo put it in perspective when he said how many people - both educators and students - went all at once from being in buildings to virtual learning. That has never been done

before and our arts teachers, our education workers, and our students and families had to do it with little to no preparation and with little to no support from the provincial government and local school boards. Granted they were caught a little off guard, but it took months before there was action and funding put into place to support those students and their educators to make some kind of positive learning experience. The members of our union - our teachers and education workers - did their best under difficult circumstances, and we stayed virtual until the end of that school year.

Schools reopened in September 2020 with new conditions put in place for safety, but the government did very little to prepare. We called for a number of things. We called for better ventilation,

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nothing happened. The government said that they would bring in filters for all the classrooms. That never happened. They did require masking for all students and for staff. But they also said we'd do rapid testing of students and staff, and that didn't happen. So, due to the lack of adequate Covid safety precautions in Ontario, many schools closed again right after the Christmas holidays. Some started to reopen, depending on what region of the province they were in, in February 2021. Then the infection numbers spiked again with the third Covid wave and all schools in Ontario closed in April 2021 and stayed closed until June. We all switched to virtual again, many of us for the third time in a year and a half.

Across Canada, other provinces kept their schools open with some small exceptions. I know that in British Columbia, one school district outside of Vancouver did close for a little while and go fully virtual, but Ontario the main difference in the country. Ontario had the most schools closed and students in virtual learning across the province because our Covid cases were the worst. And that's because of poor government action and poor government funding to try stem the growth of the virus across the province.

Schools are open again now and we're staying open. We've had the challenge of keeping the conditions safe. In Ontario there is a law where you can refuse to work under unsafe conditions. If an employee files a Work Refusal, that requires a Labour Ministry inspector to come and check things out. However, we have had very few Ministry of Labour orders written. Very few violations cited.

We (the OSSTF) have launched some grievances, but very few have been successful, and a bunch of those grievances are still in process. It takes a long time to get a grievance through the system.

At the start of the 2021-22 school year we had five very simple demands: Vaccinations was the first. We support mandatory vaccinations of staff and subsequently of students. Right now, in Ontario children between the age of 12 and 17 can be vaccinated, and we have just heard that a vaccine from Pfizer is about to be improved for 5- to 11-year-olds. We support that, as do all the education unions in Ontario. Most of our members are vaccinated although much like the rest of society, there's a few who are not. Teachers were supposed to be a priority, and we've heard in some countries that teachers were a priority and government announced that teachers would be a higher priority than other groups, but when it was announced here that teachers could go get vaccinated, there were none available. It took about five-six more months before the first teachers would have access to vaccinations. It really ended up being the beginning of the current school year before we could see more saturation of teachers fully vaccinated.

I mentioned earlier that most schools do have high-quality ventilation units in classrooms, but not all. The government promised this a full year ago and said they were coming. It took them over a year to get them and they're still not completely deployed. We called for mandatory masking. That has happened. Students are required to wear masks in school, as are educators.



**Ontario's teacher unions support mandatory vaccinations in schools. We believe that everyone working in, or attending a school who is eligible and can be safely vaccinated, should be vaccinated.**

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Testing: A lot of talk, but no action. The government announced a few pilot programs for rapid testing in schools, which many experts say is a good way to stop the spread of covid. But very few random tests are available in our schools. They only seem to show up where we see outbreaks. The last thing we've called for is distancing. For students to be able to physically distance from each other requires smaller class sizes. But in no way are the class sizes smaller. In fact, we've seen some bigger class sizes. We see 30-35 students crammed together in small spaces in elementary and high schools. The government and local health units have called for what we call "*cohorting*," which means you keep students in groups together, so they don't mix with other groups of students. Well, that doesn't really exist because students are allowed to interact with anyone before school, on their buses, at lunch and after school. So, there is no *cohorting* even though they say there is. So, we got all these things, well as you as heard, no not really. But we also have seen solidarity and trust. Teachers and education workers have become more

popular and more trusted than they were before and, strangely enough, teachers' unions have garnered a higher level of trust due to the campaigning we've done calling for these greater safety measures. In fact, the trust levels are far higher than they are of the government. This is interesting because we had just completed a very difficult round of bargaining that involves rotating strengths and we settled just as the pandemic started up. We were able to get public support when the government was trying to negotiate significant cuts to education, and sharp increases to class sizes.

Now seeing my time is nearly done, I'm going to mention one thing about virtual learning that's been a problem in some or our school boards. The Ontario government has left it completely up to local school boards - there are over 70 local school boards in the province of Ontario - to decide how they'll deal with remote learning. The government said the school boards must offer a remote learning choice for students this school year. Some have set up virtual schools. They're saying the virtual schools are

temporary for those students and parents who are concerned about getting covid at schools, but some have also decided not to setup a virtual school and instead do what we call hybrid learning. That term may be familiar to some of you. Hybrid learning in our context means that you have one class, some are learning in an actual physical classroom with the teacher and same teacher is also teaching students watching online livestreamed

into that same classroom. We call it distracted learning because the teacher must go back and forth between the computer screen and the students in person and try to deliver the lesson to both simultaneously. It is burning out a number of our teachers. Many of our boards don't do this, but it seems that the urban boards, like Toronto, have opted more for the hybrid classrooms.