

# A Gentle Return to School: Go Slow to Go Fast

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*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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There is an adage used in teaching, especially when introducing a new unit or a particularly challenging concept that we know students will need to understand in order for them to move successfully to the next level of learning. Teachers remind themselves to “go slow to go fast.” This adage can just as easily be applied to the construction of a house, where it is essential to take the necessary time to get the foundations right, so that the rest of the house can be built safely and without future problems.

In his July 27, 2020 *Globe & Mail* op ed, David Hutchison, a project management professional and professor at Brock University, makes a strong case for the gradual reopening of schools:

*“Think of the return to school as a safety product, similar to a new seat-belt design,” writes Hutchison. “A manufacturer wouldn’t widely roll out a new seat belt without first conducting field tests in order to hone its product. The same holds true for school reopenings. Gradually ramping up the reopening of schools will help school boards refine their pandemic plans and hygiene routines so that these measures can be safely implemented system-wide later in the fall.”*

Given the possibility that individual schools may have to close again if the virus spreads, we believe that this outline provides a proactive approach, aimed at re-opening schools safely in the fall.

While decisions for how best to phase in the return to school will look different from board to board, and even from school to school, we offer the following suggestions for what the first few weeks of school might look like to ensure a safe and successful return to learning for all. We have also provided a companion document, *Considerations for Re-opening Ontario Schools*, listing key underlying principles and considerations that we hope policy and decision makers will consider as we all work together to make a safe, successful and gentle return to school possible for all students.

## 1. A phased-in return

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While we all want to see children returning to attending school five days a week when it is safe and possible to do so, there is no compelling reason for having every student return on the very first day. Ontario schools have often done staggered re-entries in the past; for example, it has not been unusual to welcome kindergarten children into schools a few days before the rest of the students return in September. Internationally, several jurisdictions have managed to control the spread of COVID-19 by instituting a gradual return to schools for students. Often, this has been done by grade level, but it could also be done by cohort. Denmark, for example, was one of the first countries to re-open schools and is considered to have done so successfully – on April 15, the equivalent of K-5 students began a phased return with older students returning just over a month later. Some other countries, such as Germany, began with their most senior students to provide support for their final year of schooling and successful graduation.

As schools re-open, there will be many new behaviours and routines to be learned by students, staff and families, and it would be best to avoid hundreds of students and staff all experiencing this on day one.

There is a strong argument to be made for trying things out and seeing what is working. A phased-in return could take a number of forms, again dependent on local or regional realities:

- Elementary schools could open for just the youngest students in the first week and then gradually have older grades return.
- At secondary, a similar staggered re-entry would make sense. Students who graduated from Grade 8 last spring did not have an opportunity to visit their new high schools or to receive the orientation they normally would have in terms of course selections. Therefore, high schools could use the first week to welcome the new cohort of Grade 9 students, before gradually opening for Grades 10 to 12. Alternatively, schools could start with their most senior students to maximize time in school for students to meet graduation requirements.
- In a staggered or phased re-entry, not all instructional staff will be required to be in classrooms in the early stages. Staff not yet deployed to classes can be engaged in communication with students and parents to prepare for the next phase of students returning to schools, and assessing their learning needs.
- As mentioned above, depending on local and regional health considerations, the phased-in re-entry could be done more quickly (i.e., over a matter of days) or may need to be done more slowly over several weeks.

As well as the phased return of students by age/grade, international experience suggests the use of staggered arrival/departure times into school. Our paper on *Considerations for Re-opening Ontario Schools* lists some ideas for how this could be done:

- The school day could be shortened to have students attending in shifts (e.g. 8a.m. – 12:00; 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.). 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 school boards, municipalities, unions and provincial government in partnership.
- Secondary schools could offer four face-to-face classes per day of 55 or 60 minutes. This would preserve a semestered model and would also work with some full-year models. Secondary schools could then include independent study modules in all courses which would complete the required hours/credit allocation. Another possible modification is a concentrated quadmester system (2 credits over 10 weeks), although any student absence in such a system has a multiplied effect.

In mid-July, the Massachusetts Teachers' Association, American Federation of Teachers of Massachusetts and Boston Teachers' Union proposed a four-step, gradual return for students in their schools (MTA, AFT & BTU, 2020). Their plan includes dedicating an entire block of time at the front-end of all school re-openings to allow uninterrupted time for school personnel to prepare for the return of students, including setting up classrooms, learning about health and safety protocols and preparing for teaching and learning. A second phase would be devoted to one-on-one meetings, held in person or remotely, between school staff, students and their families to evaluate students' educational and wellbeing needs and to prepare everyone for the new health and safety protocols. We think this makes tremendous sense.

## **2. Clear communication at all levels and for all participants**

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Students, parents and educators will all need to adapt to many new routines. Having a clear understanding of what those new routines are will be absolutely essential. Ensuring clear communication to every member of the school community will maximize the chances that the array of new health and safety routines will be adhered to correctly and minimize anxiety levels.

### Questions to be addressed include:

- Are masks provided by the schools or families? Is there a plan in place to address the needs of families who may not have the economic options to provide masks?
- What personal belongings can students bring into school and/or take home?
- How will hand washing and toilet visits be managed?
- How will students be arranged in their classrooms? How many students will be in the same cohort?
- How will recess and lunch be managed?
- What about busing?
- What happens if a student, staff member or their families becomes infected?
- What are the supports in place for students and staff who may have pre-existing or underlying conditions, that can potentially place them at heightened risk?
- What will be the everyday expectations and protocols, and what will be the emergency provisions?

Some of these questions can be answered at the local level through print and online communication, while others will require actual conversations. Decisions taken by the school or board for managing the new realities of school attendance must be clearly communicated to all stakeholders.

### 3. Prioritize mental health

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One of the strongest arguments for why we want to see students returning to in-person schooling this fall has been the negative toll that isolation and reliance on digital technology has taken on their mental health and psychosocial development. Almost three-quarters (74%) of teachers responding to surveys in Canada had concerns about the mental health and well-being of their students in relation to the pandemic (CTF, 2020). Children and young people have also reported that the experience of the pandemic has had a negative effect on their mental health (AMHO & CHMO, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2020). World events over the summer months, including the murder of George Floyd, which have brought issues of systemic racism to the forefront here in Canada, will also have had a negative impact on the mental health of many students and staff. The first weeks of school should be dedicated to activities that enable students to talk about and work through their feelings of what they have experienced. For example, the school re-opening strategy in the Philippines dedicated week one entirely to addressing psychosocial and mental health needs. While arguments about mental health are important for returning to school and face-to-face instruction, the reality of being back in classrooms and schools is also causing anxiety for students, staff and families.

### Here are some ideas for prioritizing student and educator mental health:

- Fully attend to all health requirements to make re-entry into school as safe as possible, including effective testing and tracing in the community to minimize the spread of COVID-19.
- There should be no rush into curriculum expectations, and no pressure exerted on teachers or students to meet them immediately.
- The return to school should be a joyful experience for students, with ample opportunities provided for them to feel comfortable and at ease, so as to mitigate against the prevailing and ongoing anxieties around the spread of COVID-19.
- There should be more art, not less, and more opportunities for creative activities and play.
- There should be ample time allocated to returning to learning routines without the pressure of tests or exams in the first month at least.
- Resources from School Mental Health Ontario should be made available to teachers, parents and students, including the recently developed toolkit focused on the first 10 days, and others found on the SMHO website at <https://smho-smso.ca/covid-19/>.
- Educators should be given time and opportunities to decompress and talk about any challenges associated with the return to school.
- Fall reporting requirements for elementary schools should be removed by the Ministry of Education or at the very least simplified and should focus solely on how students are adapting to school. For secondary schools, assessment and reporting will need to be adapted to the models of delivery, and should focus on assessment of learning needs and successes, rather than on traditional marks

## 4. Focus on diagnostic and formative assessments, curriculum modifications and differentiated instruction

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COVID-19 is not only a global health pandemic; according to UNESCO (2020) it has also resulted in *A Global Crisis for Teaching and Learning*. The learning of students across Ontario will have been differentially impacted by the closing of schools last March, depending on their access to communications technologies, safe, quiet places to study, and parental support while learning at home. Reviews of previous times when schools were closed – mainly for summer break – suggest there will be increased socio-economic inequities in students’ learning outcomes during remote learning (EEF, 2020). Previous research in Ontario has also found that differences between primary division students from the highest and lowest income households’ literacy and numeracy learning increases substantially over the summer (Davis & Aruni, 2013). While remote learning included continuing instruction and supports, this was not equivalent to a regular full school day.

It will be essential for classroom teachers, SERT (Special Education Resource Teacher) staff, school psychologists and social workers to dedicate the first weeks of school to conducting diagnostic assessments of students. This will enable educators to assess any gaps in learning as well as mental health needs. It is also unrealistic to expect all existing curriculum expectations and content to be covered in this exceptional school year. An early review of 98 countries experiences of responding to COVID found that the prioritization of curriculum learning goals had not initially happened but was required going forward (OECD, 2020).

**Considerations include:**

- Using a range of diagnostic and formative assessment resources and strategies, differentiated instruction and additional supports based on students' individual learning needs.
- Not requiring all curriculum expectations to be met, especially in the first few weeks; it is more appropriate to ensure a prioritization of curriculum to be taught to support students' gradual re-entry to schooling and continued learning.
- Providing timely feedback to students and to parents and guardians to support learning and to inform next steps, regardless of whether a student is physically in school or at home.

## **5. Address inequities for students' learning and well-being**

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COVID-19 has been inequitable in its consequences. Recent data from Toronto public health (2020) indicated that of people with reported COVID-19 infections, 83% were racialized people and 51% were living in low income households. In education, globally and locally, COVID-19 has deepened and exacerbated existing inequities in students' learning opportunities and outcomes. The United Nations' Secretary General, Antonio Guterres has said that students are facing a "generational catastrophe" due to the profound and inequitable consequences of the pandemic (Bogart, 2020). In response to a survey asking how teachers in Canada thought their students were handling online learning, the majority of respondents reported concerns about negative experiences for students in poverty, with special educational needs, in single parent households, English as a Second Language learners, First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, visible minority students, and/or students who identified as LGBTQ2S+ (CTF, 2020).

**To address inequities, school staff will need to:**

- Carefully consider the experiences of students returning to school and/or continuing remote learning.
- Update any identified learning needs for specific students and provide required supports.
- Ensure a range of additional, targeted supports for students' learning and for their well-being, including access to adequate learning resources and to safe spaces inside and outside of school.
- Pay particular attention to how to identify and support inequities and issues for students in fully remote learning.

## **6. Support physical health through recess and outdoor experiences**

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While physical health and safety specific to COVID-19 is the top priority, students' overall physical health has been affected by the period of remote learning. A majority of 9 to 15 year olds surveyed in Toronto reported sleeping more, being less physically active, and not spending enough time outside (Maximum City, 2020). In Denmark, part of their success has included outdoor learning and use of community facilities, including times when community parks are reserved for children to use.

**Strategies to support students getting outside to play and to learn could include:**

- Daily opportunities for students to be outside (weather permitting).
- Use of community facilities and opportunities for school-age students.

## **7. Protect the adults**

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In education, the well-being of students is top-of mind; the well-being of the adults in the school environment sometimes less so. While always important, the physical and mental well-being of educators and support personnel will be critical to the smooth and successful operation of schools in the coming months. If teachers and other staff feel unsafe themselves, not only will they be concerned about returning to face-to-face classrooms, they will also find it difficult to reassure students and families.

The most recent annual report of the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan (OTPP) cites the average age of practicing teachers as 43. We estimate that a solid 30% of all teachers in our publicly-

funded schools are 50 and older, and we know that older adults are more at risk for COVID-19 infection and for more serious consequences of the illness. School boards will need to carefully consider what precautions they will need to put in place to ensure that teachers and other adults in the system are not unnecessarily exposed to infection. Plans should also be put in place to support staff with pre-existing conditions. These are conversations that must be conducted with the unions and associations representing educators, custodians, bus drivers and office staff.

As well as physical health considerations, mental health needs are also a priority. In a survey of educators in Alberta, almost half of respondents (49%) were concerned about teachers' mental health (ATA, 2020). Educators at all levels of the system (school and district) and support staff have been put under tremendous pressure to manage extraordinary transitions to remote learning and now to deal with various plans for back to school in 2020-21. Evidence indicates that combining the need to teach both in person and remotely has added considerable strain to teachers' workload (EI, 2020). Expecting educators to simultaneously support online, blended and in person learning cannot be sustained for another school year. If educators' own well-being is not attended to, it will affect their professional lives and their work to support students and families. For example, in Argentina new formal agreements, including a right to disconnect outside of work hours, were established between the government and the profession.

#### Here are some strategies to support educators' safe return to school:

- Allocate additional staff to support the range of requirements to be addressed in the 2020-21 school year and to address workload challenges.
- Re-deploy staff who cannot safely return to classroom teaching to support those students who similarly cannot be in classrooms due to COVID-19 or other considerations.
- Provide clear guidance about staff health and safety, including staff in risk categories for COVID-19, and clearly articulate absence and attendance policies for staff affected by COVID.
- Develop clear protocols for physical and mental health of staff, including workload and working conditions.
- Limit and place appropriate expectations on online activities and staff availability, including the right to disconnect outside the workday.
- Provide adequate professional learning to support staff with new COVID-related requirements and professional responsibilities for the upcoming school year.

## 8. Listen to the educators and support staff

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International guidelines and evidence are clear that successful approaches to planning educational responses to the pandemic involve collaborative joint working between government departments responsible for education, relevant health organizations, and the education professional organizations. Part of Denmark’s successful re-opening of schools was that the Ministry of Education, health authorities and education unions worked together to ensure a smooth transition.

As the health decisions about student and staff safety are made, it is vital to include and trust the education profession to lead on how to support students’ learning and development. Local education professionals know their schools and communities best. Teachers and education support workers are in the best position to gauge what will or will not work for their students. They are also well positioned to understand that every student is different, and so what works for one will not work for all. We have been impressed over the past few weeks by the number of excellent and innovative, out-of-the-box ideas for a safe return to school that have been proposed by education staff. Education systems need to enable educators and support staff to share their ideas and thoughts. They should be both free and supported to do so. As the ARC Education Project succinctly put it at the start of the pandemic: *“Teachers need to be allowed to be the heroes of learning like our health workers are being the heroes of combatting infectious disease”* (ARC, 2020: 6).

## 9. Give due attention to childcare availability

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School attendance and the availability of childcare are interconnected, and both require careful attention. Health and safety provisions during COVID-19 will likely make it impossible for schools in many parts of the province to operate a full-day schedule, five days a week. Moreover, as we articulate in our paper on *Considerations for Re-opening Ontario Schools*, “Where childcare is not readily available or affordable, older siblings are sometimes made responsible for childcare if a school-age child becomes ill, or for getting younger children to and from school, affecting the attendance of the caregiving sibling.” Young students will need childcare when not attending school, and this will increase substantially the need for safe and appropriate childcare solutions.

Proper attention needs to be paid to the intersection of school attendance and childcare and appropriate resources need to be provided to boost affordability and availability of childcare and afterschool care services.

## 10. Ensure continued learning and support for students and staff not in school

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There will be individuals of all ages who cannot return to school for health reasons and risks associated with COVID-19. Boards and schools will need to implement contingency plans to ensure that parents, students and staff members are provided with options that can support them.

Evidence internationally and in Canada indicates the digital divide has had significant and inequitable implications for the accessibility of, and experiences with, online learning approaches for students and staff (CTF, 2020; EI, 2020; Maximum City, 2020). Of concern, Education International's *Forward To School* evidence concludes:

All of the data gathered and analysed so far make it abundantly clear that responses that only or mainly rely on technology to provide teaching and learning in times of crisis are inadequate to provide learning continuity for the most marginalized and vulnerable children. (2020: 47).

During the period of emergency remote response learning in Canada, survey evidence indicates substantial worsening of students' overall readiness to learn, their ability to focus on educational tasks and frequency of checking in online (CTF, 2020). Parents also struggled during this time.

### A return to school including remote learning needs to include attention to:

- Universal access to affordable, high quality internet connectivity and personal devices for each student and teacher.
- A range of approaches to remote learning, such as radio, TV, phone, books, hard copy resource packs, and independent study projects.
- Teaching students to learn independent study skills and self-regulation.
- Providing educators who cannot return to school buildings the options of delivering remote learning supports instead.
- Availability of safe, quiet supervised places for students to study if they do not have these conditions at home.

## Concluding Remarks

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As we consider the range of options and decisions surrounding the safe re-opening of Ontario's schools, we would do well to remind ourselves that nothing is a panacea. The work to be undertaken over the coming weeks and months is about simultaneously trying to plan carefully to meet the needs of students and adults in schools and to provide the best teaching and learning possible, while at the same time knowing that nothing is certain. We still have much to learn about the virus and how it spreads. There will be bumps in the road.

It is understandable that there is an urgent quest for some forms of normalcy, including the re-opening of schools. However, these are not normal times and we cannot simply return to the old status quo. We urge that as well as a safe return to school, we need a gentle return to the upcoming school year. We need to "go slow to go fast".

It is in recognition of this context that we have proposed some ideas that we believe are forward looking, constructive and feasible. We have offered ten guiding principles above. We propose a phased in return can support students, staff and families to transition into this unusual school year and to set the back to school process up for success. We believe it will also be essential to prioritize students' mental health, to address inequities for students' learning and well-being, to focus on use of diagnostic assessments and formative assessments, curriculum modifications and differentiated instruction, and to support students' physical health through opportunities to play and learn outside. As well as the priority focus on students, we consider it to be vital to also protect the adults involved in our education system and to listen to and trust their professional expertise and judgement in navigating these new realities. Clear communication at all levels of the education system for all participants is necessary – students, families, staff, and the wider public are anxious about the risks of re-opening schools and need clear, comprehensive and understandable information on what is happening and with what implications. Finally, there also needs to be support for children and young people not in school, both through ensuring affordable childcare availability and also supporting the continued learning of students who are not in person in school buildings.

COVID-19 is a novel virus with significant implications and previously uncharted challenges for society. If we "go slow to go fast" to successfully re-open schools, we have the possibility to also go forward together to support all students. We welcome further suggestions and solutions in this essential task.

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August 11, 2020