

June 19, 2020

Dear Parents—

I write to you as we are just a couple weeks away from the official end to the 2019-2020 school year. Despite the challenges that we have all faced in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, I have been inspired by your determination and spirit. **I know that it has not been easy, but your commitment to supporting your children over the last several months has been reaffirming, constructive and exceptionally encouraging.** We will continue to safeguard the well-being of your children and preserve the continuation of learning. Your role as parents and guardians is critical to making this a reality.

We know that the start to the next school year **may not** look or feel the same as it did just 10 months ago.

Earlier today, I announced our government's plan for the safe reopening of schools. While Ontario is clearly on a positive trajectory in terms of our response to the COVID-19 outbreak, **my objective is to make sure that the education system is safely prepared for all potential scenarios come September.** With that in mind, I have directed all school boards to plan for three scenarios:

- A return to conventional, regular classroom instruction, with health and safety requirements,
- A continuation of remote learning, including the use of live, synchronous online instruction, and;
- An adapted delivery model that enables students to return to class with blended virtual learning, that includes health and safety requirements that will limit the maximum number of students to 15 per class.

We hope that public health situation will continue to improve and allow school boards to enter a conventional classroom experience, once it is safe to do so. Local and regional health authorities – in conjunction with a Ministry of Education established table of medical experts – will help shape the way forward, to ensure the realities on the ground within your communities are best reflected.

While school boards will develop their plans based on the ministry's guidance, I want to express some of the underlying principles that we used in issuing these instructions to boards.

First, we must recognize that choice that you as parents must have. You made this clear to me, and we are ensuring you get to make that choice. Any participation in in-person class will be voluntary. We will strengthen our Learn At Home program, provide greater access to technology for more families, and stand-up for regularized, synchronous live learning that clearly benefits your child. Our government will continue to stand up for parents and insist on this impactful experience.

Second, this plan was developed with the **health and safety of your child, staff, and your families as our top priority**. It is why the government announced net new funding for cleaning, cleaning protocols, and financial support to hire additional custodial staff in September, to ensure schools are safe. It is also why our plan was created following extensive consultation with the Chief Medical Officer of Health, health experts on the COVID-19 Command Table, medical experts at The Hospital for Sick Children, education sector partners, front-line workers, parents and students.

Third, our government is investing in record levels to support student mental health. **We are investing \$10 million in new additional funding for the coming school year alone**, to help school boards ensure they are proactively supporting students given the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and well-being. This year, students will have unprecedented direct access to regulated mental health professionals, as our government invests a record nearly \$50 million in support of student well-being. Medical experts have been clear, there is a need for enhanced mental health supports to respond to COVID-19. This funding can be used by school boards to hire additional mental health workers to support students through this adversity, reduce wait times, and improve access to critical services, that we know students deserve.

The school restart plan also prioritizes supports for students with special education needs, including advance planning for a smooth transition to school, a requirement that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Identification, Placement and Review Committees (IPRCs) are followed, along with the direction that boards plan for full-time in-class instruction for students with the most significant levels of needs. We are also asking boards to work with local partners including Children's Treatment Centres so that students have access to the supports they need to succeed.

Fourth, we saw families rise to the challenge and adapt quickly while we rolled out the Learn at Home program. This plan will provide new online course content and digital tools, and provide other resources for educators to support continuous learning for students in the coming school year. We also know that we must do more to so that all students have greater access to technology, and for all schools have access to internet.

This week, I announced \$15 million to assist school boards in purchasing devices and further embracing the digital age. This new funding will be directed to securing up to 35,000 classroom computers and ensuring students have the tools to succeed in the upcoming school year.

Fifth, today I announced that the government is spending more in education than ever before. This year, the Grants for Student Needs has increased by a record \$736 million. We are investing record amounts in mental health, special education, technology, and overall – **every school board will benefit from a funding increase** – as we prepare for the year ahead.

We will never waver in our commitment to Ontario's students – to their health and safety – to supporting them on their learning journey – and to set them up to succeed for the future.

Thank you to Ontario parents, education staff, and communities for your support, ideas, and commitment to the safety of our schools and the success of students.

Have a positive summer,

The Honourable Stephen Lecce,
Minister of Education