



VIA EMAIL

August 17, 2020

Hon. Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
438 University Ave.
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8
stephen.lecce@pc.ola.org

Hon. Christine Elliott
Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
777 Bay St.
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3
christine.elliott@pc.ola.org

RE: Safe Re-opening of Schools in Ontario

Dear Minister Lecce and Minister Elliot,

With the start of the school year approaching us, the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) strongly recommends that your government's focus remains in fighting the pandemic. We urge extreme caution and strong protocols informed by public health advice to ensure that appropriate measures are put in place to support physical distancing and other essential measures to prevent and detect transmission in schools.

CNA is pleased with your efforts to listen to the concerns of teachers, parents and health-care experts and take additional steps to better protect students and staff, as detailed in the announcement on August 13th. While we commend your government for its leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and for taking steps to protect children in Ontario, CNA believes further improvements to health and safety protocols can be made to enhance mitigation strategies. We urge your government to **consider increasing funding and implementing the following recommendations to Ontario's plan to re-open schools from kindergarten to grade 12:**

- Increase the supply of public health and school nurses.¹ School nurses play a critical role that bridges health-care and education, and ensures the safety of children and youth.
- Leverage Ontario's robust nursing knowledge and leadership for expert advice.
- Limit class sizes by establishing a clear direction for a 2 metre distance between children, youth, staff and volunteers, and create physical barriers between them wherever possible. Effective mitigation measures involve physically separating people from each other through physical distancing and physical barriers.²
- Recommend the creative use of community spaces to supplement the need for additional space required to appropriately reduce class sizes to allow for physical distancing.
- Ensure appropriate resources are in place for rapid testing and confirmation of results in schools for children, staff and volunteers who develop symptoms.

¹ While the current proposed addition of 500 public health nurses, each assigned to a "family of schools" is a welcomed investment, this number falls short of providing adequate support to the nearly 5,000 elementary and high schools in Ontario.

² Public Health Agency of Canada. COVID-19 guidance for schools Kindergarten to Grade 12. 2020
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/guidance-schools-childcare-programs.html>



Experts in pediatric health and mental health recognize education to be essential for the development of children and youth, a human right and essential for the future well-being of our society.³ However, the potential risks, if not appropriately addressed, could impact people not just within schools, but the greater society at large. Safely reopening schools is critical to the prevention of significant community transmission in Ontario as emerging evidence suggests that coronavirus can be efficiently transmitted by children of all ages.⁴ Failure to do so will impact the health of the population and could overwhelm Ontario's health-care system.

Safe re-opening of schools is an essential action to help mitigate the perpetuation of health and social disparities on some of our population's most vulnerable children, including racialized and marginalized children, those living in poverty, and those exposed to home situations which may be unsafe.

Parents and caregivers in Ontario face difficult decisions for their children. Some are in positions of privilege and may have different alternatives to sending their children back to school if they find measures are not adequate. But many, if not most, do not have these choices available to them, and their only option may be returning to school. Current proposed re-opening measures can otherwise disproportionately affect marginalized and vulnerable people and communities by perpetuating gaps in access to safe spaces and equal access to quality education.

We understand these are challenging times. If there is anything we can do to help your teams, you need only ask.

Sincerely,

Michael Villeneuve, RN, M.Sc.,
FAAN
Chief Executive Officer
Canadian Nurses Association
mwilleneuve@cna-aiic.ca

³ Sick Kids. COVID-19: Guidance for School Reopening. 2020. <https://www.sickkids.ca/PDFs/About-SickKids/81407-COVID19-Recommendations-for-School-Reopening-SickKids.pdf>

⁴ Government of Canada. COVID-19 guidance for schools Kindergarten to Grade 12. 2020. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/guidance-schools-childcare-programs.html>