

How do we navigate a return to school and childcare? ^[1]

Experts share their priorities for ensuring a safe and equitable reopening

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Excerpted from introduction

One of the biggest differences between the COVID-19 pandemic and past crises is that this time, the kids are at home. With schools and childcare centres shut down to prevent the spread of the virus, parents and caregivers have had to find ways to keep their children supervised and educated while simultaneously trying to maintain their own livelihoods – and mental health. The effects of this have been profound for Canadian families of all kinds. After three months, the consensus is clear: we can't go on like this.

But where do we go from here? How do we get children back to childcare centres and classrooms in a way that supports students and children, educators and childcare workers, public health and the Canadian economy as a whole? We reached out to experts in education, childcare, economics and public health with one question: "What is the most important thing to consider when reopening schools and childcare?" Here are 18 answers.

We can minimize health risks without keeping all kids at home

Anna Banerji – Dalla Lana School of Public Health Pediatric Infectious Disease Specialist, University of Toronto

In the months since COVID-19 arrived in Canada, we have learned that this virus targets the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. In Canada, only seven per cent of children and youth under 19 have tested positive, and less than one per cent were sick enough to be hospitalized. Of the more than 8,000 deaths in Canada, none of them have been children. Basically, COVID is a different disease in children.

Although children have different ways of learning, structured learning at school is beneficial to the vast majority. Children also need the socialization aspects of school. The lockdown has also created a significant amount of stress for children and parents, and school closures have had a great impact on parents' ability to work. Prolonged lockdown is not sustainable.

Many governments are in discussions about wearing masks, physical distancing and hand hygiene in schools. Hand hygiene is always a good idea, and masks could be implemented for older students and teachers, but it will be impossible to keep younger children continuously distancing and using masks. The bottom line is that when schools open, it will not be possible to contain the virus, and despite the best efforts, children and staff will get infected. At this point in time it is really about learning to live with COVID-19.

While most children who contract COVID can be expected to have a mild case of the disease, children or teachers at higher risk for severe COVID could turn to online learning. This may also reduce the demands on physical space, which was already a struggle with large class sizes prior to COVID-19.

In the early weeks to months after schools reopen, it will be important to avoid transmitting this virus to high-risk people such as elderly grandparents, parents or teachers with health concerns that would increase their risk for severe COVID. Children would need to be "cocooned" away from these high-risk adults in the first term back at school when there is a higher degree of transmission. However, this initial phase may also lead to herd immunity, making it safer for vulnerable people to return to school as we continue to wait for that sacred vaccine.

Labour force gender gaps are in danger of widening

Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant – Associate Professor, Department of Political Studies, Queen's University

Health and safety are the paramount priorities in reopening schools and daycare. Beyond this, there are numerous lenses that must inform planning. One of these is gender.

COVID-related job losses have been borne disproportionately by women. There will be no economic recovery without full-time care, because the workers hit hardest are women. A path out of the "she-cession" is impossible without full-time care and on-site schooling, yet this seems unlikely right now. The Ontario government, for example, is currently considering three possibilities for September: full-time return to school, full-time online, and some hybrid. Indications currently point to a hybrid, so parents should anticipate some level of daytime care and academic support for children in grades JK-12.

How will parents, and especially mothers, be affected by hybrid models of school or part-time daycare – not to mention, how they will manage during July and August? Women tend to do a disproportionate share of childcare, domestic chores and family management tasks, including in households where both parents work full-time. During COVID-19, this pattern continued, with remote schooling added to the list. Many of these mothers have also been working, either in or outside the home, and more will rejoin the workforce as the economy heals. Statistics Canada data also show a widening gender gap in self-reported mental wellbeing. Women are faring worse psychologically than men during the pandemic, likely due to worry about the disease and the burden of balancing so much.

Worryingly, many workplaces seem to be normalizing business as usual while increasingly strained mothers struggle to do it all. Planning for September must address the challenges faced by working mothers or risk widening current gender inequalities in incomes, lifetime earnings, pensions, career advancement, and much more. A gender lens on policy and planning is always prudent, and in this case it is vital. Part-time care/school is not sustainable for women without additional supports.

We need to bring an equity lens to the reopening of schools

Tesfai Mengesha – Co-Executive Director, Success Beyond Limits

COVID-19 has put on full display the glaring socio-economic disparities that exist and have been further exacerbated by the global pandemic. The City of Toronto, Canada's largest city, released its COVID-19 Toronto Neighbourhood Maps which detail cases of the coronavirus by neighbourhood. Predictably, the communities with the highest number of cases are also those that are predominantly lower income, higher density with more social housing, and whose residents perform the kind of essential work that cannot be done virtually. These often-neglected neighbourhoods are indeed the front lines of the pandemic.

As we plan to return to school in September, we should account for the fact that many of our students will have experienced learning loss and gaps in learning while they were out of school. Due to deepening economic, social and health inequities, alongside the education system's inadequate response to COVID-19, many students have been left behind. These same students still do not have adequate learning resources and technology to engage in online (a)synchronous learning. The plan for this fall should begin with addressing this pressing reality.

The Ministry of Education has mandated that local school boards prepare for three scenarios: in-class instruction, remote learning and a blend of both. Local school boards are working with the province on how to move forward, but what must be considered are the local complexities and challenges of communities within individual school boards. Schooling experiences have always been inequitable whether students live in Northern, rural or urban communities, high-income or low-income neighbourhoods, and of course differences across race.

Equity must be the lens that guides policies and plans to return come September. The approach we take will have to look both ways at the same time: backward to recover learning loss and address gaps in learning, particularly for students whose education needs have traditionally not been met, but also forward to attend to local complexities so that school boards – with the support and resources of the Ministry – are able to provide safe and effective learning environments as we collectively move forward.

Access to greenspace can mitigate COVID-19 closures for Indigenous children and youth

Jeffrey Schiffer – Executive Director, Native Child and Family Services of Toronto

Since the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, we have seen the face-to-face social services Indigenous families in Ontario rely on recede like a wave pulled back into the ocean. With the closure of schools and daycares, the majority of community referral sources for child abuse and neglect concerns have been suspended.

A sharp reduction in community referrals in combination with necessary provincial orders directing self-isolation have resulted in increases in domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. Research emerging from countries further ahead in the pandemic process shows that children and youth are suffering. Anxiety, depression, boredom, difficulty concentrating, loneliness and isolation, and other mental health concerns are beginning to characterize the most vulnerable children within the context of this pandemic.

This is especially true for Indigenous children already impacted by systemic racism and the legacies of intergenerational trauma, and for whom the intergenerational realities of disease epidemics, geographical confinement and inability to access land for wellness within their families, communities and nations make COVID-19 a perfect storm.

At the same time, a well-developed canon of research tells us that designated access to greenspace will not only help mitigate the mental health impacts of COVID-19 in the present, but may play an essential role in preventing a secondary pandemic of stunted physiological development and poor mental health – particularly in urban COVID-19 hotspots like Toronto.

We must balance the impacts of continued social isolation against the risks of opening schools and childcare centres. In the interest of physical development and mental health, it is critical that we develop safe ways for children and youth to get outside, access green space, and attend school in some fashion.

Crisis has amplified differences in families' capacities to support children

Annie Kidder – Executive Director, People for Education

For the last three months we have been in a state of “crisis response” in childcare and education, but it's time to move beyond that.

The crisis has made everyone realize that schools are important – as places where learning happens, vital relationships are built, staff can support the vast array of students, and we can attempt to mitigate the impact of things like poverty, race, parental education and family

stress.

Even more importantly, the crisis has amplified the huge differences in families' capacities to provide around-the-clock learning and support for their children.

Families that were already struggling, struggled more. For students already facing barriers, those barriers became insurmountable. Yes, a component of the inequity was about who had laptops and good internet, but much more than that, it was about which families had the social capital, the privilege and the human resources (flexible jobs that were doable from home, time to spend on homework, more than one adult at home, English as a first language, a university education etc.) to act as nearly full-time supports or teachers for their children.

So what should the post-crisis response look like?

First, we need a Task Force – we need all the players at one table, working together to design a comprehensive, sustainable plan for the next year. Beyond education experts, practitioners and students, the table must also include municipal service providers, and childcare and health experts.

Second, we need resources. If we need more human supports for families who cannot be asked to do more, municipalities must have the funding to hire more staff or improve social services. If we need kids to be in classes of 15, we need to hire more teachers. If students are being taught partly at home and partly at school, teachers need to be supported to work in teams. We must carve out (and fund) time for teachers, principals, and support staff to plan together to ensure that no more students are falling through cracks. And we must listen to the childcare experts – not just about how to keep kids apart, but about how to make sure that kids are still benefiting from all the things that quality early learning and care brings.

There was a massive response at the federal level to the financial crisis brought on by COVID-19. Now it's time to recognize the human crisis, and provide the policy, planning and resources needed to support children and young people, so that all of them can thrive

Schools must have adequate funding to keep students healthy

Medeana Moussa – Public Education Advocate, Support Our Students Alberta

The safety of students and education workers is the most important consideration for the reopening of schools. Public schools deliver so much more than education to our children. Support extends to lunch programs for food-insecure students, assistance for complex learning needs, and counselling services to help families navigate various challenges. COVID-19 has shone a bright light on the crevasses of inequality in our society and that inequality has been deepened with school closures.

Governments have asked schools to deliver more than academic lessons without providing the funding and resources that this enormous task requires. Schools are essential to the functioning of our communities and, as we have seen during COVID-19, to the functioning of our economies. Governments need to provide adequate additional funding in order for schools to implement the necessary safety measures to reopen and continue this essential work.

SOS has outlined safety measure checklists for school re-opening. We recommend that parents have a safety tour of schools prior to reopening. This is an opportunity for governments to be transparent about the measures they are implementing to ensure the safety of children and staff.

Recommendations include:

- Social distancing measures; desks two metres apart
- Minimize hallway time; minimize exposure to multiple classes, teachers and substitute teachers
- Face masks and PPE available to staff with clear protocols outlined
- Sanitization stations at entranceways, hallways and bathrooms
- Dedicated isolation rooms with a nurse for sick students as they wait for pickup
- Transparent outbreak protocol and a clear plan
- Adequate caretakers and resources to meet frequent cleaning requirements

Many schools lack the necessary infrastructure to accommodate these safety measures. They are often overcrowded, with students sharing lockers and lunch spaces, and there are often only a dozen sinks for several hundred students. Governments have an obligation to ensure the school environment is improved to meet the safety protocols provincial health services have mandated and prioritize the health and safety of children and education workers.

Teachers need proper tools to support student learning and wellbeing

Liz Stuart – President, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association

The Ontario government's announcements about school reopening and education funding for the 2020-21 school year leave much to be desired. Beyond the lack of clear direction to school boards regarding their responsibilities to protect the health and safety of all students and staff, Catholic teachers are most disappointed in the apparent lack of urgency about giving us the tools we need to support student learning and wellbeing.

We all want to return to more normal ways of teaching and learning, but we must recognize that everyone will be returning in September having experienced some level of fear, anxiety, uncertainty and grief. Also, as a result of the inequities inherent in emergency distance learning, many students will be behind in some or all subjects, and there will be greater variability between students than under normal

circumstances.

Although we still have not been meaningfully consulted about reopening, our association has nevertheless offered the government a number of ideas about how to address these issues. Recognizing that much time at the beginning of the year will be spent catching up, we have highlighted the need to modify curriculum expectations, and to pause the introduction of the new math curriculum. Understanding the stress that standardized testing places on the whole school community, and that it will be impossible to compare data from next year to previous years, we have called for EQAO standardized testing to be suspended. And given the variety of mental health and learning challenges students will be facing, we have called for significant investments in professional supports.

Thus far, none of these matters have been adequately addressed. Moving forward, Catholic teachers hope much more attention will be paid to the need to create learning conditions that fit these unique circumstances, including real investments in education that match the scale of this unprecedented crisis.

Going back to school requires focus on students' mental health

Charles E. Pascal – Professor, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education & Former Ontario Deputy Minister of Education

There is a plethora of comments and ideas about how and when schools should open. Most of the advice boils down to the need to follow the public health data, as well as the usual basics including handwashing, distancing (including the need for smaller class sizes) and personal protective equipment (PPE). Proper government funding is key to ensuring these things are in place. This is the easy stuff.

But the most important concern is getting the short shrift: the social and emotional issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The old normal wasn't working for far too many students who were falling through the cracks of a non-system when it comes to early identification and interventions for mental health issues. Educators, as well, need "resilience" support. The pandemic crisis has exacerbated problems that were there before.

Few jurisdictions are planning properly for this. It is critical to recognize that educators need support for dealing with their own issues, and they need support to deal with the issues that will arise with many of their students. All this requires proper training from psychologists and social workers well before schools are opened. "Hey, glad you are all back, how was your time away?" will not cut it.

Finally, imagining and developing a "new normal" will take time over the next few years to answer questions arising from the pandemic, including:

- How can we ensure education is informed by a whole-student approach that recognizes, respects and supports students of varying incomes, diverse identities, cultures and race?
- How can we turn the preschool-through-post-secondary continuum into a force for enabling mental health and wellbeing?
- How can we ensure more effective collaborations among and between parents/ guardians and educators?
- How can we create a renewed curriculum that focuses on creative problem-solving and social competence – a curriculum that moves away from discipline to a transdisciplinary project-based approach that builds on students' interests and prior knowledge?
- How can we develop new, creative and effective approaches to remote learning that work for diverse students and educators?

Focus on community partnerships and data collection to support students' wellbeing

Konrad Glogowski – Director, Research and Evaluation, Pathways to Education Canada

At Pathways to Education, we help youth living in low-income communities to graduate from high school and build the foundation for a successful future. The students we serve have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing measures have increased the already precarious situations of many socio-economically disadvantaged families and amplified existing barriers to youth success.

As they return to school, students will need additional supports to help reduce their anxiety about both personal and academic challenges. They will require personally relevant academic support and guidance, as well as assurance that the academic barriers created by the pandemic are not insurmountable.

When considering school re-openings, we offer the following recommendations.

1) Recognize community-based after-school programs as allies in supporting students who face complex barriers

Community-based organizations possess a strong understanding of the communities where they operate – they understand youth, family and community assets, needs and goals. Partnerships with programs that support youth who face complex barriers can provide insights into the lived experience of young people, including barriers and challenges they faced during the pandemic, as well as those they are likely to face as they transition back into classrooms.

2) Focus on students' social and emotional wellbeing, especially their sense of personal agency and self-regulation skills

Schools would do well to invest in students' ability to thrive as individuals and to help them develop a strong sense of agency and self-regulation so they can continue to identify personally meaningful academic goals and develop plans to work toward them. Use of reassurance, routines and regulation will be crucial during this time: creating safe spaces for connection with educators and peers, helping develop and strengthen school-related routines, and support youth in managing difficult feelings and stress.

3) Collect and analyze key data to understand who is adjusting and who needs additional supports

Re-opening schools after a significant period of disruption will undoubtedly focus on assessing student readiness and potential learning

gaps, and implementing the supports required to ensure a successful future. All efforts to support student academic success should be carefully monitored and analyzed to ensure they are effective. It is critical that the data and insights emerging from this work be shared with a wide network of those committed to supporting student success. If schools need to again be closed in response to a resurgence of COVID-19, this type of data will also help inform the work of teachers teaching remotely and community programs that engage students virtually.

Parents need more support and clear communication with schools

Corinne Payne – Executive Director, Quebec Federation of Parents Committees

At the end of May, the Quebec Federation of Parents Committees, which represents parents of a million students from all corners of Quebec, consulted parents about the return to school in the fall. An in-depth survey was sent to its 60 regional branches and a social media survey garnered more than 43,000 responses within four days.

Everyone was itching to get back to “normal,” ideally with all children back in school full-time. Barring that possibility, there was clear support for getting 100 per cent of students back to school at least 50 per cent of the time. It was imperative that students with special needs return to school full-time.

Nearly half of parents of elementary school students said they would need childcare services if their children were not in school full-time. Parents would not be able to stay at home indefinitely or balance their work schedules to match the educational system (for example, alternating days or half-days). Likewise, more than two-thirds of parents said they could offer limited to no support or supervision for their children if they were to be at home.

Parents were nearly unanimous that the arts, sports, special projects, social clubs, extracurricular activities – in other words, school life beyond reading, writing and arithmetic – must be maintained or adapted to the new reality, these activities being the drivers of perseverance and motivation for students.

Parents also said it was crucial to be prepared for a potential second wave of the virus. The education system needed to be operational from Day 1, with all students equipped with the appropriate tools for learning from home, and work-family balance initiatives must be implemented.

Whether a return to normal, a new normal or another period of confinement, parents emphasised the importance of communications between home and school: the need for improved communications that are clear and constant at all times.

Teachers’ professional judgment is key to supporting students

Harvey Bischof – President, Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation

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. When we are asked what is the most important thing to consider when reopening schools, we answer: the education and wellbeing of our students. This has always been our mandate and we will not lose sight of it during a pandemic.

Central to everything we do is professional judgment, which is defined as judgment that is informed by professional knowledge of curriculum expectations, context, evidence of learning, methods of instruction and assessment, and the criteria and standards that indicate success in student learning. OSSTF/FEESO’s comprehensive paper, “A safe return for all: OSSTF/FEESO’s framework for reopening schools in 2020-2021,” outlines that one of the main pedagogical principles to be considered when reopening schools is that educators’ professional judgment should be at the centre of the planning and delivery of the curriculum. Educators will identify the core expectations required for each course, set realistic academic expectations and identify what parts of the curriculum will be covered in priority order.

Educators have always had to adapt to the needs of the students in front of them (or physically distant from them, as the case may be). This pandemic does not change the fundamental need for the educator to make sure every student is ready to take on the next task or learning outcome. We have always done this, recognizing that students come from a variety of experiences the year before. We are confident that the public will put their trust in us as educators and know that we are professionals with a very compelling mandate – the education of our students. We insist that the Ministry of Education exercise its leadership role and require school boards to respect and support educator professional judgment.

What school reopening looked like in Vancouver

Natalie Sadowski – Digital Communications Coordinator, Vancouver School District

It is hard to know exactly what to expect on the first day back to school during a global pandemic. As British Columbia schools have adjusted to the resumption of voluntary part-time, in-class instruction, the Vancouver School District continues to follow the direction of the Provincial Health Officer with respect to health and safety measures in schools.

As part of Stage 3 in B.C.’s Education Restart Plan, families had the choice for students to return to class on a part-time basis for the remainder of the current school year. About 42 per cent of Vancouver families surveyed said they were planning to return and a little under that number attended the first week back to school.

Students in kindergarten to Grade 5 were offered in-class instruction two days a week. Students in Grades 6 and 7 were able to attend school 1 day a week. For students in Grades 8-12, blocked times of two hours per day were offered and staggered throughout the week.

The resumption of voluntary in-class instruction helped the district prepare for the start of the 2020-21 school year in September. We are currently moving toward Stage 2 (full-time, in-class instruction), but are prepared for all circumstances, with health and safety being the top priority.

In preparation for the reopening of schools, teachers, support staff and engineers did extensive work to ensure the safety of staff and students – and to make the transition a smooth one for all. In schools, arrows were placed on hallway floors to manage the flow of people. Only staff and students are permitted to come in and out of the buildings, and as they enter, everyone is asked to wash or sanitize their hands. There are designated entrances and exits to help control traffic flow. There are signs posted with informative health and safety tips throughout the buildings, and classroom doors are propped open to avoid contact with door handles. There are also enhanced and frequent cleaning schedules in place at every school.

While the task of transitioning has not been a small one, everyone across the Vancouver School District pulled together to transform the delivery of education for students.

We need to better value and regulate care work

Linda White – RBC Chair in Economic and Public Policy, University of Toronto

When it comes to the choice to re-open schools and childcare facilities, the health and safety of their overwhelmingly female labour force must be taken into consideration.

First, we must avoid the impetus to return to the status quo, with only a small or short-term infusion of cash into the system. The pandemic presents us with the opportunity to fix what is fundamentally broken in the childcare and long-term care systems. We could start with permanent wage enhancements and other benefits to workers who are expected to step up to the front lines and deliver essential care services. We should also vastly expand the system of regulated and high-quality centre-based care – preferably not-for-profit so that monies earned are reinvested in the centres and not the pocketbooks of owners. We need to recognize that care services such as childcare and long-term care are especially vulnerable to market failures and the costs of those failures are tragically high, given the vulnerability of the ages of those in the care of others. We need to fundamentally revalue care work to acknowledge their essential role not just to a functioning economy but to a decent, caring society.

The time is ripe to introduce more, not less, regulation and oversight of these services. While lack of oversight of long-term care facilities has received a great deal of media attention, lack of oversight in unlicensed home childcare (HCC) has gone virtually unnoticed. It boggles the mind that governments across Canada allow a portion of the childcare sector to operate with virtually no oversight and regulation other than the number of children who can be legally cared for at one time. How, for example, can provincial governments communicate important health and safety guidelines to HCC providers they don't even know about? How can they track outbreaks in HCC settings that have no obligation to report? As colleagues and I have written elsewhere, it is long past time for all provincial and territorial governments to require – at minimum – all HCC providers to be licensed and subject to regular oversight and supports for professional development.

Public investment is needed to build an early learning and childcare system

Carolyn Ferns – Public Policy and Government Relations Coordinator, Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care

Alana Powell – Executive Coordinator, Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the childcare crisis in Canada and created a new challenge. The old market model that we have relied on to provide childcare in this country will not fit back together in our new reality. The truth is, that system wasn't working well for many and it was past time for change. But now the necessary health and safety precautions to combat COVID-19, including smaller group sizes and additional skilled staff, are in direct tension with the old way that childcare centres used to maintain their financial viability: full enrolment, high parent fees and low wages.

Once we understand the depth and extent of the problem, we must respond in kind. This crisis must force the federal and provincial governments to reexamine childcare and move to a much more public system. Government funding must be tied to system-building.

To build a new early learning and childcare (ELCC) system, we need the federal government to provide funding and leadership, including an immediate investment of \$2.5 billion, that grows year-on-year as the system expands. It requires a national childcare secretariat to organize the system-building work. And it requires national legislation that enshrines principles and goals for the new system.

Three important goals when building an ELCC system must be addressed simultaneously:

1. Supporting parents in the workforce with enough spaces for all and relief from fees
2. Supporting child wellbeing through trauma-informed programs to help a generation of children overcome the impact of a global pandemic.
3. Supporting decent work for Early Childhood Educators (ECEs), who will be essential to accomplishing the first two goals.

ECEs are competent, educated professionals, whose relational and caring work has gone undervalued for too long. But a system that had a recruitment and retention crisis pre-COVID must better address the needs of the childcare workforce in order to successfully reopen, recover and grow. The working conditions of ECEs are the learning conditions of children.

If government investment focuses on meeting these goals, Canada will gain an ELCC system that supports our economic and social recovery.

Diverse families require diverse childcare alternatives

Brian Dijkema – Vice-president, External Affairs, Cardus

As provinces scramble to reopen childcare, the most important consideration should be that diverse families require diverse childcare options. In a First Policy Response Panel last month, I said, “Childcare should be thought of as the care of the child” not something done primarily to help the economy grow. Policy-makers should keep that as a top consideration. As I said then, “the economy should be at service of the family,” not the other way around.

According to Statistics Canada data, most Canadian families access a mix of non-parental childcare options, provided publicly, privately, by family and through civil society. Any federal support for childcare should maintain and enhance that diverse ecosystem of care instead of constraining options in the way the national, universal system some are calling for would. Research from Quebec’s experiment with universal state-provided daycare shows negative outcomes for children and families. It shifts care from informal arrangements to cheaper options; makes children more aggressive, sicker and less well off; makes parents worse at parenting, sicker, and places serious stress on marriages. Research also shows that higher-income families disproportionately accessed the system compared to lower-income families.

If we want to pursue positive ways of helping people return to the labour force – and especially women, whose return to work is most affected by childcare needs – we need to pursue policy that supports childcare options as diverse as the families it serves. A more imaginative approach would consider childcare as part of a cohesive suite of policies including flexible and generous parental leave, child benefits, and subsidies that would help families navigate their unique needs and lead to the best outcomes for children, parents, the economy and civil society together.

Support small businesses to develop safe childcare options

Amanda Munday – Founder and CEO, The Workaround Coworking and Childcare

We must bring innovation to childcare. The decision to return to in-person operations in schools and childcare is nuanced, and the emotional wellbeing of families must be front and centre as we return to these spaces.

The decision to reopen a childcare centre like mine has been excruciating. Owners are being asked to balance health and safety needs, the financial implications for employees, and the threat of losing hundreds of thousands of dollars given the hard costs required to set up a socially distant classroom for young children.

Asking children to wear or not to wear masks misses the systemic inequities facing thousands of families in Ontario and across Canada. Before the pandemic, childcare was already inaccessible, unaffordable and not at all flexible. Years-long waitlists and fees of \$2,500 a month per child are the norm in many urban areas. Childcare centres and schools are being asked to reopen at a reduced capacity, to not raise fees and to hold spots from previous patrons, all without government funding to support the losses.

If we do not bring a critical, innovative lens to childcare, the emotional and physical health of our children will be threatened and the effects long lasting, as reported in the recent guidelines from SickKids. Families need more spaces, not less, and more affordable spaces, not expensive annual commitments. Children need social and emotional support and opportunities for play. Childcare centres and schools are left with the decision to stay open under grave financial and operating conditions, or close and further reduce access for those who need it. We need to support small businesses to create and offer childcare in order to find a way to safely support the needs of young families, especially from vulnerable communities and single-parent households.

Open classrooms this summer for early learning for our most vulnerable children

Petr Varmuza – Doctoral student, OISE & Former director, City of Toronto Children’s Services

The summer learning gap that affects all children, and especially those from disadvantaged families and neighbourhoods, is likely to become even more pronounced this year because of school closures and lack of recreation facilities. Meanwhile, school buildings across the country sit empty. The Toronto District School Board alone has between 1,200 to 1,300 kindergarten classrooms – with tens of thousands of classrooms across the country. Those school buildings are public property, held by school boards in trust for public purposes. And they tend to be located within walking distance of people’s homes.

Given the current circumstances, provincial ministries could temporarily convert those kindergarten classrooms to provide age-appropriate early learning and child care, employing qualified early childhood educators. While strict restrictions on groups are likely to remain, each of these empty classrooms could be converted immediately into a true early learning and care environment for children ages 4 and 5. This would relieve the pressure on childcare facilities, which could refocus on care for younger ages.

To reduce inequality, as spaces become available, access should be prioritized for disadvantaged children and their families. Socially distanced school lunches that provide important nutrition to children could be restored, offering relief to families already under stress to provide appropriate nutrition during those times. And this plan would offer employment to the many ECEs currently furloughed or unemployed.

All families deserve the opportunity to advocate for their mental safety

Anneke Van den Berg – Peer Health Worker, Our Place Family Resource and Early Years Centre

Shawna Vander Velden – Lead Registered Early Childhood Educator, Our Place Family Resource and Early Years Centre

Over the last few months while facilitating Our Place’s “Parenting in a Pandemic” virtual peer support group, we have been using the term “mental safety” to acknowledge that during this period of concern for physical safety, we need to be equally aware of how our mental health is affected by COVID-19. We have seen parents shift from fears of being unable to protect their families from the virus, to concerns

about the mental safety of their children, and maybe even more importantly, themselves. The mental safety of all families is at stake when daycares and schools do not open.

In our contemporary world, schools and daycares have become our village. For many families, schools have become an essential part of their lives, and education plays just a part in this. Many families are not concerned about their children's academics as much as their lack of socialization, and the lack of resources that especially children with exceptionalities need during this pandemic. Schools and childcare centres are places where children learn and practise important social skills, like exploring common interests with peers. Schools also provide families with a sense of normalcy and structure.

As parents, we know our children best and we know what they need. Right now, for many parents the question really comes down to whether fear of the virus outweighs their growing concerns about the mental safety of both children and themselves. All families deserve the opportunity to advocate for their needs, and the need for school and childcare is real, even if they look different in September. While not all families will feel comfortable sending their children to school or childcare in a couple of months, every family should have that guilt-free choice. Parents deserve to put their mental health, and that of their children, first.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: health and safety ^[4]

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Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/20/06/how-do-we-navigate-return-school-and-childcare> [2]

<https://policyresponse.ca/how-do-we-navigate-a-return-to-school-and-childcare/#Carolyn> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4]

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