

# Ontario's back-to-school plan ignores a glaringly obvious problem<sup>[1]</sup>

"Our government is essentially telling all the parents who are already at the very end of their ropes that the past three months have been fine."

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online<sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

"Wait, what the @#%\* do they do on the no-school days?"

I practically yelled this at my computer screen as I was reading the latest news about the school reopening plan in Ontario. Although the province says it won't be forcing school boards to finalize the details before August, a key recommendation in its most recent guidelines is "cohorting" students—keeping them in groups of 15 or fewer students with the same teacher all day. Since classes are usually about double that size, this means the government is directing all school boards to at least start the year with a "hybrid learning" approach that will have children in school on alternate days, or maybe alternate weeks.

This was not what any parent wanted to hear. It was the last few weeks of school, when many of us were rallying our last shred of homeschool energy to try to organize gifts for the teachers or figure out socially distanced end-of-school celebrations. In our family we actually ceremoniously burned our long-abandoned (but still symbolically hung on the fridge) homeschool schedule. Are we supposed to cheerily make a brand new one in just a couple of months?

The government recommendations say cohorting is about "minimizing the number of students and teachers any individual comes in contact with, and maintaining consistency in those contacts as much as possible." OK, fine, makes sense. This is in line with what hospitals and nursing homes do to reduce transmission and it makes contact tracing easier during an outbreak. It certainly seems more sensible than expecting young children to be able to physically distance or properly wear a mask all day long. But seriously, where do they expect the kids to go on the no-school days?

If kids are only in school half-time in the fall, many children will disperse to daycares and babysitters on their days off (instantly increasing their number of contacts several times over, and presumably negating many of the intended benefits of cohorting) and others will be at home with distracted parents or otherwise overwhelmed family members.

According to the guidelines, students will be assigned "curriculum linked work" and will participate online in "synchronous learning with their classmates" when they're not in school. In other words, the province seems to imagine kids will be at home, with a dedicated screen per child, functioning high-speed internet and an adult available—and not busy working—to help facilitate all this high-quality remote learning. The assumption seems to be that families will manage this half-time schedule however they've managed since the initial shutdown began in March. But here's the thing: most families haven't been managing very well at all.

These past 100 days, we hunkered down. We carried on with little sleep and made impossible choices around potentially exposing elderly relatives to the virus so we could go to our essential jobs while they watched the kids. We let our children watch way too much TV, shooed them away while trying to appear professional in Zoom meetings, and turned our kitchen tables into ad hoc arts and craft stations. We accepted that teenage siblings might have to sacrifice their own schoolwork so they could help care for the younger ones. We worked triple shifts as employees, homeschool teachers and parents. We grieved, we raged, we cut back hours and lost jobs. We applied to CERB, sewed masks, pretended online fitness was fun and Instagrammed tiny moments of joy while we worried about finances and the future. We commiserated in group texts and on social media, and took turns being the one to cry. (But never in front of the kids, because This is hard enough already for the kids, we told ourselves, as we escaped into the bathroom to doom-scroll and deep breathe.)

And we did it. It was an emergency—what choice did we have? But we can't keep on doing it indefinitely.

Telling parents to prepare to send children to school half-time, without providing a hint of a plan or funding to address the obvious problem of where children will go on the off days—and who will teach and care for them on the days they aren't in a classroom—does not get to count as "a school reopening plan." It means our government is essentially telling all the parents who are already at the very end of their ropes that the past three months have been fine. And that if we managed every day with no school, we can of course do every second day with no school. And if it means Mom has to quit her job, or Grandma might get sick while stepping in to provide child care, then fine.

But it isn't fine. And it isn't fair to parents, especially not to women who are statistically most likely to have to reduce work or quit their jobs to care for children. And it isn't fair to kids either.

In their recommendations for the school reopening plan released this month, doctors from SickKids hospital were in favour of cohorting younger age groups as much as possible, but specifically advised against doing so "in a manner that compromises daily school attendance." The SickKids guidelines have been criticized by some for too heavily discounting the potential risks of COVID-19 in children, but as a mom, I appreciate their emphasis on the physical and mental health impacts of school closures and inconsistency on young children's development and wellbeing. Like many parents, I've been heartbroken to see how destabilized my children have seemed after the sudden loss of their wider social worlds: all the friends, the teachers they'd grown close to, the beloved coaches. My five-year-old has a worrying new fear of strangers and my eight-year-old is now prone to crying spells and angry refusal of our well-meaning attempts to help with schoolwork.

I understand that politicians, public health officials and school boards across the country are in a difficult situation. There's no perfect school reopening plan that can 100 per cent ensure the safety and wellbeing of all students, teachers, staff and families. But parents deserve, at a minimum, a clear explanation (with scientific footnotes, if I had my way) of why groups of 15 young children are significantly better from a public health perspective than groups of 30, especially if there's no funding to create more childcare spots, no budget or initiative to hire or redeploy more teachers to create smaller classes, and no guidance offered for how we're supposed to keep children limited to their cohorts on the days they aren't in school.

If the expectation is that children are at home on their off days, then we need a system of leave for parents of school-aged kids that provides income support and the right to return to work that is modelled on how we already support parental leave for parents who care for babies.

A real solution requires investing in more than just increased school sanitizing schedules and better technology. The province's promise of funds for student mental health services and special needs support is a good start, but it's a reactive, insufficient strategy. A truly responsible, proactive plan for the fall would include hiring more teachers and early childhood educators and working with municipalities to free up additional physical spaces, like community centres, that could be used for small-group learning. A truly ambitious, forward-thinking plan might involve experiments in outdoor education or other experiential non-classroom-based learning. If our government is actually concerned about children and families, it needs to invest now to avoid a cascade of further public health, education and economic crises in years to come.

Of course it's hard for anyone to make concrete plans—policy-makers included—because data on COVID-19 transmission (especially by kids) is incomplete. Plus, infection rates vary by region, and we don't know what case totals will look like in two months.

I know some will argue that half-time school is better than no school at all; that something is better than nothing. But the government's current policy rests on the offensive assumption that "the moms will just figure it out," and I refuse to believe this plan is anywhere near the best we can do.

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