

# Education is a human right, but it certainly hasn't been a COVID-19 priority<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Education is a human right. But you would not know this in most of Canada, where lockdowns are ending, people are returning to work, and patios and nail salons are open, all while parents are hearing that children might only be attending school a couple of days a week in the fall – if schools open at all.

Ontario's Education Minister, Stephen Lecce, has given school boards three options for a return to classrooms – all classes may be offered online; schools may offer a mix of virtual and in-classroom teaching; or all classes will take place with students physically present at school. This does not equate to specific guidance and there has been no instruction from the Minister that school boards should do their very best to safely maximize in-person class time. Parents might be forgiven for thinking that in-classroom instruction probably won't return for the foreseeable future.

So far, the Ottawa-Carleton District School board says it will probably create two cohorts of children, each attending school two days a week, with one entire weekday dedicated to closing and cleaning schools. That's 20 per cent of childrens' education time devoted to cleaning.

These "solutions" are unacceptable. The lack of affordable child care, especially for low-income and racialized families, was already unsustainable. It is now a crisis for many. We must make the safe return to school a political and national priority. Children have been denied their legal and human rights to education for six months. There are children for whom the lockdown has been profoundly frightening, leaving them hungry and in abusive settings. They have been isolated from caring adults who could identify abuse and have gone without the school breakfasts many of them rely on. Indeed, the impact of school closures has been disproportionately felt by children already facing barriers in life – low-income children; children who don't speak English or French as a first language; racialized communities who've already felt the worst of COVID-19; children with special needs; and children without access to technology or the internet.

Partial reopenings won't affect wealthier parents as much. They will be able to pay for additional child care.

Our governments are not only failing children, they're failing parents, and mothers, in particular. Women have faced the brunt of this pandemic, accounting for most of our front-line and health care workers. Women have also represented the majority of pandemic layoffs and have returned to work at half the rate of men. Parents are at a breaking point – we've been juggling 40 hours of work, 20 hours of home school and 100 hours of parenting a week for months, with no end in sight. We've magically (barely) made the math homework happen. But it is not sustainable. Already, employers are pressing staff to return to work. Parents cannot leave children home alone, which will force those who can't afford alternative arrangements to drop out of the work force. A loss of household income will devastate many families, especially single parents, and set back women's equality by years. Our inability to reopen schools will push families into poverty, slowing economic recovery, increasing demand on government assistance and deepening inequality.

Parents understood the need to flatten the curve. But with restaurants, bars, golf clubs and gyms reopening, it is increasingly obvious that we have our priorities utterly backward. Education and child care must be our biggest priority, not a mere afterthought delegated to school boards and schools. Nor should governments hope online learning is a substitute for classroom learning. While online classes might be manageable for older children, evidence shows they simply don't work for younger kids.

We need to be blunt here: There is no viable reopening of the economy without child care and schools. Actual leadership on this issue would see politicians at all levels of government committing to safely reopening schools and daycares to the fullest extent possible. They would work together with experts, and fund school boards to develop innovative, creative solutions to get kids back to in-person education, prioritizing vulnerable and at-risk children. This could include requisitioning properties such as recreation centres, local colleges and universities, and fast-tracking teacher trainees and pairing them with experienced mentors. Governments would communicate openly and clearly with parents, and develop contingency plans for the outbreaks that will inevitably happen as long as COVID-19 is among us.

Nobody is saying this is easy, and the safety of our teachers and children is paramount. But we should not accept the bare minimum. If we have one single priority as a country, it should be the safe return of children to school, and parents to work.

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