

Memo sent to Ontario school boards urges 5-day 'face-to-face' learning come fall ^[1]

Ontario families juggling child care, education, work can't be 'new reality,' expert warns

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Schools across the province are being directed to steer away from online learning and maximize children's time in the classroom this fall, according to a memo sent to Ontario's directors of education.

The Globe and Mail first reported on the directive Wednesday, having gained access to an email sent to school boards across the province by Tony Pontes, executive director of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE).

CBC Toronto has not obtained the full email, but did obtain an excerpt from a source at a GTA school board.

It says: "... boards will be directed to create adaptive plans that have no 'virtual learning day.' That is, there will be face to face learning all 5 days of the week. So a 2-3/3-2 model over a 2 week time period."

The memo's directions go against a recent directive released by Education Minister Stephen Lecce in mid-June, which asked school boards to prepare for three scenarios: in-class learning, online learning or a mixture of both.

A spokesperson from Lecce's office told Radio-Canada the government could not provide a copy of the memo as it wasn't sent by their office.

In Thursday's provincial COVID-19 briefing, Lecce said they're continuing to ask school boards to prepare three separate plans, but their preference is for children to be in class five days a week.

"These kids need it, especially after being out of class for so long because of COVID-19," he said.

Lecce added he knows parents want more clarity on what September will look like, but said it's still unclear what impact COVID-19 will continue to have in the coming months.

CODE has not yet responded to CBC Toronto's requests for comment.

Mass exodus of parents from workforce possible, some warn

The news comes as parents like Allison Venditti struggle to keep up with chaotic new norms.

Her days, which routinely start at 6 a.m. and go until 11:30 p.m., are filled with the constant juggling act of raising her three children — ages eight, six and two — full-time as schools remain shut, while also trying to run her career coaching business in whatever time she can carve out each day.

Venditti's husband takes Monday mornings and Friday afternoons off work to chip in with the kids as well, but there's no question it's a newly-lopsided arrangement, with Venditti's work pushed into the cracks.

The Toronto mother is matter-of-fact as she explains there's just no other choice. As with many Ontario families, it's her husband who makes more money, meaning his job takes priority in order to pay the bills.

"My hand is being forced so hard, it feels like I'm being stabbed," Venditti said.

And she considers herself one of the lucky ones.

Across the province, parents say they're struggling — not just with the constant threat of COVID-19, but the ripple effect of no school or child care.

Some warn a mass exodus of parents — moms in particular — from the workforce is on the horizon if families don't get more answers and support.

"What you will see is parents, and predominantly women, dropping out of the workforce," said Lauren Dobson-Hughes, a Canadian consultant specializing in gender equality and health, during an interview with CBC Radio's Here & Now.

"When faced with legally caring for your children or having a job, parents have to care for their children."

Venditti, who owns Toronto-based career coaching company Careerlove.ca, also manages a Facebook group for working moms.

The pandemic experiences she's read about from some of its 4,500 members have been all across the spectrum. Some are single mothers juggling kids and jobs; moms who've been laid off; working mothers who've been told their productivity is "crap."

"It's been heart-wrenching and awful," Venditti said.

School closures — and the uncertainty about what's coming in the fall — is a particular challenge for many of those women.

"This whole school thing doesn't just hinge on mental health. It hinges on our ability to feed our kids," she explained. "People who've been laid off can't go back to work if they only have schooling two days a week."

'Who's supposed to be working?'

In June, Ontario officials asked school boards to create three different plans: one for a full return to the classroom, one for continued online learning and one that would combine online and classroom learning, with no more than 15 students together at any one time.

Amid the uncertainty over what plan will be picked, mothers across the province say they're in a no-win situation.

Roxy Futia, a single mom with a three-year-old son, had already had to stop working during the pandemic — and likely can't return to her job unless school is back full-time.

"It's really upsetting," said the Toronto mother, who had recently returned to the workforce after a divorce and a move.

"Now I'm back to square one."

Futia had to stop working in mid-April, because it was impossible to keep up with her job at a tax clinic while looking after her young child.

"I feel like this has the potential to really set women back so far."

Matilda Kontozis, who lives in Richmond Hill, said she may leave her medical administrator job this September because she felt like "a complete failure" supporting her 12 and 15-year-old with online learning. She doesn't know how she'll manage financially.

"It's me choosing their education, or my job and finances," said Kontozis on CBC's Metro Morning.

"I really don't know what I'm going to do."

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