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## STAR EXCLUSIVE

# School pandemic plans don't work for working parents, province told

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## JOIN THE CONVERSATION

School reopening plans don't work for working parents — and it's time the province embraced “creative and ambitious” alternatives for this fall so families aren't left in the lurch as the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) continues, and two Toronto school trustees are determined to make that happen.

Other jurisdictions are thinking outside the box so students aren't simply divvied into groups and told to attend classes half-days or every other day — and Ontario should be too, say Toronto trustees Jennifer Story and Rachel Chernos Lin, who are to bring forward an emergency resolution Thursday night, calling on the province to craft a school year that works better for families.

“I live on a street full of kids, and I see around me every day parents who are struggling in every context to juggle working from home and taking care of kids. And as we roll toward September, that challenge is going to become greater and greater,” Story told the Star.

“Right now, we can't possibly accommodate all kids full-time and comply with public health guidelines around distancing, and on top of that, child-care needs,” she said. “It seems the provincial government is not up for thinking of funding much beyond a hybrid model — which is essentially a part-time model ... (and) the impact on kids is negative. They need to be safe, and social, and learning, and this doesn't do that.”

Some U.S. states are looking at expanding school and daycares into unused public or commercial spaces to allow for more, smaller classes, or maybe changing the length of the school day. Anything's possible and all levels of government must be involved, the two trustees say.

“We need a creative and ambitious response to COVID in education,” said Chernos Lin. Otherwise, both she and Story warn, “working moms are going to suffer the brunt of this.”

Last month, Education Minister Stephen Lecce told school boards to [prepare for three scenarios](#) this September: online only, in-class only with strict hygiene or a mix of the two and said he expects the hybrid model will be in place this fall.

In the legislature Tuesday, he said, “What this government is going to do is ensure that we are ready for all scenarios for September. The focus of the government is to ensure that safety remains our paramount priority. What we've asked school boards to do is to be ready for three scenarios” as other provincial governments have done.

“That is prudent, given what we have learned from COVID-19. We must be ready for the challenges on the horizon.”

He said, “Our priority is to get kids back into class in a conventional model, day to day. That is the aspiration, but it has to be safe.”

It's another example of the uncertainty around how to deal with the ongoing pandemic and how to plan when no one knows what the situation will be in the fall.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said Premier Doug Ford "expects parents and educators to juggle a pretty much impossible schedule coming September."

Instead of "keeping class cohorts small by keeping half the kids at home," she asked the government to "commit to hiring more teachers, educational assistants and educational workers — like cleaners, for example — so that we can have more, smaller classrooms to protect our children from COVID-19."

The "hybrid" model of in-class and online learning "leaves working parents with young children, single-parent households and low-income families in the precarious position of having to choose between educating their children and their own employment," says the emergency resolution from Story and Chernos Lin.

And given the concerns raised by experts that children's mental health and well-being has been negatively impacted by the extended school shutdown, all efforts must be made to get them back to school, the resolution says.

The Toronto District School Board, Canada's largest school board, has consulted with families and, like other boards, is now looking at options for the fall, with a draft report to go to public health next week.

The Ottawa-Carleton board is looking at having half the students in school Monday and Tuesday, Wednesday closed for thorough cleaning, and the remainder of students attend Thursday and Friday.

For high school students, a number of boards are considering offering *one class at a time*, for several hours a day for about five weeks, much like summer school. The Toronto public board also asked parents how they would feel about a "quadrimester," two classes at a time, though that raises concern because teens will have contact with more students in classrooms and the hallway.

Story and Chernos Lin said, "The health and safety of students and staff needs to be prioritized — yet balanced with the needs of families."

Their motion will include a letter to Lecce and Ford about the need for creative thinking and extra funding for busing, PPE for staff and "repair/maintenance including, but not limited to, ventilation issues, touch-free sinks and soap dispensers for handwashing and water bottle refill stations."

Lecce has said the government added funds for staffing during the last round of negotiations with teacher and support staff unions — although unions have said that money would only cover the costs of replacing staff who were let go when contracts expired.



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