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PROVINCIAL POLITICS

School board calls on government to look at alternatives to hybrid learning model, expected to be in place in September

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The Toronto District School Board voted unanimously Thursday night to support an emergency motion calling on the government to look at “creative and ambitious” alternatives to the hybrid model, which is the model expected to be in place in September.

“We want to ensure that all students can return in September in the safest way possible, but we must also recognize that if the Ministry of Education does not permit them to return every day, it will put many of the families of 247,000 TDSB students in a very difficult position, not to mention the families of thousands of TDSB staff,” said chair Robin Pilkey.

Boards are planning for three different scenarios for schooling this fall — but full-time, in-person learning for kids is still the province’s hope, says Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

“The government’s preference is every day, day-to-day delivery, five days a week in class,” he said at Queen’s Park on Thursday.

“And the obligation on us today, and we are doing this, is working closely with public health to get to a point that we can scale up that plan. But the reason why we have ... three different plans is because we need to be ready. We do not know what will happen in August. So, out of an abundance of caution to ensure ... there’s not a gap in learning”

The province has been feeling the heat from parents and trustees, who say, if kids are home full-time learning remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, or a hybrid model is put in place that would see students in school part-time, families, especially low income ones, will struggle.

Under the hybrid or mixed model, with classes capped at 15 to maintain physical distancing, only about half the students could be at school on any given day. Working parents would have to figure out a way to supervise their children when they aren’t in class, which could be two or three days a week.

The trustees who proposed the motion, Jennifer Story and Rachel Chernos Lin, say other jurisdictions are finding extra classroom space in unused buildings so that all kids can attend, every day. More teaching and educational assistants would have to be hired, they also say.

Lecce said school boards have received more funding for the next school year through the usual grants, plus extra money for staffing that was negotiated in the latest contract with teachers.

Unions have said that money is to replace workers who were let go after the last contract expired, and not enough to cover COVID-19 needs.

“I understand fully that parents of this province want to know with clarity what September will look like,” Lecce said.

“Our government’s plan is to have operational readiness in our school boards to respond to the local circumstance as it arises And (that), likewise, applies to child care as we look at efforts to improve and rather enhance the amount of capacity of children that could be within these centres. We know this is important to you. We’re working around the clock to get this right when it comes to our kids.”

New Democrat Leader Andrea Horwath has called the government’s hybrid model “disastrous ... (and it) will only make learning, teaching and parents’ return-to-work plans a nightmare.”

She said “instead of putting all the responsibility on parents to stay home with kids indefinitely, this government needs to get more teachers, more education workers and more classroom spaces lined up and ready to go, so that, if we continue to see infection rates drop over the summer, we can get all kids back in school full-time in September.”

NDP education Critic Marit Stiles said, “It looks like the government is bending over backwards to prevent having to hire more teachers, more custodians and unlock more classroom space.

“And parents and kids are going to pay the price for that.”

Parents, and especially mothers, “won’t be able to go back to work under this convoluted model. And this government seriously can’t expect teachers to teach in the classroom at the same time as trying to teach the half of the class that’s at home.”

Chief medical officer Dr. David Williams is hopeful the COVID-19 outbreak will be better by late August, because “we know there’s the pressure and issues around working parents, both with schooling and with daycare.

“We continue to have those discussions to look at that correct balance, knowing the need, the social aspects, the connectivity side, the work things, as you open up to Stage 3, allowing parents to go to work where they had structured that around children attending school and daycare.”

Concerns have also been raised that, if students return part-time and remain with the same teacher all day to limit contact, that would clash with collective agreements and prep-time requirements.

The [Ottawa Citizen](#) reports that, in public schools in the capital, teachers must get 40 minutes for lunch and 240 minutes a week in prep time, which means they could not be at the front of the class for an entire school day.

In Toronto, trustees Story and Chernos Lin said in some places in the U.S., governments are thinking of ways to get everyone back to school and daycare.

“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,” Story told the Star.

“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.”

“We need a creative and ambitious response to COVID in education,” said Chernos Lin.

Otherwise, she added, “working moms are going to suffer the brunt of this.”

The two say experts have said kids need to be in school for the social contact, too, given the pandemic has taken its toll on their mental health and well-being.

Their motion includes sending a letter to Lecce and Ford about the need for creative thinking and extra funding for busing, personal protective equipment 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.”



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