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PROVINCIAL POLITICS

Halton school board rejects 'hybrid' model for classes this fall

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The Halton public school board is pressing the province to drop the “hybrid” back-to-school model — a combination of in-person and online classes — saying it would not only be unfair to working families, but also less safe than having kids return to class full-time.

Trustees have sent a letter to Education Minister Stephen Lecce urging him to drop the mixed model as a possibility for this fall, saying it could potentially leave parents of 36,000 elementary students seeking care for children on the days they aren't at school.

Not only that, as parents scramble to rearrange their schedules around an alternate-day or alternative-week model — or give up on work entirely — they would also face the financial burden of care, while at the same time their children's circle of contacts would expand drastically.

“It is a house of cards,” said Halton District School Board chair Andrea Grebenc.

The all-female board's concerns include how “temporary child-care situations may mix students from various school classes, schools and boards, exponentially exposing the contained classroom ‘bubble’ of students and staff and risking harder-to-trace-and-contain outbreaks in various classes, schools and across boards” than if they returned to school full-time.

It would be “counterproductive to limiting widespread community infection and poses great challenges to contact tracing efforts,” says the board, which serves Oakville, Burlington, Milton and Halton Hills.

Earlier this month, two trustees at the Toronto District School board raised alarms about the hybrid model, and urged the government to be “creative and ambitious” to get children back to school full-time, including looking for additional space if classes are to be limited to 15 students or even tinkering with the length of the school day.

Trustees at both boards have noted that the burden of leaving parents to supervise their children's learning is unfair to working families, noting women typically take on that responsibility.

In Halton, trustees said the 15-student class size — outlined under the full return to school as a way to maintain a smaller group of contacts — is not feasible with current funding levels. They are asking for more funding, or some flexibility with the class sizes.

The trustees also said the amount of child care needed under a hybrid model “does not currently exist in Halton Region” for school-aged children, so last-minute options would spring up, with unknown safety protocols.

The Toronto board has modelled options including a 15-student cap in elementary classes, or a combination of 15 students from kindergarten to Grade 3 with 20 students in Grades 4 to 8.

Grebenc said the province could be more innovative and consider including outdoor learning for the first few months of school — in schoolyards, area parks or conservation areas — given the lower transmission rates compared to indoors.

At the legislature Monday, Lecce said “we all appreciate that many parents in this province have faced difficulty as a consequence of COVID-19, as well in the context of wanting certainty about the way forward. What we can confirm to parents, to students and, of course, our education staff in the province is that we will be prepared to respond to the local challenges and the transmission risk that may arise as a consequence of COVID-19.”

He said the government’s “commitment, our solemn responsibility to the people of this province, is to do whatever it takes to keep families safe.”

The province is to provide a general direction for all boards, which are submitting plans by Aug. 4, so there will be local variations depending on which model it goes with.

Both Lecce and Premier Doug Ford have said they would prefer students to be in school full-time in the fall.

But Liberal MPP Mitzie Hunter, a former education minister, said there are gaps if a five-day learning week is the government’s goal. “Where’s the funding? Where’s the planning? Where are the safety guidelines and protocols?

“There’s not enough space, not enough teachers, there’s not enough planning,” she said, and more resources are needed to hire teachers and custodians.

New Democrat MPP and education critic Marit Stiles said schooling and child care “should be the biggest priority for any government that wants to see real recovery.”

The Ford government, she added, “has shown that they haven’t really managed this well. We are down to the crunch.”

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