

Ministry of Education

Minister

315 Front Street West
Toronto ON M7A 0B8

Ministère de l'Éducation

Ministre

315, rue Front Ouest
Toronto ON M7A 0B8



May 19, 2020

Dear Parents—

Today, I announced our government's decision that schools will remain closed until the end of June.

This decision was based on protecting the health and safety of your child, your family, and your community. When I last wrote to you on April 28, I promised that your child would not return to school if we are not able to definitively answer "yes" to the following question: does this promote the health, safety, and well-being of our children and students? Given the current developments in the COVID-19 outbreak and the congregate nature of schools, we cannot answer yes to that question just yet.

For the last few months, you and your children have taken extraordinary steps and shown great flexibility to continue your children's learning journey. Our government has also been working to make sure you and your children have access to the tools, resources, and predictability that we have all sought during these times.

As we continue to work around-the-clock to plan for the summer and the 2020-21 school year, I believe it is more important than ever to listen to you and hear your ideas.

We have heard clearly from parents that they expect dynamic live education for their children. The connection between a student, their peers, and their teacher is more important than ever. Two weeks ago, I wrote to school boards and other education sector partners to express my expectation that teachers utilize live teaching—sometimes called 'synchronous learning'—for entire classes, smaller group settings, or one-on-one interactions.

While this is by no means a normal time in your child's education, it is critically important to allow your child to have access to a school community, support network, and learning experience that is as close to normal as possible. I will continue to advocate for this, as we must strive to do more to serve our children in these extraordinary and tough times.

We have also heard from many parents who are concerned about how to access technology in order for students to fully benefit from this live learning. One of the first things we did after suspending in-person classes was to support school boards in distributing existing technology to students who needed it. Over 200,000 devices have been distributed to students across the province.

On April 17, we also announced a partnership with Rogers and Apple that enables school boards to provide portable tablets with free Rogers LTE wireless data, pre-loaded with critical education tools and resources. To date, tens of thousands of these devices have been distributed and delivered to students in the province. It is partnerships like this that represent the best of the spirit of Ontario.

Through the Ontario Together initiative, we have been able to procure competitive packages for broadband internet that families can access immediately. We have provided these options to our school boards, and I encourage you to contact your local board to determine if this might be the right fit for you.

We have heard from parents that there is a need to provide bridge programming and other gap-closing initiatives during the fast-approaching summer period. We know that the learning loss that takes place every year over the summer can be a challenge to students when school resumes in September. This year, the risk of summer learning loss is more pronounced.

That is why we are providing new opportunities for students to continue learning over the summer. We also have announced Ontario's Summer Learning Plan, which is a robust plan for summer learning opportunities, including new programs and initiatives. I encourage you to discuss these options with your child, to determine if there are opportunities to continue their learning over the summer.

Some of these initiatives include:

- New upgrading courses, which will allow Grade 9-12 students to upgrade a full credit course they passed during the school year in 55 hours, rather than the normal 110 hours;
- Specific learning supports for students with special education needs and mental health needs, including access to Education Assistants, a new two-week program in skills development, learning, and routine establishment, and a summer extension of after-school programming for students with autism;
- Working with our cross-government team, we will be providing virtual opportunities for students to volunteer during the summer, which can be counted toward the community service graduation requirement.

These programs and resources were designed with your child in mind, and we have more than doubled the funding available during the summer period for this continued programming. As we roll out Ontario's Summer Learning Plan, new virtual components will be available and strict protocols will be unveiled for in-class summer learning should emergency measures be lifted. We are also creating an organized and safe process to allow families to retrieve items in schools, led by local school boards.

Looking ahead to the Fall, when schools reopen, we know that school may not look or feel the same. While we have seen other provinces suggest what their classrooms may look like in September, we know that each part of our country is impacted and responding differently to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Our government is in regular contact with Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. David Williams, and the education system remains a top priority for the COVID-19 Command Table. I have also spoken with the leadership of the Hospital for Sick Children, who have provided important counsel in how we continue to support students' health and safety at school.

While we are working aggressively to make sure Ontario's schools and classrooms represent the safest learning environments possible, we will provide our plan for resumption of class in September in short order which will include strict safety protocols and public health measures.

As our province moves further along the recovery path, we should be proud of our collective efforts that are now showing signs of hope and optimism. Despite this, we appreciate that students and children may struggle to make sense of this pandemic. We are all doing our best to stay strong and positive during this period, and you may be having difficult and emotional discussions with your children during this time.

You and your children are not alone. At the onset of the school closure period, I encouraged school boards to immediately ensure that their mental health workers and professional staff are available to engage in safe and secure conversations with students who feel the need to talk. Our government has also provided emergency funding of up to \$12 million to immediately expand online and virtual mental health supports, many of which are directly tailored for youth.

There are many organizations that provide critical support for children who face mental health concerns or distress. A great example is Kids Help Phone, which offers 24/7 counselling and referral services across the province. To use this free resource, children can call 1-800-668-6868, or text CONNECT to 686868. School Mental Health Ontario also has a number of great resources for students, parents and families on their website at www.smho-smsso.ca. In addition, child and youth mental health agencies across the province continue to provide services.

Our government has been consistently clear. The health and well-being of your child guides every decision we make. We will get through this together, and in doing so will always work in the best interest of your child, your family, and your community.

I know that together, we will all continue to rise to the challenge.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Lecce". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and a long, sweeping underline.

The Honourable Stephen Lecce, M.P.P.
Minister of Education