

# News Release

## **CLOSING SCHOOLS ONLY ONE STEP TO ENSURING SAFETY, SAY CATHOLIC TEACHERS**

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TORONTO – After months of advocacy by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) and other unions on behalf of teachers and education workers, the Ontario government has finally decided to close schools to in-person learning. But Catholic teachers say this is only the first step.

"As the third wave intensifies, a result of the Ford government's underfunded and mismanaged COVID-19 response, this action is necessary to protect the health and well-being of our students, teachers, education workers, families, and communities," says OECTA President Liz Stuart.

That this decision comes less than 24 hours after Minister Lecce said schools were safe to resume post-break further highlights this government's ineptitude and internal disorganization. This contradictory messaging has been a constant throughout the pandemic, heightening the fears of parents, teachers, and education workers in an already difficult and uncertain time.

"We all want schools to be open and stay open," says Stuart. "Ironically, the Ford government's haphazard handling of this crisis has provided yet another opportunity to implement stronger health and safety measures, to protect not only our classrooms, but all Ontarians. It cannot be squandered."

As they have been doing for more than a year, Catholic teachers call on Premier Ford to immediately do the following:

- prioritize the vaccination of teachers, education workers, and other essential workers in hot spots;
- realize smaller class sizes, to allow for proper physical distancing;
- implement a comprehensive and meaningful asymptomatic testing program for schools that serves the needs and encourages the participation of everyone in the community;
- improve ventilation in schools; and
- ensure paid sick days for all Ontarians, to stop the spread of COVID-19 among frontline workers and to save lives.

"The Ford government must prioritize safety in our schools and properly invest in publicly funded education," says Stuart. "Cutting \$1 billion in education spending, as put forward in their recent budget, will make a dire situation worse, further threatening student success and safety. Teachers and education workers have gone above and beyond this past year, showing tremendous dedication and resolve in support of the students in their care. The Ford government must finally do their part by acting to protect our schools and all Ontarians."

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OECTA represents the 45,000 passionate and qualified teachers in Ontario's publicly funded English Catholic schools, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

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