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Considerations for School Reopening in Ontario: Building a more resilient education system for recovery

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOL REOPENING IN ONTARIO: Building a more resilient education system for recovery¹

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CONTEXT

School closures in Ontario affect over 2 million elementary and secondary school students.² Ontario issued the first school closure announcement on 12 March 2020 to take effect for an initial period from 14 March to 4 April 2020, compelling all publicly funded elementary and secondary schools to close during this time.³ On 17 March 2020, the government declared an official state of emergency under s 7.0.1 (1) of the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*.⁴ This required the immediate closure of all private schools as defined in the *Education Act* and of all licensed child care centres, amongst other public places and institutions. Public school closures were extended another three times – first until 4 May,⁵ then 31 May,⁶ and finally until the end of June.⁷ *Ontario's Framework for Continued Learning* was released on 19 May 2020 with a notice for public consultation until the end of June.⁸ These recommendations are a response to that call.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The **transformative impacts of education** on individuals, and the **positive societal effects on the economy, health, and engaged citizenship** are well known. Regular education has been interrupted in Ontario during the COVID-19 crisis. However, the unalienable right to education remains. **The province has an obligation to provide accessible, available, acceptable, and adaptable education.**⁹ These obligations are heightened during emergencies.

Sustained and committed investment in education and careful crisis-sensitive education planning are key to addressing long-term recovery for Ontario. These will enable **rebuilding a resilient society post-COVID-19** and accelerate **progress towards social and economic goals**.

The following policy and planning recommendations are based on **international best practice on education planning during the pandemic**. Box 1 presents key touchstone documents to guide pandemic education planning.¹⁰ The recommendations and international guidelines are, first and

foremost, **predicated on comprehensive public health measures** and a significant and sustained drop in the numbers of cases to sustainable levels, and **placing the well-being of the child at the centre in view of aggravated risk and protection issues.**

Framework for Reopening Schools (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, WFP)

Outlines planning considerations: prior to reopening; as part of reopening process; once schools are reopened. Rests on four pillars: ensure safe operations, learning, including the most marginalized, and wellbeing and protection.

Interim Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools (UNICEF, WHO, IFRC)

Provides key messages, actions, and checklists to support safe school operations. Addresses different members of the school community: administrators, teachers, staff; parents/caregivers and community members; students and children.

Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards for Education: preparedness, response recovery

A key tool for governments to enhance the quality of education preparedness, response and recovery, increase access to safe and relevant learning opportunities, and ensure accountability in providing these services.

INEE Coronavirus Resources Portal

A collection of resources to support education provision in view of COVID-19.

Box 1 Touchstone documents and resources

1. Strengthen mechanisms for multistakeholder and cross-sectoral policy dialogue.

Planning does not, and should not, stop once an initial plan is conceived.¹¹ Planning processes structured by feedback loops, monitoring, and readjustment enable nimble responses. Anticipation and foresight and policy dialogue are essential.

A **multistakeholder and cross-sectoral task force or planning body should be created** for a more sustainable and comprehensive approach. **This task force should be retained from first response throughout the reopening phases**, and into the academic year. The task force should include a broad array of representatives from teachers, principals, school boards, ensuring representation from Indigenous and minority communities and schools; education experts, including those with knowledge in education and emergencies and international education to identify international best practice; psycho-social and mental health experts; experts in special needs education; medical, public health, and epidemiological experts; and groups representing families and students.

The task force should:

- a. lead crisis planning exercises with government;
- b. help to disseminate education data linked to the evolving health situation broadly and transparently;
- c. liaise and engage in broad public communications strategies. Using open data and public data visualization platforms would increase communications.

2. Adopt a crisis-sensitive approach to immediate, medium-, and long-term education planning and recovery. Extend cross-sectoral approaches prioritizing the vulnerable and at-risk.

Canada has been less attuned to crisis planning in education due to the relative peace and security and strong public health context we have enjoyed for many years. This is an enviable position. However, the pandemic has revealed gaps in **cross-sectoral collaboration** as a matter of course. Responding to this crisis provides Ontario with the opportunity to create a more resilient education system for the future, noting the likelihood of increased future shocks due to climate change and other pandemics

A crisis-sensitive planning approach involves four steps: first responses – managing a crisis; planning for interrupted, localized reopening; an ongoing crisis-sensitive approach; adjusting pre-existing policies.

i. First responses – managing a crisis: First responses must be quick, coordinated, and cross-sectoral. First response plans should be developed as **part of integrated medium-term and longer-term plans towards recovery**. This is more efficient than revising decisions every few weeks. It minimizes confusion amongst education stakeholders, parents, and students and provides clear objectives. Setting priorities should include broad stakeholder engagement, prioritizing those impacted directly (teachers, school administrators, and families), and transparent public communications on the integrated plan and a concrete framework, including adapted curricular objectives.

First responses should focus on ensuring **that education and allied services continue and prioritize vulnerable and marginalized groups**. This is strengthened by conducting a **rapid situation analysis** and needs assessment. **Education data on student numbers by grade level should be linked with proportions of students in vulnerable and at-risk groups in each school community**. The needs assessment should include, for example, proportions of students with individual education plans (IEP), those that access allied diagnostic and therapeutic help, students that have regular access to additional classroom supports, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds with limited access to learning resources and support. Appropriate services should be identified and delivered directly to individuals, or, if safe and appropriate, in smaller groups.

ii. Planning for interrupted, localized reopening. Sustainable school reopening is predicated on safe conditions and comprehensive public health measures.¹² **Reopening schools** in a context without an effective vaccine or treatment, and where the virus has not been eliminated, **is likely to be volatile**. If that is the case for the 2020-21 school year, **there are likely to be schools in certain communities that may open and have to close again**.¹³

Preparation for reopening can take several weeks or months. Different phases of the regular **planning cycle will be compressed** – education sector and context analysis; formulating policy

priorities and strategies; program design; costing and financing; implementing decisions and an action plan informed by data; and designing monitoring and evaluation frameworks.¹⁴

The **Framework for Reopening Schools**, jointly developed by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and the World Food Programme, outlines planning considerations prior to reopening, as part of the reopening process, and once schools are reopened.¹⁵ It rests on four pillars: ensure safe operations, learning, including the most marginalized, and wellbeing and protection. It is **strongly suggested that the Ministry consult the Framework** when developing and assessing its plans.

Reopening will unlikely be a one-time event or follow a one-size-fits-all approach within Ontario, and even within the same district or community. **Reopening plans should consider a phased and localized approach** (e.g., levels of education, years, locations). There should be continuous community-based assessment of the local health and safety context, linking local health and education data.¹⁶ This will have implications on, for example, ascertaining which communities can sustain school reopening, how to procedurally manage reopening, and practical considerations for implementing necessary physical distancing measures given education system capacity, infrastructure, and teacher and education personnel supply. **Reopening plans must be properly resourced with additional funding for these specific purposes,¹⁷ beyond the new allocations recently announced by the province.¹⁸**

iii. On-going crisis-sensitive planning and analyses. Going forward, managing the COVID-19 education emergency should be **part of broader crisis-sensitive planning exercises.**¹⁹ Education plays a key role in preparing for risks and building resilient social systems. Integrating risk reduction and risk management within the curriculum,²⁰ ensuring that information and materials are inclusive and accessible,²¹ and gender mainstreaming are vital. These are significant as systems move to recovery, particularly since **negative socio-economic and education effects of the pandemic are likely to be more severe on vulnerable and marginalized groups.** Given the volatile context, **crisis-sensitive planning should cover the 2020-21 school year with a contingency plan for 2021-22.**

iv. Adjusting pre-existing policies and procedures. Pre-existing policies and procedures need to be re-examined and adjusted. The pandemic will exacerbate existing inequities and created **new needs. Assessing the financial implications of instituting equity-focused measures requiring strengthened investment are vital.**²² Assessing the **viability and financial implications of instituting physical distancing measures,** implicating teacher and education staff supply and infrastructure capacity. In addition, **curricular objectives, transitioning requirements throughout the system,** EQAO assessments, entry- and exit- requirements may need to be revised. **Routine procedures** such as school calendars and timetables, transportation services and capacity, etc. will need to be reassessed to take into consideration the make-up of and compulsions on individual school communities.

3. Adopt a comprehensive remote and distance learning plan, ensuring continuity for the most vulnerable.

Remote and distance learning may need to be instituted **at various times and for various communities throughout reopening phases**. Education continuity during school closures and throughout intermittent reopening phases depends on instituting appropriate and accessible learning activities, securing learners' safety, and ensuring participation from vulnerable groups.

First responses in Ontario included a substantial shift to online learning through the *Learn at Home* portal. However, as seen in the early experience, accessibility was uneven, prompting partnerships with companies for supplies and connectivity.²³ **Online learning may also be inappropriate for sustained learning for certain age groups, learners, or subjects.** The first response has highlighted the need to support teachers, facilitators, and parents/caregivers to optimally use technologies for learning.²⁴ This is to minimize disparities due to the digital divide associated with household wealth, social background, and location, which may otherwise combine with learning inequities to widen gaps.

Based on COVID-19 response experiences of 127 countries, UNICEF recommends:²⁵

1. using multiple delivery channels for remote learning, with a combination of digital and non-digital approaches;
2. strengthening teacher and parent /caregiver support; and
3. gathering feedback to improve reach and quality.

Implementing a range of remote and distance learning approaches beyond a standalone platform is essential.²⁶ UNICEF's *Remote Learning COVID-19 Response Decision Tree* is a concrete tool to navigate remote learning solutions to support different learners (Figure 1).²⁷ Ontario can learn from the experience of countries that have used a mix of technologies and resources, including special radio and television broadcasts, SMS messaging, tele-help lines, and take-home print-based packages for parent/carer-guided instruction.²⁸ Developing material for learners with special needs, e.g. closed captions and audio recordings, live sign language, Braille, large print, etc., are essential.

Online content should use open-source tools and be free. Extending free access and hotspots for homes and connectivity in remote locations is also essential. Moreover, teachers and administrators should be consulted during planning on policy changes in the delivery distance education and decisions regarding the safe reopening of schools. These measures can contribute to promising practices for more equitable remote learning.²⁹

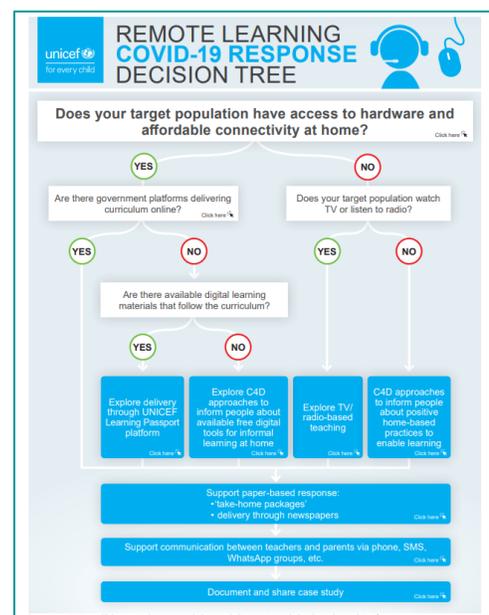


Figure 1 UNICEF decision tree for remote learning solutions

4. Keep education staff, spaces, and services separate. Treat schools as closed systems.

It is critical that education staff, spaces, and services are reserved for education service delivery throughout the school reopening phases. This is to minimize the risk of transmission and guarantee continued access to education services once the system is reopened.

On 13 May 2020, Ontario issued a call for the voluntary redeployment of education sector workers during COVID19.³⁰ Most employees other than those required to support learning continuity were eligible for temporary redeployments to meet the growing needs in acute and high-risk contexts in the province. This included staff members in custodial and maintenance, children and youth services, social workers, paraprofessionals, office support staff, and educational assistants. Occasional teachers and casual education staff were also eligible.

Owing to the high-risk nature of their work, it is **essential that any staff members who were temporarily deployed are repatriated exclusively to the education sector.** These staff should be **quarantined** for a minimum of two-weeks before returning to their regular duties **and frequently tested.** Once schools are reopened, there should be **no exchange of in-person education staff** between schools and/or between other sectors or high-risk settings. This is to ensure that schools are treated as closed systems to minimize the risk of transmission, and to trace contacts if necessary.

If schools or education facilities were used to manage the COVID crisis or as temporary testing or care facilities, they should be vacated and returned for exclusive educational use. **Transportation services should be reserved for education purposes and for single schools** to minimize risk.

5. Address teacher and education worker supply, well-being, capacity, and conditions as education front-line workers to ensure quality education and learning

Teachers are key to delivering quality education and achieving positive learning outcomes. There will be **an impact on teacher supply.** In some cases, unplanned attrition may combine with the **need for even smaller class sizes to safely reopen schools** with physical distancing measures. Increased **urgent demands** are placed on teachers and administrators with new and alternative delivery models. This is likely to continue throughout the reopening phases, which will contribute to existing work intensification.³¹ **Capacity building** instructional methods for equitable remote and distance learning and **appropriate support for increased urgent complex administrative tasks** are required.

Teachers and education workers are not immune. **Safe working conditions** and protecting their health and mental well-being are essential to ensure sustainable education delivery. **All education staff should be frequently tested.** Physical distancing measures and supports and safe school operations are required to protect teachers, as much as students and the school community.³² Finally, the **economic security** of teachers, administrators, and education workers must be protected requiring continued pay.

6. Institute strategic education data collection for continuous situation analysis. When appropriate, institute safe school operations, and open 'better schools'.

Ontario can **strengthen risk analysis** for more resilient education systems. Strategic immediate response and recovery depend on **relevant health and education data and evidence**.³³ Documenting the impact of the crisis for **evidence-informed policy and practice** are essential. This includes documenting the learning and inclusion experiences of systems and schools that have reopened.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics provides guidance for **rapid data collection** in view of the pandemic, with three key suggestions:³⁴

1. Institute a rapid collection format. Focus on a few key indicators and on school and student samples rather than the whole population.
2. Monitor equity by over-representing vulnerable students (e.g., students in poverty, with special needs, Indigenous and minority groups, minority linguistic groups).
3. Frequent, low stakes learning measurement.

Safe school operations, child health and psycho-social wellbeing, learning continuity, safe school reopening and opening better schools are integral to resuming regular schooling.³⁵ **When the time is right to access formal spaces, inclusive and safe school practices and infection control prevention measures** should be instituted (e.g. sanitization and hygiene supplies, WASH and hygiene practices, physical distancing, inclusive behaviours addressing stigma and xenophobia).³⁶

Reopening will entail necessary **physical distancing** measures, which may require additional resources regarding staffing and space. More sustainable responses for recovery and resilience include developing **learning continuity plans, considering alternative or contingency learning pathways, and developing cross-sectoral allied service continuity plans**.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen mechanisms for multistakeholder and cross-sectoral policy dialogue.**
 - Create multistakeholder and cross-sectoral task force of education and health experts with broad representation from education stakeholders directly affected.
 - Retain task force from first responses to reopening phases, and into the academic year.
 - Task force to: lead crisis-sensitive planning with government; help disseminate data broadly and transparently; liaise and engage in broad public communications.

2. **Adopt a crisis-sensitive approach to immediate, medium-, and long-term education planning and recovery. Extend cross-sectoral approaches prioritizing the vulnerable and at-risk.**
 - Institute crisis-sensitive planning approach for immediate response integrated with long-term recovery, integrating four steps: first responses – manage a crisis; plan for interrupted, localized reopening; conduct ongoing crisis-sensitive analyses; adjust pre-existing policies.
 - **First responses:** Quick, coordinated, and cross-sectoral. Part of medium-term and longer-term plans. Ensure education and other services are provided to at-risk. Conduct rapid situation analysis with education data and specific data on vulnerable and at-risk in each school community.
 - **Phased, localized reopening:** Carefully consider phased and localized approach (e.g., levels of education, years, locations). Institute continuous community-based local health and safety assessment. Link local health and education data. Ascertain which communities can sustain school reopening, how to procedurally manage reopening, and practical considerations to implement physical distancing. Resource with additional funding for these purposes beyond recently announced allocations.
 - **Ongoing crisis-sensitive analyses:** Going forward, institute ongoing crisis-sensitive planning. Ensure materials are inclusive and accessible. Plan for 2020-21 school year and a contingency plan for 2021-22.
 - **Adjust policies:** Assess financial implications of new needs with equity focus. Instituting viable education and health and safety measures implicate teacher and education staff supply and infrastructure capacity. Reassess curricular objectives; transition and entry and exit requirements, EQAO assessments. Reconsider routine school procedures.

3. **Adopt a comprehensive remote and distance learning plan, ensuring continuity for the most vulnerable.**
 - Ensure education continuity during school closures and throughout intermittent reopening.
 - Implement range of remote and distance learning beyond standalone platform.
 - Use multiple delivery channels and combination of digital and non-digital approaches; strengthen teacher and parent /caregiver support; gather feedback for improved reach and quality.

4. **Keep education staff, spaces, and services separate. Treat schools as closed systems.**
 - Reserve education staff, spaces, and services for education only.
 - Repatriate any temporarily deployed education workers exclusively to the education sector. Quarantine prior to resuming regular duties. Frequently test.
 - There should be no exchange of in-person education staff between schools and/or between other sectors or high-risk settings.
 - Reserve transportation services for single schools.

5. **Address teacher and education worker supply, well-being, capacity, and conditions as education front-line workers to ensure quality education and learning.**
 - There will be an impact on teacher supply. Institute smaller class sizes for safe reopening with physical distancing measures.
 - Implement capacity building support in instructional methods and additional support for increased and urgent complex administrative tasks.
 - Safe working conditions and protecting health and mental well-being are essential. Test all education personnel frequently. Ensure economic security of teachers, administrators, education workers.

6. **Institute strategic education data collection for continuous situation analysis. When appropriate, institute safe school operations, and open 'better schools'.**
 - Strengthen risk analysis. Collect and link relevant health and education data for strategic response.
 - Institute a rapid data collection format; monitor equity and over-representing at-risk groups; conduct frequent, low stakes learning diagnostic assessments.
 - Institute safe school and prevention measures, and child health and psycho-social wellbeing services, and inclusive behaviours combating stigma and xenophobia.

Notes and References

¹ This document is heavily based on the policy brief submitted to T20 Task Force 11 'COVID-19 and Multidisciplinary Approaches to Complex Problems' which will feed into the 2020 G20 Summit, Saudi Arabia, November 2020.

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- ³⁶ UNICEF. (2020b). COVID-19 emergency preparedness and response. WASH and infection prevention and control measures in schools. 25 March 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/media/66356/file/WASH-COVID-19-infection-prevention-and-control-in-schools-2020.pdf>