



August 21, 2020

The Honourable Stephen Lecce
Ministry of Education
5th Floor
438 University Ave.
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

To the Honourable Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education,

The Trustees of the Halton District School Board are greatly concerned and seeking clarification regarding a number of items that are critical for back to school planning and ensuring stability and confidence in public education. It is an understatement to note that there is heightened stress among all parties in the education sector and beyond due to the ongoing pressures and concern about COVID-19 and keeping everyone safe and healthy. While the health crisis evolves and demands flexibility, now is a time for collaboration and clarity of vision.

In your August 13 announcement, there were several items that are concerning:

- The well-being of students, staff, families and the community is the highest priority. In your announcement, you noted that the Province's Medical Officer of Health has signed off on the current return to school direction regarding existing class sizes in elementary. You also stated that Boards have the choice to implement greater distancing (finding new spaces) and smaller class sizes than are in that guidance. This is highly confusing and puts our Board in a very difficult position. Elementary class sizes for elementary grades has been a source of broad contention with the Province's return to school direction to Boards. The announcement created an expectation that would be nearly impossible to meet, particularly before September 8. In Halton, over 1200 new teachers would be required to lower elementary class sizes to 15, and additional space would need to be sourced and outfitted, transportation arranged, etc. In addition to a multitude of logistical challenges, and a lack of rental spaces in areas of need, it is anticipated that the cost to do so would be well in excess of the amount our Board could access from reserves.
- Boards are able to utilize a portion of their own financial reserves to implement changes for the upcoming school year. In Halton, reserves have been built over a number of years and earmarked for other high need situations such as upgrading facilities, a home-grown

Street Address: J.W. Singleton Education Centre • 2050 Guelph Line, Burlington, Ontario L7P 5A8
Mailing Address: J.W. Singleton Education Centre • P.O. Box 5005, Stn. LCD 1, Burlington, Ontario L7R 3Z2

Phone: 905-335-3663 | 1-877-618-3456 Fax: 905-335-9802

www.hdsb.ca

solution to a lack of adequate funding sources for aging school and administrative buildings.

- The July 30 direction from the Ministry, included: "Secondary schools in designated school boards will open on an adapted model, with class cohorts of approximately 15 students, attending on alternate schedules that would include in person attendance for at least 50% of instructional days." Boards (consistently) interpreted this to mean at least 2.5 days of the week, and models had been circulated to families reflecting this. While answering a press conference question, you stated that in person instruction is to be 50% of the time, causing much confusion and impacting the expectations of families and students across the province. Prior to the announcement, HDSB staff had gone through the Ministry presentation process receiving positive feedback and no red flags on a model which reflected 50% of days, with mornings for face to face learning, and afternoons for synchronous and asynchronous learning while the schools are cleaned. HDSB staff had begun the process of surveying staff and families about their intent to return. Following your comment about the expectation of in-person instruction at 50% of the time, Board staff immediately paused the process to revise the plan, diverting valuable energy and undermining the community confidence.
- In the same announcement, you noted a \$50M investment to upgrade/address HVAC systems across the province. While additional investment is appreciated, with 72 Boards in Ontario of varying sizes and needs, it is difficult to say how much would flow to each board. For context, to retrofit an older secondary school with a partial air conditioning system has cost in excess of \$1M in the HDSB. Facilities staff have been working tirelessly during the summer months to upgrade and update these systems, and inference of lack of safety is not helpful.


Minister, you have spoken many times about working together. It is very challenging when these announcements come with no advance notice, and Boards hear about them at the same time as thousands of concerned citizens of Ontario who, in turn, expect school boards to have answers. These announcements may trigger complex revision processes that often require additional direction from the Ministry which may or may not come in short order. You have also mentioned "scaling up" a number of times, inferring that other announcements could be coming. Systems and people are under great pressure. At this time, staff need to focus on implementing plans for return to school in just over two weeks.

Staff and students of Ontario school boards should be focussing on a safe return to school, and establishing the new learning and health and safety protocols that the COVID-19 pandemic requires. Overlaying this with new curricula (such as elementary math) complicates these processes and draws energy from where it is needed most. As such, the Trustees of the Halton District School Board are adding our voice to the many letters you've received requesting that full

implementation of the new math curriculum be delayed, in favour of a measured transition with adequate preparation time for staff.

Minister, words matter. This is not a time for finger pointing. All Boards, and the communities they serve are different, and plans have been developed to reflect those unique restraints and needs. We are asking for consistency and clarity of vision so that all resources can be focussed on implementing back to school plans. The Trustees of the Halton District School Board look forward to actively collaborating with the Ministry of Education to help make the school year safe for students and staff so that students can learn, grow and succeed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andréa Grebenc', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andréa Grebenc
Chair of the Board of Trustees, Halton District School

Cc: MPP Ted Arnott,
MPP Stephen Crawford,
MPP Parm Gill,
MPP Jane McKenna,
MPP Effie Triantafilopoulos,
OPSBA Member Board Chairs
President Cathy Abraham, Ontario Public School Board Association