

Postponing March break: comment from CUPE-OSBCU

Responding to today's announcement by Minister of Education Stephen Lecce about the postponement of March break, president of CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) Laura Walton gave the following comment:

"We made it clear to the Ford government that CUPE education workers wanted to keep March break intact. Staff and students have had a difficult school year and everyone's mental health would have benefited from a long-scheduled break that was meant to help them recharge."

The Minister of Education can claim he based his decision to postpone March break on advice from Ontario's public health advice officials, but education workers live every day with the consequences of his continuing refusal to implement other basic measures that would make schools safer. They include:

- mandatory screening for anyone coming through the school doors
- asymptomatic testing and rapid testing in schools: the Ministry is sitting on 80% of the rapid testing kits and asymptomatic testing is not being carried out at all in schools. Some public health units have stated explicitly that they won't test unless there is an outbreak.
- paid sick days for occasional staff, so that no education worker who is sick has to worry about a hit to their pay cheque; this would be in accordance with the position of the Association of Local Public Health Agencies, which recently called for paid sick leave provisions under the Employment Standards Act.
- make education assistants part of the smaller cohorts of the students they support, so they don't have to travel from classroom to classroom
- opening up closed spaces to allow more physical distancing
- adequate ventilation including air purifiers for every room that's occupied in schools
- impermeable barriers for front-line staff in offices
- limiting the number of workers who are required to be in schools when schools are closed
- a review of students' Individual Education Plans with an eye to safety and risk assessment
- sharing the breakdown of board-by-board hires using COVID-related funding

Finally, CUPE is once again calling for an action table of all concerned parties ensure schools are safe and to implement the proposals that were already made around screening, testing and class sizes.

Make no mistake: the Minister can delay March break and claim he's doing it in the interest of public health. But if he's not carrying out the proposals above during the COVID-19 pandemic, he's putting students, workers and families at risk.

Let the Minister put the best medical and public health advice into action that will make a difference to students' and workers' health and safety.

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