

Province ensures safe return to school

By Mark PavilonsEditor

Getting kids back in the classroom this September is the priority. And the provincial government is ensuring it will be a safe, more normal transition to in-class learning. Education Minister and King-Vaughan MPP Stephen Lecce said they've done their due diligence and have followed health advice all through the pandemic. Medical experts agree that getting students back to school, and opening up extra-curricular activities is the best approach. The new school year will see access opening up to sports, arts and other aspects of typical school life. Lecce said they are taking a cautious approach, lifting restrictions over time as health guidelines allow. He wants to avoid any significant challenges, and other health measures will remain in effect, such as wearing masks in the classrooms for Grades 1 through 12. Last week, Lecce announced provincial funding of up to \$25 million to procure up to 20,000 additional HEPA units, which will be deployed for the return to school in September. These will be put in all kindergarten spaces, all kindergarten classrooms, all learning spaces which are defined not just as a classroom. The minister said it could be a lab, it could be a gym, it can be a library, for example, a shared learning space where they will have HEPA units deployed within those classes that are in schools that do not have mechanical ventilation just to really improve that air standard. All of this will help ensure that all schools in the province maximize the air quality within them. We are taking it a step further by further improving air quality in schools. And I think it's actually important to note what we have done to ensure that those kids that return in September in elementary and high schools are safe, Lecce said. Virtually every school has had their system assessed and recommissioned to optimize air flow. Ninety-two per cent of our schools are using filters that are being changed more frequently and higher grade filters, including MERV 13. 91 per cent of our schools are running their systems longer. 87 per cent have increased their fresh air intake and over 50,000 stand-alone HEPA filters are in our schools today. Lecce pointed out there are 50,000 HEPA units already within schools in Ontario that have been supported and funded by the Province. The \$1.6 billion dollars allocated last year and the \$1.6 billion dollars allocated again for this coming school year, in addition to the 20,000 units just announced. We do have confidence that those HEPA units will be deployed, they will further improve air ventilation within those schools. The objective, the minister reiterates, is to keep schools safe and restore the full benefits of the school system. This means supporting a student's entire well being. Dr. Kieran Moore, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health, said he is elated that they are going back to school this September. It's great news for our kids. It will be back with their classmates where they can get back to activities like music and theater and sport and develop those friendships that can last a lifetime. This is crucially important to their mental, physical and social well-being. Dr. Moore pointed out it's also important to do so cautiously and carefully. He said schools are safest where they maintain high rates of community immunity, high testing, good case and contact management and high immunization rates. So it is our duty for our schools to remain safe by getting immunized. This means also that students grade one to 12 will be required to wear a mask while indoors. Our goal is to have a safe reopening of our schools that lasts the entire academic year, wearing a mask is a proven way to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and when combined with other public health measures, such as screening and hand hygiene, enhance cleaning and distancing. Support healthy and safe school environments. Rest assured that we will regularly review the need for these measures and we will recommend modifying requirements as soon as it is safe to do so, a decision that will be made collaboratively and based on the best evidence between local school boards and their local public health agencies. He said having measures in place means that kids get back to class, go on field trips and socially interact with their friends with confidence. These measures will help ensure that we have a safe, safe and sustained reopening of our schools in the fall. Dr. Moore said these measures worked during the last school year, and an ever increasing level of community immunity is only going to increase the strength of these measures. I am confident, as well as my colleagues are confident, in the plan for reopening our schools and our cautious approach to reopening the province. Vaccination numbers are encouraging, too. Roughly 68% of those 12 and over have received their first dose, and just over 50% have received their second dose. We're on track for a high level of immunity, Lecce pointed out. Lecce added that funding has been increased to school boards, for things like rapid testing and access to more nurses. The quicker response time from tests will reduce anxiety among families and students and keep kids in class, Lecce said. As well, the province is focusing on the learning gaps that developed during the pandemic, providing greater access to tutoring for reading and math at the young grades. In learning recovery, the government announced \$85 million back in May specifically focused on early reading interventions from kindergarten to Grade 3, expansion of math, teacher led math supports and

math tutoring utilizing TVO and TFO in English and French, great partners in education, as well as expanding investments for at risk communities black, indigenous and racialized students as well. Those resources are being front loaded for the school boards, which has been acknowledged both by the boards, school board associations and others. These measures have drawn praise from the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO). They said these measures meet some of RNAO's long-standing recommendations to Premier Ford. "The measures are essential to minimize the impact of a fourth wave of COVID-19 as Ontario opens school doors to students and staff," said RNAO CEO Dr. Doris Grinspun.