

Stacey Wan - Planning for Return to School – 9 July 2020

I am a mother to a six year old and a nine year old, as well as a full-time working mother. I am writing to express my disappointment with OCDSB's plan for a hybrid return to school in September. This plan ignores the educational, social and emotional needs of children as well as the needs of parents to financially provide for their children. Furthermore, this plan doesn't seem to be based on any evidence or science.

Children have been isolated for months at their homes, without education, friends or extra-curricular activities. The virtual "learning" that occurred between March and June of this year was woefully inadequate. One hour google meets per week and a couple of worksheets loaded to a website is not an education. My daughter who was in grade four received zero instruction the entire time, no one-on-one meetings and barely any group meetings. The OCDSB had no standardization as expectations differed between schools, within schools and even among teachers at the same grade level. As a result, teaching fell to parents, most of whom were working full-time jobs. Parents made do as it was an emergency situation. However, we have always known that school would start in September so it is shocking that planning is just starting now. Parents are beyond stressed to think that we will need to manage this situation indefinitely.

A number of experts, including those from the SickKids Hospital, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the American Pediatric Society, have recommended the full-time return to school in the fall given the social, emotional, cognitive and developmental importance of schools on children, not to mention physical safety needed by some kids. Other jurisdictions in Canada and abroad have allowed schools to re-open with minimal spread of the virus if done properly. I would hope that OCDSB is looking into the experiences of these jurisdictions which have found that kids do not spread the disease widely and very rarely experience negative health effects. As well, Ottawa has had declining cases and currently has less than fifty active diagnosed cases. Is the goal to have zero cases before kids return to school--what is the threshold?

The current plan does not seem to be based on any scientific evidence. If kids are with a teacher Monday and Tuesday and then another group of kids on Thursday and Friday, would the teacher not become a vector for transmitting between the two groups? As well, most parents will be looking for formal or informal care arrangements for the three days their kids are not at school. This increases the number of people who could be exposed to the virus (including vulnerable grandparents) and makes it more difficult to contact trace.

Given that COVID-19 could be with us for years, is OCDSB planning on having kids attend school part-time for the next few years or decades? Yes, COVID-19 is a risk but this needs to be balanced with the mental, physical and financial needs of children and their families, not to mention the fundamental rights of children to receive an education.