



# Schools, Austerity & Privatization in the Pandemic Era

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## Executive Summary

When the coronavirus arrived in Ontario in the winter of 2020, the province's K-12 education system was already in a state of profound turmoil. Soon after its election in June 2018, the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party led by Premier Doug Ford, made known its intention to impose sweeping forms of fiscal austerity across the public sector and pursue opportunities for privatization. These priorities were applied to K-12 education in the subsequent provincial budget, with measures released in March 2019 including class size increases for Grades 4 through 12, the elimination of a \$235 million Special Education fund and mandatory e-learning for secondary students. The government subsequently signalled that Full Day Kindergarten might be rolled back. The class size increases alone, scheduled to be phased in over three years, were projected to eliminate ten thousand teaching positions, while greatly reducing the course offerings of schools. Despite the PC Government's insistence that class sizes didn't really matter, private schools launched advertising campaigns emphasizing their low student to teacher ratios.

The announcement of the cuts coincided with the beginning of collective bargaining for Ontario's over two hundred thousand teachers and support staff, affiliated with five unions and employed in the province's nearly five thousand elementary and secondary schools within the Anglophone public, Anglophone Catholic, French public and Catholic school systems. Amid campaigns that successfully merged public support with collective bargaining, culminating in rotating strikes over December 2019 to March 2020, the Special Education fund and Full Day Kindergarten were protected, class size increases were mostly though not entirely rolled back, and e-learning was reduced from four to two courses with opt out provisions added. Then the pandemic came, and the coalitions that were successfully resisting the Ford Government's cuts to education largely unraveled amid the urgencies and disruptions of the public health emergency. In the drastically changed landscape from March 2020 to the end of the school year, educators and

families strived to make do as best as possible with emergency remote learning at a time of profound societal disruption.

This report examines what occurred in Ontario's education system in the successive two and a half school years, during which time the pandemic raged across the world. The report is divided into three main sections: **Section 1** assesses the government's funding of health and safety measures in schools during the pandemic, untangling the ambiguities that arose during the 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years over the respective financial contributions of the Federal and Provincial Government. Overall, the most significant contribution came from the Federal Government, despite K-12 education being a provincial responsibility. Funding was used to make structural improvements to ventilation in some schools, but not to the scale or degree often claimed by the Provincial Government, particularly in the context of a long-term repair backlog that reached \$16.8 billion in the 2020-21 school year. Reliance was placed on portable classroom HEPA filters and masking, and the Provincial Government resisted acknowledging the full extent that the coronavirus (especially later variants) was transmissible by air. Meanwhile more costly expenditures on staffing, particularly to reduce class sizes for physical distancing and to operate parallel virtual schools, remained insufficient, uneven across the province and fleeting, being largely rolled back by the start of the 2021-22 school year. Within this context, educators, the teachers' federations and concerned public responded with a range of approaches including legal challenges, protests and in a few cases, work refusals at schools during pervasive outbreaks. The Ford Government responded by publicly attacking its critics, whether they be doctors, scientists, union leaders or educators.

In **Section 2**, this report considers the profound restructuring of teachers' work that has occurred during the pandemic. During the initial 'emergency remote learning' phase from March to June 2020, many students struggled with the disruptions caused by shifting to remote learning, and the ensuing lack of many necessary in-school supports. Academic learning was strained, but more profoundly affected was student mental health, and



often, by extension, that of their parents. Teachers within this context grappled with both adapting their pedagogy wholesale to work within a remote learning format, and providing the supports that students needed, amid both top-down directives from the Provincial Government made without consultation, on issues including weekly minutes of synchronous instruction and final grades, and the many new issues for which no guidance was offered and teachers largely relied on the support of their colleagues to improvise.

The nature of teachers' work continued to be transformed during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, with the implementation of measures intended to reduce the risk of contagion, including cohorting, various sanitary measures, and quad/octomesters. These measures required a major reworking of teaching practices to accommodate longer classes, the delay of prep time for months at a time, and the imperative of covering content to prepare students for EQAO standardized tests while spending more time on health and safety measures. Hybrid/fractured learning, in which a teacher is responsible for instructing students both in-person and online at the same time, became pervasive in intermediate and secondary grades across the province, and in some boards even in at the primary and junior level, with the expiration of temporary funding for extra teachers in 2021-22. The hybrid approach has profoundly intensified teachers' work and general stress, while shortchanging both groups of students due to the teachers' divided attention. It is widely opposed by teachers' federations as an unfeasible, unsustainable and pedagogically unsound model. Similarly, parents have witnessed how it degrades teaching and learning. Nevertheless, many educators fear that the cost savings it offers amid the entrenchment of e-learning, mean that it may outlast the pandemic. Among teachers, many of the measures addressed here have had a particularly heavy effect on the newest educators. These include the disruption of regular access to professional development and informal mentoring by more experienced colleagues, and the role of new and occasional teachers in accommodating rapid expansions and contractions of school board staffing depending on shifts in funding, resulting in precarious employment. It also coincides

with concurrent Ford Government policies not directly related to the pandemic, including the replacement of Regulation 274, which provided a transparent qualifications and seniority-based hiring system with one where administrators again have more power and discretion.

**Section 3** explores how the Ford Government's policies during the pandemic have accelerated the privatization agenda in education. The expansion of e-learning, as a result of the pandemic, as well as the government's directive that high school students must take some courses online in order to graduate, and a trend towards the development of comprehensive online course packs for all grade levels, coincided with the provincial directive that administrative responsibility for e-learning be centralized from school districts to public broadcasters TVO and its French-language counterpart, TFO. This measure has opened up a broad scope for potential privatization, including the contracting out of the design and delivery of some courses, and the mandate given by the Ford Government for TVO/TFO to commercialize and market these courses outside Ontario. Cash payments of hundreds of dollars made by the Provincial Government to the parents of K-12 students during periods of remote learning in the 2020-21 school year under the rationale of subsidizing family expenses in purchasing computers, had the immediate effect of diverting \$1.8 billion from school funding. It may also have helped subsidize private schooling options, which have proliferated during the pandemic among families that can afford them. In the long term, these payments may serve to prepare for public consent for a future more direct form of school vouchers. Finally, while the digitization of education, including the structuring of the schooling experience through the medium of computers, and "platformization" via learning management systems including Google Classroom and Brightspace, has been developing for the past several years, this trend was inexorably accelerated during the remote learning periods of the pandemic. It appears to be entrenched even during subsequent periods of in-person learning. As this hardware and software is nearly exclusively provided by for-profit ed tech firms, including some of the most powerful corporations in the world, the result has been a profound



advance in the corporatization of education. However, as with many of the policies and practices discussed in this report, this trajectory is neither natural nor inevitable, but the result of particular political decisions and priorities. It is possible to imagine and create alternative policies that prioritize the public good over private profit, and that rather than undermining teacher professionalism and intensifying their work, can renew the profession and public education as a whole, as it confronts the challenges of the third decade of the 21st Century.

# Introduction

This report attempts to help us understand how K-12 education in Ontario underwent a profound transformation during the coronavirus pandemic, both as a direct result of the impact of the disease, and due to the policies and priorities of the Progressive Conservative (PC) Government of Premier Doug Ford during this same period. Key events are recounted here that affected K-12 education from the emergency closing of schools in March 2020, to the decline of the Omicron variant-fuelled fourth wave in March 2022, when this report was finalized. The author has attempted to provide some analysis of the significance of these events, including why they occurred within the particular social, political and economic context of Ontario in the early 2020s, their potential long-term implications for education, how they compared to events elsewhere, and how things could have been managed differently. Within the broad scope of understanding how K-12 education in Ontario was affected by the coronavirus pandemic during the tenure of the Ford Government, this report focuses on its implications for teaching and teachers' work. By understanding how it affected the daily experience of elementary and secondary educators in the province's Anglophone public, Anglophone Catholic, and Francophone public and Catholic boards, we can then also see its implications for the students they serve, their parents and the broader public.

These experiences in Ontario must be understood within a broader context. Though the impact of the pandemic varied over time across Canada, as did the policy responses of provincial and territorial governments —which ranged from consultative to openly antagonistic towards teachers and their organizations, educators everywhere experienced sustained disruptions to how they work. The outcomes included the intensification of their workload, and a heavy burden on their mental health and wellbeing (CTF 2022). In nearly all jurisdictions, including Ontario, these challenges intersected with political tendencies predating the pandemic that have undermined public education, including the imposing of fiscal austerity and forms of privatization —together often referred to as the neoliberalization of education, for its diminishment of the public sphere and the common good, and the elevation of profit-

making and competition at all costs. Beyond Canada, we can see variations around the world of these same dynamics affecting educators, the schools they work in, and the teaching profession as a whole (Thompson 2021).

## The Context

When the coronavirus arrived in Ontario in the winter of 2020, the province's education system was already immersed in a period of turmoil and upheaval. Upon their election as a majority government in June 2018, the PCs led by Premier Ford swiftly turned vague campaign promises of “saving four cents on the dollar” into a clear agenda for public sector austerity in the province, twinned with the pursuit of opportunities for privatization. A ‘line by line audit’ was commissioned by the Ford Government from management consulting firm Ernst and Young, on the province's finances under the outgoing Liberals, to help build the case for deep cuts to public services and the outsourcing of some programs. The general public was not convinced, particularly in a period of overall economic growth. Nevertheless, the PCs announced a series of major cuts to K-12 education in March 2019 as part of the provincial budget. These included raising average class sizes from Grades 4 through 12 over the next three years, projected to eliminate a thousand elementary and nine thousand secondary teaching positions (FAO 2019), the elimination of a \$235 million fund for hiring Special Education teachers and support staff, and instituting a graduation requirement that high school students complete at least four courses online. In addition, the PCs subsequently signalled that the province's recently implemented system of Full Day Kindergarten could be considerably scaled back, and the cancellation of the province's carbon tax eliminated a \$500 million revenue stream directed towards a long-term school repair backlog that reached \$16.8 billion in the 2020-21 school year (Tranjan et al 2022).

The announcement of these cuts coincided with the start of negotiations for the renewal of the collective agreements of Ontario's over two hundred thousand K-12 teachers and support staff affiliated with the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), the Elementary



Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). During subsequent collective bargaining amid widespread grassroots activism against the cuts by educators, parents and students, and strikes from December 2019 through early March 2020 amid a pitched battle over public opinion, the planned class size increases were mostly, though not entirely, rolled back, and the Special Education fund and Full Day Kindergarten were protected. Mandatory e-learning was also scaled back to two credits from four, and opt out provisions were introduced, but the Ford Government subsequently announced its centralization from local school boards to the public broadcasters TVO and TFO, raising widespread concern that privatization was planned. However, the province-wide movement of educators and parents that had formed over the previous year alongside the momentum of collective bargaining, united under the banners of 'no cuts to education', 'class size matters' and 'cuts hurt kids', was thrown into disarray by the arrival of the coronavirus and the ensuing public health emergency, which shut down schools and disrupted everyday life in March 2020. This is the context where this report begins.

## Overview

Section 1 of this report addresses the related issues of funding provided to school boards and health and safety measures during the pandemic. Both have been the subject of considerable scrutiny, as the Ford Government has strived to persuade Ontario citizens that all reasonable measures have been taken to ensure Ontario's schools are safe, while publicly assailing scientists, doctors, union leaders and activists who have said otherwise. This section seeks to explain how much money was actually spent in schools, the sources of funding from Provincial and Federal Governments and school districts reserves, and how it was used to address health and safety measures. The latter issue intersects with disputes over school ventilation and air quality—a critical issue given airborne

transmission of the coronavirus, and the implications of school staff taking direct action by exercising the right to refuse unsafe work.

Section 2 focuses on the restructuring of teachers' work during the pandemic and its long-term implications. The period of frantic improvisation, top-down directives and adaptation by educators, parents and students during the initial "Emergency Remote Learning" phase from March 2020 to June 2020 when all of the province's schools first closed upon the arrival of the pandemic is assessed, by considering its impact on student wellbeing, and the implications of student wellbeing for teachers. Continuing into the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, the paper examines the effects of various structural changes to the organization of schooling intended to reduce contagion while minimizing expenditures on new staff, including cohorts and quad/octomesters, new health and safety routines, and hybrid/fractured learning. Consideration is given to the particular impacts of these changes on new teachers.

Section 3 considers how the pandemic has accelerated preexisting trends towards privatization in K-12 education in Ontario, resembling broader trends in the global neoliberalization of education. This includes the particular form by which e-learning may act as a 'vector' for the privatization of education through the Ford Government's imposition of mandatory online courses and their centralization under TVO/TFO. Meanwhile the cash payments made by the Provincial Government to the parents of K-12 students under the rationale of assisting with the expenses of remote learning, represented both a deprivation of funding from the public system and a potential stimulus for private providers of education. The ascendance of "big tech" amid the restructuring of learning for both remote and in-person classes, around hardware (computer tablets and laptops), and software (learning management systems including Google Classroom and Brightspace), has considerably advanced the corporatization of education. These products are almost exclusively provided by for-profit ed tech firms, including some of the most powerful companies in the early 21st Century. Within this context, the expanding role of



tech presents a stark political choice between privatization, driven by profit-maximizing operations that could lead to the “Uberization” of teaching and learning, versus the mobilization of tech for the public good.

## Methodology

This project emerges out of an intersection of multiple roles that the author has carried. It expands on key issues that he studied in his doctoral dissertation on the implications of contemporary education policy for teachers’ professional autonomy, with cross border case studies in Ontario, New York and Mexico. In *Public Education, Neoliberalism, and Teachers* (Bocking 2020a), the author argues that a primary way to understand the effects of the ongoing neoliberalization of education has been its tendency to de-professionalize and deskill educators within a context of aligning public schooling with competitive market structures. As a secondary occasional teacher with the Toronto District School Board since 2008 and the vice president and chief negotiator of OSSTF/FEESO’s Toronto Occasional Teachers’ Bargaining Unit up until fall 2021, the author was actively involved in resisting the cuts imposed by the Ford Government and is familiar with the implications of policies at the school board level and as they affected individual educators. As someone who is personally concerned with the fate of public education, the author does not claim to be unbiased when assessing the many typically politically driven policies that have shaped teaching and learning in Ontario over the past two years. Nevertheless, this research initiative strives to adhere to the principles of rigorous, critical and honest scholarship.

The limitations of this study include its focus specifically on teachers’ work. It does not directly address implications for other workers, from custodians to child/youth workers to clerical staff, among many others in the K-12 education system. While the experiences of students and parents is discussed, it is primarily in relation to the context of how policies affect teachers’ work, and by using secondary sources rather than the

author’s own interviews. Limits of time and the length of this report have also meant a sacrifice of depth in understanding the context of particular school districts or broader ranges of opinions, to ensure a province-wide breadth that encompasses all four public education systems: English public, English Catholic, Francophone public and Francophone Catholic, at the elementary and secondary levels.

The research for this project included an analysis of Provincial Government policy documents, legislation and public statements, press coverage of K-12 education issues and reports by organizations including the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association, People for Education, the Ontario Science Table, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the teachers’ federations. The study also draws on the rapidly growing scholarly literature on the experience of K-12 education during the pandemic, including many studies conducted within Ontario. Finally, this report is enhanced by semi-structured interviews conducted with the provincial and local leaders and classroom educators affiliated with the four teachers’ federations, as well as some former government policy advisors and academics. While completing this research project, funded by a Mitacs Accelerate grant and the Ontario Teachers’ Federation (OTF), the author has benefited from the support and guidance of Lindy Amato of OTF and Professor Sue Winton of the Faculty of Education at York University. All errors and omissions in this report are the responsibility of the author.



# 1

## Funding, Health and Safety During the Pandemic

### Overview of key points:

**1. Finance:** The Ontario Provincial Government strenuously avoided deviating from its pre-pandemic trajectory of imposing fiscal austerity on K-12 public education. New provincial funding was modest. The vast majority of emergency pandemic funding flowed from the Federal Government or from the reserves of school districts. The single largest effect of limited new funding was the inability of school districts to reduce the size of most elementary classes, and a reliance on cohorting to do so in secondary classes.

**2. Health & Safety:** While scientific research was initially unclear and is still unfolding, over the course of the pandemic as research was conducted and variants emerged, evidence of school transmission has become increasingly strong. The risk of school transmission was consistently minimized by the Provincial Government that, while defending against criticism of the allocation of insufficient resources, maintained the basic claim that schools were safe. Relatedly, up until May 2021, amid the peak of the third wave, the Ford Government resisted presenting clear quantitative benchmarks for reopening schools. Claims on investments made in asymptomatic testing also appeared to be inaccurate. Confronted by school outbreaks, the Ministry of Labour did not support workers' foremost tool to ensure safety at work: the right to refuse unsafe work. However, work refusals helped raise public awareness of pandemic outbreaks in schools and thereby fortified the push for policy interventions.

**3. Political:** The Provincial Government, with Minister Lecce as the primary spokesperson on education issues, consistently prioritized framing and delivery of key messaging to the general public over key stakeholders responsible for implementing policies at the school level, including teachers and administrators. The Government's practice of consistently minimizing opportunities for meaningful dialogue with federations and unions, while developing major policies impacting their members, can be explained as a perpetuation of the government's ideological anti-union orientation, amid general hostility to political critics and opponents. Grassroots activism of educators, parents and allies likely helped win some improvements, in moments when the government perceived political vulnerability.



## Paths Not Taken: School Reopening Plans, Class Sizes and Education Funding

On January 21, 2021, the *Toronto Star* published an investigative report, compiled through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, detailing the initial concept of Ontario's Ministry of Education in the summer of 2020 for a comprehensive, well-funded plan to confront the pandemic as the province's K-12 schools reopened in September. Recognizing the particular challenge that school-aged children were less likely to show symptoms from COVID-19, it mandated frequent asymptomatic "surveillance testing" on a large scale for students and staff alike, across the province; with a considerable investment in expanding laboratory capacity. School districts would also receive a considerable increase in funding to ensure elementary and secondary classes were capped at 15 students, recommended by epidemiologists as the optimal number to enable adequate physical distancing of two meters, while considering the cost of additional teachers and staff, and space limitations (Mendleson 2021). This plan was not implemented by the Provincial Government.

Scientists, medical experts and school board chairs interviewed by journalist Rachel Mendleson in January 2021 lauded the plan, arguing it could have prevented or reduced infections which led to school closures over the fall of 2020. While the shutdown of schools province-wide for weeks and then months over the winter and spring of 2021 would not likely have been completely avoidable, given the role of community spread of the pandemic, perhaps earlier reopening measures could have been more feasible with these additional investments, and more students, staff, and their families would have been spared from the consequences of infection and illness, had these more rigorous but costly measures been implemented. According to University of Toronto epidemiologist Ashleigh Tuite, "It's like we had these branch points and we picked the wrong path to take." Instead, Ontario received "plan lite", in the words of Halton District School Board Chair Andrea Grebenc (Mendleson 2021).

By July 2020, the first wave of the pandemic had largely subsided in Ontario. Premier Doug Ford and his government were riding high in the polls, having fully recovered from the considerable drop in public support during the rotating teachers' strikes from December 2019 to March 2020. Despite the tragic loss of over 2,000 patients and residents in nursing and long-term care homes during the first wave, the public largely approved of Ford's handling of the pandemic and the serious stance that he took, particularly in contrast to President Trump south of the border, from whom Ford, who had previously voiced support, now distanced himself. A positive shift in media coverage of Ford was perceptible by mid-May, as the first wave began to recede. On May 15, 2020, Ford released a video of himself baking a cheery cheesecake in his home kitchen while engaging in amiable banter. "We are all in this together" was printed prominently on his t-shirt. The cake recipe was universally lauded by journalists, in what was arguably one of the most acclaimed acts of his political career. Writing in mid-July 2020, prominent political commentator Steve Paikin assessed the revival of Ford's political fortunes, "He went from a failing, disruption-for-disruption's-sake novice to someone who rose to the occasion... Just look at any poll. The public is impressed with Ford's volte-face." (Paikin & McGrath 2020).

Behind the scenes, over the summer of 2020, as public attention turned from the first wave to preparations for a return to in-person learning in September, the Provincial Government abandoned its initial comprehensive, well-funded plan for one considerably scaled back, and ultimately largely reliant on the Federal Government, and school boards self-funding. Despite Ford's repeated insistence that his government was following the advice of "the best medical minds", its official back-to-school plan presented on July 30, 2020, addressed school-site safety protocols and the provision of PPE, but largely avoided measures to reduce class sizes -the very measures recommended by the Toronto Hospital for SickKids in its own advisory report, as well as by Toronto Public Health, as being crucial for physical distancing to reduce the risk of infection in the classroom (Ogilvie & Mendleson 2020; Alphonso & Stone 2020). A \$30 million fund, sufficient to hire 300 new teachers,



was created for the entire province (Rushowy 2020d). This was to the dismay of school boards, including both public and Catholic boards in Toronto. In consultation with the local teachers' federations, they planned to hire large numbers of new teachers to reduce elementary class sizes to between 15 and 20 students, and prepared models of secondary school timetables involving a combination of students alternating time in-person and learning from home, thereby enabling the "cohorting" of secondary students in groups of 15. The two boards required additional funding of \$20 and \$70-90 million respectively from the Provincial Government to enact these plans to reduce class sizes and make the public health guideline of two meter physical distancing feasible (Rushowy 2020a).<sup>1</sup> Despite a public petition for smaller class sizes that had garnered over 180,000 signatures and the endorsement of Ontario's three opposition parties, these proposals, and those of other urban boards including Ottawa-Carleton, were rejected by the Provincial Government. The school boards were required to create a new structure for the school day three weeks before students returned to class. The public explanation from the Ministry of Education sidestepped acknowledging its denial of the requests for additional funding to hire more teachers and focused instead on how the board's plans to significantly reduce class sizes, particularly in Grades 4-8, would result in students having slightly less than the 50 percent of in-person school hours mandated by the government (Rushowy 2020a). The Education Minister's spokesperson accused the teachers' unions of not "adapting to the new realities in our classrooms," (Rushowy 2020a), and insinuated that unlike the school boards and unions, the Ford Government cared about the wellbeing of students.

In the face of growing public criticism over its return-to-school plan, including widespread grassroots social media campaigns by education activists, in mid-August the Ontario Government announced a new \$50 million fund to improve school ventilation, and situated it within a reframing of its pandemic

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1 The TDSB estimated that to reduce all elementary classes to 15 students without shortening in-person class time by scheduling all teacher prep time at the end of the day would cost approximately \$190 million (Rushowy 2020a).

funding, touting total investments at the start of the 2020-2021 school year of \$1.3 billion. However less than a third of this money was ever actually provided by the province, with \$381 million coming from the Federal Government and \$496 million in "unlocked funds" from permitting school districts to draw more money from their reserve funds for day-to-day operations. Assuming a board had reserves, it was typically used for capital projects including building new schools or renovating existing ones (Wallace 2021). While appearing significant in absolute terms, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) found the resulting additional 3,834 teachers, 1,117 custodians, 286 special education staff, 178 mental health support staff and 1,291 other administrators and support staff, amounted to an average of 1.5 staff members or fewer than one teacher, when spread across Ontario's 4 444 public and Catholic schools serving nearly two million students (Tranjan 2021). Of the \$655 million of this money spent by school boards on hiring more staff, nearly half (\$304 million) came from the usage of the board's own reserves, and \$119 million from the Federal Government (Tranjan 2021). These increases in staffing followed the reduction of teaching positions due to average high school class sizes rising from 22:1 to 23:1 in the 2019-2020 school year. The Halton District School Board hired 54 additional teachers, amounting to 0.5 more per school, while the Toronto District School Board hired 456 more (alongside other staff), averaging fewer than one new teacher per school, costing \$48.6 million, of which \$34.4 million were funded by the board itself. In the Peel District School Board with over 200 schools, 147 new teachers were hired (Wallace 2021). This additional funding was not continued into the 2021-22 school year; the Ministry of Education directed local districts to staff their schools on a pre-pandemic basis (Ministry of Education 2021).

The increased funding over the 2020-2021 school year did not enable school districts to ensure class caps of 15 students. Many districts responded creatively, with additional teachers dispatched to elementary schools located in neighbourhoods with higher transmission rates, which tended to be lower income and in large urban areas, with a higher proportion of newcomers and racialized residents (Rushowy 2020a). Yet,



to the dismay of parents and teachers, many elementary classes, especially in Grades 4 to 8, remained comparable in size to prior to the pandemic (Southwest Elementary Teacher 1). Some classrooms went unused, their teachers reassigned to teach fully online (Ireton 2020). Recognizing the increased risk of transmission in high schools, class sizes were limited to 15, but through quadmester or octomester structures, whereby students were placed in cohorts that on alternating day schedules would take a reduced number of courses, which would be completed on a faster timeline, with some daily time scheduled for asynchronous learning at home. While a creative approach to reducing the crowding of students and staff in schools in the face of insufficient funding, the new more intensive timetables placed considerable strain on many students, as well as their teachers, as Section two will discuss.

Understanding the state of Ontario's K-12 education funding, and how much of it actually reaches schools, has become a complex endeavour. Education funding is highly politicized, due to the broad unpopularity of cuts, and conversely, the general esteem held by the public for funding increases towards important well-used services. In the midst of the pandemic and in the aftermath of the unpopular cuts announced in March 2019, the Ford Government, with both an ideological instinct towards cutting the public sector, and a strong desire to be reelected, has strived to have it both ways. As an expert practitioner in public relations, Education Minister Stephen Lecce is singularly well-placed in his role. The 2020-21 increase in K-12 funding was quietly scaled back for the 2021-22 school year, with spending over the first three financial quarters down \$1.088 billion (or 5.6 percent less) than the year prior (FAO 2022). This was partly due to K-12 education spending being \$212 million below budget during the first three quarters of the 2021-22 financial year, largely due to the use of less than half of the Capital Grants available for school repairs and construction (FAO 2022). Yet in February 2022, the Ministry of Education announced that "Ontario Launches Largest Tutoring Support Program" for the 2022-23 school year, as part of the "highest investment in public education in Ontario's history" (the same claim can be made nearly every year by discounting

inflation). The core Grants for Student Needs (GSN) funding for school boards would increase by \$683.9 million or 2.7 percent over 2021-22, to a total of \$26.1 billion (Ontario 2022). While an impressive looking sum, Canada's inflation rate was 5.1 percent over the 12 months ending in January 2022 (Statistics Canada 2022). A very high degree of skepticism is required when receiving funding announcements from the Ford Government at face value. Educators and parents could be forgiven for feeling like they are being gaslighted by a government that insists Ontario's schools are better resourced than ever before, while class sizes see no improvement and student access remains inadequate to educational assistants, child/youth workers, psychologists, social workers and many other vital professionals.

## The Political Sphere: Message Control

These developments coincided with a return to open confrontation between the Provincial Government and the teachers' federations. Teachers' organizations in all provinces and territories in Canada experienced challenges to varying degrees in ensuring the voices of their membership were heard by their respective governments amid school reopening in the fall of 2020. However, the tension was most acute in Ontario and Alberta due to particularly ideological Conservative Governments whose education policies pre-pandemic had centered on forms of defunding the public system, and publicly attacking their principal antagonists in doing so: the teachers' unions (Osmond-Johnson & Fuhrmann 2021). In Toronto, plans reached in August 2020 between the public school board and the elementary and secondary teachers' federations which would have preserved daily access to preparation time by dismissing schools earlier, was vetoed by the Ministry of Education, requiring a reorganization of staffing and the creation of new school timetables just weeks before the start of school. Ministry spokespeople publicly accused the federations of putting their members' interests before students (Rushowy 2020a). This discourse was characteristic of the re-escalation of tensions between the government and education unions, following a brief hiatus at the start of pandemic and the end



of the strikes in March 2020. According to the federations, a clear pattern had emerged of being blocked from providing substantive input on return-to-school issues through the Ministry's formal consultative processes (Provincial Union Officials 1, 2 and 3). Union concerns about health and safety, particularly a call for smaller class sizes to ensure physical distancing, as well as regarding ventilation of buildings and safe student transportation, were either ignored or summarily dismissed. Following an unsuccessful meeting with the Minister of Labour, the federations filed formal legal challenges with the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) a week before the scheduled start of the school year, asserting that the Ministry of Education, as the employer, had provided inadequate safety measures. Ford denounced the challenges to the press, extolling his government's spending on health and safety in schools and accusing the federations of obstructionism in refusing their "cooperation" amid such generosity. He claimed, "We've worked with every community organization, every labour organization, every single group in the entire country of all political stripe and 99.9 per cent of everyone is getting along except for this one group, the teachers' unions. Why?" (Baldwin 2020). Days later, in another press conference, Ford dismissed criticism from the president of OSSTF of inadequate health and safety measures in the government's school reopening plan, by describing him as "some guy with a degree in English literature who thinks he's a doctor." (CityNews 2020). A month later, the challenge was dismissed by the OLRB, which concurred with the government that the case was outside the labour board's jurisdiction (Rushowy 2020b, 2020c).

In their interviews with Ontario secondary teachers from mid-March through April 2020 on their experiences working through the early stage of the pandemic, Cooper et al (2021) found widespread frustration with the government's "poor policy communication". During the initial period, when Ontario's entire education system shifted online and there was considerable uncertainty on the length of the pandemic, teachers described the government's decision-making process as completely top-down, with decisions announced with no notice or no consultation, centered around buzzword oriented "policy by

press conferences" (Cooper et al 2021). Examples included: the announcement that student grades for the remainder of the school year would not go down, generating numerous questions from parents and students, which teachers, learning at the same moment, initially struggled to answer; and shifts in the number of required weekly contact hours and the proportion that would-be synchronous versus asynchronous. Among the over a thousand elementary and secondary principals who completed the annual surveys in 2021 and 2022 by the research group People for Education on conditions in Ontario schools, frustration was similarly widespread regarding the lack of consultation from the Ministry of Education. Like teachers, principals learned about important policy announcements from the government at the same time as the general public, and accordingly, have not felt supported in being able to effectively implement these policies (Kotasinska & Liu Hopson 2021; Hodgson-Bautista, Liu Hopson & Pearson 2022). It appeared that controlling the public narrative of the government's handling of K-12 education was the top priority.

## The Debate over School Transmission

One of the most contentious issues in education policy was the extent to which transmission of COVID-19 occurred within schools among students and staff, determining critical questions on the extent of the measures required to make schools safer, and if or when individual classrooms, schools, districts or the entire system needed to move online. Besides consistently touting new investments in schools during the pandemic (and typically not clarifying that this spending came from the Federal Government or the school districts themselves), the key message of Education Minister Lecce,<sup>2</sup> was that schools were safe, and transmission was occurring within the community. His message was backed by Ford and frequently corroborated at press conferences by Ontario's first chief medical officer during the pandemic, David Williams. Lecce maintained this message after students returned to school following an extended closure

2 Before being elected MPP in 2018, Lecce was director of media relations for former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper and subsequently ran a public relations firm.



following the 2020-2021 winter break, due to an escalating second wave, and even into the rise of the third wave in the spring of 2021, when a growing number of health experts, educators and parents called for schools to again close. He frequently cited the harm both to students' mental wellbeing and their academic progress from prolonged periods of online remote learning (notwithstanding his own government's zealous pre-pandemic efforts to implement mandatory e-learning).<sup>3</sup> The negative impacts of school closures are discussed in further detail in the next section of this report.

A detailed analysis of provincial documents obtained through an FOI request by *Toronto Star* journalists and published on June 1, 2021, revealed that the government lacked the data to definitively back the claim that schools do not spread COVID-19. In the document, policy makers admitted they were unsure, even following briefings by scientists. A major reason was the lack of systematic large-scale, asymptomatic testing of students and staff at schools. Despite claims by Lecce in the fall of 2020 and again amid the second wave of the winter of 2021 that such testing was being rolled out, in practice it was only very slowly rolled out over February-March 2021 in some districts and not in others. Commenting for the article, the Director of Ontario's pandemic Science Table, observed that, though school outbreaks were usually effectively contained, they could occasionally be more "concerning" (Mendleson, et al 2021).

3 Less often stated publicly, were the broader economic impacts of the absence of in-person schooling. A study by economists at the University of British Columbia estimated that, varying by sector and industry, between 6.7 and 23.1% of Canadian workers had school-aged children. While noting some could work from home while caring for their children (usually with less efficiency), they calculated an "extended" contribution of K-12 education to Canada's Gross Domestic Product of 11.5% (far beyond its direct contribution of 2.5% in the form of funding and wages earned directly in the education sector) demonstrating how critical K-12 education is to the larger economy in enabling parents to work. Even if half of all parents could work from home, the contribution to GDP would be 7% (Green et al 2021: 268). The authors note these are large factors, comparable to fluctuations in employment levels and GDP in Canada during rise and falls of pandemic waves.

School outbreaks are defined by the Ontario Government as two or more cases with an epidemiological link, occurring within a 14-day period at the same site. A study by academics at Simon Fraser University and Imperial College London, drawing on data from schools in Quebec and British Columbia from September to October 2020 during the emergence of the second wave, used mathematical modelling to explain a large variability of risk of transmission in schools: most exposures by aerosol are low risk, but some have wide-ranging transmission. They concluded that schools are at risk as sites for transmission, and that the practice of relying on testing of students and staff with symptoms is inadequate to prevent outbreaks. Widespread asymptomatic testing was required (Tupper & Colijn 2021). As research accumulated and new variants of the coronavirus arrived during Ontario's second and third wave, concern grew among health experts of the risk of school transmission, particularly among older teenagers, pointing to a false dichotomy between recognition of community transmission but lack of recognition of this occurring in schools (Wong 2021). As Garlen (2021: 29) explains, "Among the debates about school safety, the persistent logic of separation was illustrated in the differentiation between 'community spread' of the virus and 'school spread,' as if schools exist apart from the communities they serve." A modelling study of childcare and primary school settings by academics at the University of Waterloo and the University of Guelph published in March 2021, when the 50 percent more contagious Alpha Variant (Duong 2021) had eclipsed the original coronavirus, projected that transmission within classrooms could be reduced by smaller class sizes, alternating cohorts and placing siblings in the same group (Phillips, et al 2021).

The risk of school transmission was further understood by the fall of 2021. By this time, over 85 percent of people over the age of 12 in Ontario had been fully vaccinated, and the Delta variant which was 60 percent more transmissible than the Alpha variant (Duong 2021), had superseded the latter. Three weeks into the new school year, as vaccines had not yet been approved for children under the age of 12, children 11 and under comprised 20 percent of COVID-19 cases (Fox 2021a). By mid-October, 774 schools across the province had reported cases, and 10 schools



had been closed to deal with outbreaks. Most transmission occurred within the broader community. Yet with the largest congregations of unvaccinated people, elementary schools had become the leading site for outbreaks, at a rate three times higher than other workplaces. (Teotonio & Wallace 2021). In these circumstances, where provincially organized asymptomatic testing in schooling remained very limited, parent activists and educators organized themselves to procure thousands of tests themselves for local schools from non-profit providers (Mojtehdzadeh 2021b, 2021c). Within days of these efforts making headlines, the Provincial Government intervened to block them, and subsequently announced an expansion of rapid testing at schools in high-risk areas (Rushowy 2021c).

## School Ventilation

Alongside reducing class sizes to increase physical distancing, another high-profile health and safety issue, subject to considerable contention particularly as scientific research emerged that COVID-19 was primarily spread as an aerosol (rather than by touching surfaces), was the ventilation of school buildings. As mentioned above, in August 2020, the Ford Government touted new investments to support upgrading school ventilation systems in advance of the return to school. Funding commitments, such as these to improve physical infrastructure, were frequently echoed by the government over the subsequent school year and into 2021-22. Less often noted was the context in which, as of September 2021, Ontario schools had a backlog of \$16.8 billion in repairs, \$3.7 billion of which was in Toronto schools, where 99 schools, many built in the early 20th Century, lacked mechanical ventilation systems (Swyers & King 2021). This is also the case for the many classrooms held in modular “portables”. In many other classrooms, the windows cannot be opened.

In response to assertions from Education Minister Lecce in September 2021 that the Provincial Government had implemented 2,000 structural ventilation improvements (Swyers & King 2021), a teacher leader in Toronto charged, “The ministry

I think flat out misrepresented the work that they were doing on aerosol transmission and mitigation of the COVID risk and aerosol transmission in our schools. And the employer [school district] was really only able to maneuver within the parameters that were provided to them by ministerial funding.” (GTA Secondary Teacher 1). According to local teacher leaders in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), central and southwest Ontario, the initial spending on improving ventilation in their districts went towards more frequent changing of filters and increased monitoring of overall building systems. Testing of classroom air exchange rates was very limited, due to the time and specialized equipment required; school district officials relied on estimates, which local federation leaders criticized as overly optimistic. Despite what could be understood by “structural ventilation improvements”, there were very few actual changes to the physical structure of ventilation systems. “There were no air handlers that were upgraded to a larger capacity, there was no added ductwork, none of the other things that someone might imagine would go along with ventilation upgrade. There were no new vents installed in classrooms.” (Central Secondary Teacher 2). In addition to a shortfall of funding, time was also lacking to make more far-reaching improvements: “What we immediately saw on a board by board level is the money wasn’t there to make significant renovations to ventilation systems, but even if the money were there this doesn’t happen overnight... there simply aren’t the contractors or the knowhow to target that money.” (Central Secondary Teacher 2). An OECTA local leader in eastern Ontario noted that, according to a school district superintendent, there were three companies in the region capable of making significant infrastructure upgrades, and four large school districts competing for their services (Eastern Catholic Teacher). By the fall of 2021, some new HVAC systems were being installed in porto-pack classrooms in the board:

*So that’s what improvement we had but that’s in year three of the pandemic that that’s finally now in play and, to be honest, it wasn’t all in play when we went back to school in September. So when that wasn’t in play, they bought a whole bunch of HEPA fan filters and put them in classrooms. And then, certainly the message that we got as teachers, [was*



*to] have them turned on, but there was no idea how long they were supposed to be on for, at what level they were supposed to be at. So in many cases our understanding [was] they should be on full for them to actually have any impact in a classroom space, but once you have that in play, that's so loud, you can't actually teach. So then, the result is that teachers turn them down or turn them off and now have removed any layer of protection that might have actually been in play or not, and so again, it feels like too little, too late and the solutions that were provided end up being more band aid solutions because we didn't have the time to put the infrastructure in place or I don't even think the organizations to support that level of work. (Eastern Catholic Teacher)*

By the fall of 2021, the Ministry of Education announced it had distributed 70,000 portable HEPA ventilation units for districts to place in classrooms. Many interviewees noted their frustration that these improvements were not available earlier during the 2020-21 school year, and that they could have reduced the need for school closures. Overall, a GTA teacher leader described this as “An absolute and total failure on the part of the Provincial Government to wade into the real substantive questions of how we would guarantee the best possible public health and occupational health and safety.”

Over the fall of 2020, the Provincial Government receded somewhat to the background in terms of education pandemic policy, especially in the aftermath of the dismissal by the OLRB of the provincial federation's legal challenge on safe working conditions. Debates and conflicts over health and safety moved increasingly to the local level, where collaboration varied between school districts and the local teachers' federations. Amid rising transmission, school safety was vaulted back into the headlines as teachers and education workers took direct action and engaged in rank-and-file-led work refusals under the provincial Occupational Health and Safety Act. In Toronto, staff engaged in a work refusal at Glamorgan Junior Public School in Scarborough for two days in early November, after nine colleagues and three students tested positive (Lavery

2020). In the final weeks prior to the winter break, schools continued to shift to an online delivery model amid rising case counts. At Toronto's Thorncliffe Park Public School and possibly elsewhere, this was initiated by a staff work refusal. Early on in the first wave of the pandemic, Public Health Ontario (2020) identified spatial inequities: across the province, outbreaks and deaths were higher in more racially diverse neighbourhoods. These were usually home to a large proportion of newcomers to Canada, many employed in precarious jobs which placed them at greater risk of contracting the coronavirus. It is no coincidence that both of the schools mentioned in the above examples are situated in neighbourhoods where they serve children predominantly from low-income, newcomer families.<sup>4</sup> During the winter break, dozens of teacher activists and allies organized a car caravan which drove around Queen's Park in downtown Toronto, to demand large scale asymptomatic testing and greater government supports for students in racialized and lower income neighbourhoods (Michael 2021).

## Rising Cases, Rising Political Tension

As the second wave of the pandemic rose over January 2021 and the Provincial Government implemented a partial lock down and “stay at home order” for over two weeks, nearly all schools across the province returned to remote learning following the end of the winter break. Teachers scrambled again to adapt their classes, quickly arranging resource sharing and contacting parents over the holidays. As one Toronto elementary teacher attested in the *Toronto Star*, “We've just been left on our own... If it wasn't for the solidarity and the fellowship and the community of my colleagues, I don't know where I'd be.” (Yousif & Javed 2020). An anonymous ThoughtExchange survey, completed by thousands of staff in the Toronto District School Board, revealed educators overwhelmingly felt uninformed of

4 A third school-wide work refusal by support staff affiliated with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) over January 25-26, 2021 occurred at an elementary school in Toronto serving students with high special needs, when all but 500 students in the district were learning from home during the peak of the second wave of the pandemic (Patton 2021).





the safety status of their schools and, relatedly, unsafe at work. Attention returned to the Provincial Government, as students gradually returned to school in physical classrooms, beginning with districts with lower case counts in eastern and central Ontario in late January, with GTA districts waiting until February 16. Speaking at a press conference on February 1 flanked by Ontario's chief medical officer David Williams, Education Minister Lecce emphasized his government's allocation of health funding, downplaying that it was provided by the Federal Government and that it mostly reimbursed expenditures already made by school districts for PPE and ventilation filters. A new program of 50,000 asymptomatic rapid tests a week across the province was also promised (Ontario 2021a).<sup>5</sup> Williams declined to provide a specific threshold of cases below which schools were deemed safe to open or conversely, shift online. According to journalist Bruce Arthur (2021a), this perpetuated Williams' reputation for vagueness, an attribute that complemented the Ford Government's penchant for apparently ad hoc shifts in pandemic policy. Lecce deflected questions on why the government had not followed public health advice to lower elementary class sizes to 15 students.

More troubling, as public criticism of the Ford Government's handling of the pandemic mounted during the second wave, was a series of reprisals against four prominent doctors who expressed their concerns. These included smears by a right-wing columnist for the *Toronto Sun*, whose editorial staff is ideologically close to the Conservative Party, leading to death threats against at least one doctor, and the termination of another by his hospital, which feared capital funding from the Provincial Government was in jeopardy (Arthur 2021b). Dr. David Fisman, who sat on the Provincial Government's Science Advisory Table, was singled out for having also done consulting work for ETFO, through which he advised the union on the implications of the coronavirus for schools. Ford's office accused Fisman of bias and of concealing this association. The

5 An analysis by the Toronto Star later found that between February and the re-closure of schools in April, a maximum of 8,213 tests were conducted per week, less than 16 percent of the target (Toronto Star 2021).

union asserted that Fisman's involvement had been indicated in its public submissions to the government on pandemic issues (Freeman 2021a).<sup>6</sup> Bruce Arthur (2021b) questioned whether these events pointed to a return of the meaner, more aggressive persona Doug Ford was known for prior to the pandemic, also noting the longstanding relationships of former PC Party leaders with Ontario's for-profit long-term care industry. In Ontario, Conservative Government support for vaccination and face mask mandates helped limit the political polarization of public health measures, with most opposition pushed to the fringes, unlike in the US and Alberta. Yet the deeply partisan tendencies of the PC Party remained, which responded to lagging popular support by lashing out at critics in civil society.

## The Right to Refuse Unsafe Work

Within weeks of the reopening of schools between late January and mid-February 2021, case counts began to rise again in Ontario amid the arrival of new variants of concern, signalling the start of the third wave of the pandemic. Educators and school support staff increasingly initiated work refusals, usually as individuals who became aware of an outbreak in their area of the school, and occasionally coordinating together.<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Labour inspectors dispatched to investigate did not have the authority to close schools; this power is held by local public health authorities. Relatedly, from March 2020 to August 2021, none of the 44 work refusals filed in Ontario's K-12 and post-secondary education sector were upheld by the Ministry of Labour. This context was mirrored across the province's workforce at large: only eight of 482 refusals had been upheld (Mojtehedzadeh 2021). An FOI request filed by journalist Sara Mojtehedzadeh revealed confidential guidelines

6 Fisman later resigned from the province's Science Advisory Table in August 2021, alleging political interference from the government (Arthur 2021d).

7 Personal notes. Under Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act, work refusals must be filed by individual workers, hampering its usage in support of collectively felt concerns, according to labour activists, but workers can informally coordinate their individual refusals.



provided to inspectors, which set a very high bar for establishing that sufficiently dangerous conditions existed in the workplace due to the coronavirus to warrant a closure or shutdown of operations. It also appeared to be based on earlier assumptions that the coronavirus was primarily spread through droplets, rather than scientific research on newer more contagious variants that identified its potential for spread as an aerosol. The likely result of this conservative approach was to discourage workers from taking direct action and exercising their right to refuse unsafe work which, given its immediate disruption to normal operations, could compel a more rapid response than complaints through formal committees or the grievance process. However, despite the limitations imposed by the Ministry of Labour, in various cases the inspections triggered by work refusals succeeded in addressing immediate problems, such as inadequate ventilation at schools affected by outbreaks. This was particularly useful in the apparent absence of large-scale asymptomatic testing, despite Minister Lecce's assertion as schools reopened in February 2021, that it would be occurring widely.

More broadly, the extensive coverage by the media of work refusals generated awareness about the pandemic conditions in schools, highlighting to the public the inadequacies of the government's response. They may have even contributed to the government reversing course and closing schools as cases skyrocketed across nearly all of Ontario in the face of the third wave. By late March 2021, case counts in schools surpassed the previous peak prior to the winter break in December 2020, and delays in the availability of vaccines for education workers led to increasing calls from educators and parents for schools to return to emergency remote learning, particularly in hotspots including Peel Region (Newport 2021). Education unions called first on the Provincial Government and, when it was clear it had deferred its authority, to local public health units, to close schools for the rest of the week after the Easter weekend in early April, and then for a week after the postponed and rescheduled March break, owing to rising cases and the likelihood of greater

spread over holidays.<sup>8</sup> Lecce continued to emphasize that schools were safe. Yet the Superior-Greenstone school district in northern Ontario was the first board to announce an imminent closure (Rushowy 2021a). On April 5, with some of the highest cases in the province, Peel Public Health ordered the closure of schools throughout the district, followed by a handful of smaller boards. York Region and Toronto Public Health refused to follow neighbouring Peel's lead, with the latter closing only 20 elementary and secondary schools in Toronto with large outbreaks, in one of which a work refusal had been filed. Direct actions by Toronto secondary teachers on the morning of April 6 may have contributed to a reappraisal. A half-dozen teachers at Western Technical and Commercial School, and a handful more at a few other schools, declined to enter the building and stood by the sidewalk. Their classes were dismissed. Amid outbreaks in their schools, they explained to the OSSTF health and safety officer who arrived, that they had concerns based on their overcrowded classrooms, windows that did not open, and insufficient mechanical ventilation. The *Occupational Health and Safety Act* limits the right of teachers to refuse unsafe work to situations "where the life, health or safety of a pupil is in imminent jeopardy". Once a teacher enters the school, they are considered to be present and responsible for the supervision of their students. As a result, staff could not simply walk out without being in dereliction of their duties. Although this group of teachers constituted a small minority of the staff of their schools that day, as word spread among their colleagues, it became evident that the number of work refusals would be much larger the following day, with staff at other schools vowing over social media not to enter their buildings amid the rapidly

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8 Legal analysis provided at this time to local OSSTF leaders highlighted the challenge of an institutional environment in which the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health, local health unit, and school district all have regulatory roles relating to health and safety policy, creating a situation where each institution points to the other as being responsible for decision-making (Personal Notes).



rising case counts.<sup>9</sup> By early afternoon, Toronto Public Health had reversed itself, ordering all Toronto schools closed to in-person learning through to the end of the rescheduled spring break on April 18.

In May 2021, the government adopted a more stringent and transparent reopening process for the province, with clear criteria for the relaxation of restrictions for the first time, according to some commentators (Arthur 2021c). The third wave school closure was extended to the end of the school year, despite reports that cases had dropped sufficiently to safely reopen by the beginning of June, which would have given students one more month of in-person before the summer (Rushowy 2021b). Parents and education unions argued that the Ford Government prioritized relaxing restrictions on retail and restaurants over schools. The title of a *Toronto Star* editorial exhorted, “C’mon, Doug Ford — schools should open before patios” (Toronto Star 2021). In mid-July 2021, investigative reporters with the *Toronto Star* revealed a correlation between the most active lobbyists at the Queen’s Park legislature, the vast majority of whom were affiliated with or had worked for the Conservative Party, and the Ford Government granting exemptions to public health restrictions to the benefit of their big business clients (Warnica & Bailey 2021).

A final twist in the Ford Government’s pandemic health and safety policy for schools occurred in the face of the Omicron variant-fuelled fourth wave, amid case counts unprecedented to that point in the pandemic, due to this even more contagious, but fortunately less harmful variant. As schools prepared to reopen on January 17, 2022, following two weeks of remote learning after the winter break, the government announced that individual cases of the coronavirus in schools would no longer be reported to parents or the public. Instead, schools

9 In the author’s role as an officer of the local union representing secondary occasional teachers at the TDSB, he spoke that morning with two Long Term Occasional teachers at this school who wanted to join the work refusal the following day, connecting them to their peers outside, who reassured them that they could do so without fear of reprisal, considering their more precarious employment status.

would report outbreaks to their local public health units after at least 30 percent of all staff and students were absent. Chief Medical Officer Kieran Moore defended the policy as a needed adjustment, as the more dangerous Delta variant was eclipsed by the faster-spreading Omicron, requiring a focusing of PCR tests and contact tracing in healthcare settings. Education Minister Lecce insisted schools were safe, but in response to criticism, announced the installation of a further 3,000 HEPA filters in classrooms and the availability of higher quality N95 masks for staff, but not students. School staff observed that while indoor dining was prohibited in restaurants, students frequently congregated while eating lunch with their masks off. The scaling back of school outbreak reporting drew widespread criticism from parents, teachers’ unions and school districts. Many of the latter opted to voluntarily continue disclosing all school cases, particularly in the face of grassroots efforts by parents to coordinate self-reporting and contact tracing through local WhatsApp groups with hundreds or even thousands of members (Ranger 2022; Ziafati 2022; Cohen 2022).

The initial Omicron wave was fortunately short-lived in Ontario, receding by mid-February 2022, yet its duration was enough to further fray an already tenuous social environment. In January, while many epidemiologists, parents and educators expressed concerns about a return to in-person learning while the Omicron variant was ascendant, some parent groups gained prominence for their demand that students return to classrooms irrespective of case counts, dismissing the risk of school transmission in the face of concern for the adverse impact of extended periods of remote learning for students. More than a few educators expressed frustration that these voices, including some high-profile doctors and municipal leaders, were silent during their strikes in late 2019 and early 2020 that were in large part against the Ford Government’s planned mandatory e-learning policy. However, other parents directed their frustration with more home-based e-learning towards demanding better health and



safety measures from the government to prevent future school closures (Open Letter 2022; Kwong 2022).<sup>10</sup>

## Analysis

The political context is crucial for understanding the Ford Government's approach to funding health and safety measures in schools during the pandemic. Like in Alberta which is governed by the United Conservative Party of Jason Kenney, a key priority of Ford prior to the pandemic was the imposition of public sector austerity. This was principally manifested in K-12 education through increases to class sizes and plans for mandatory e-learning, which were linked by critics to a privatization agenda. While the Provincial Government did increase education funding during the pandemic, it typically appeared to be in reaction to widespread public concern over health and safety in schools. Indicating an abiding focus on political messaging with a steady eye on the next election, policies were rolled out by the Ministry of Education, often prioritizing media coverage while overlooking prior consultation or subsequent dialogue with key actors in the education sector, including teachers' federations and school districts, which were readily demonized by government officials if they expressed criticism. However, during periods of rising public scrutiny and falling opinion ratings, especially during the second and third waves, policymaking on key issues such as school health and safety measures and the structure of the school day (further discussed in the next section) were frequently downloaded to school districts, and decisions around closing schools to local health units. Districts usually followed each other's policies.

<sup>10</sup> In February 2022, a so-called "Freedom Convoy" promoted by its organizers as a movement of truck drivers upset by mandatory vaccination requirements for crossing the US border, blocked international crossings for days and occupied downtown Ottawa for weeks while harassing local residents. Fuelled by millions of dollars in donations from across Canada and the US, where copy-cat actions unfolded, the movement's far-right leaders demanded the elimination of all anti-pandemic public health measures and the downfall of the Federal Liberal Government.

This period also demonstrated the limits of formal labour relations structures for addressing health and safety issues at both provincial and district levels, particularly in the face of a government hostile to the education unions. Grassroots action, both by parent activists undertaken through online petitions with tens of thousands of signatories, and by teachers and education workers engaging in work refusals (though the latter were difficult and relatively rare), sometimes had major impacts in terms of generating extensive media coverage, effectively refuting the government's message that everything was fine, perhaps even contributing to health units closing unsafe schools. School board leaders and trustees were also at times influential when they publicly voiced their concerns with the Provincial Government's policies.

Finally, the unevenness of health contexts across the province and even within regions like the GTA or the north during the pandemic, which also revealed itself as having varying case counts in schools, often mapped onto existing social inequities. These differences were profoundly felt by students and their teachers as they struggled with vast changes to ways of learning and educating during the pandemic, as the next section will show.

# 2

## The Restructuring of Teachers' Work

### Overview of key points:

1. **The “emergency remote learning/teaching” phase of March-June 2020** was a period of confusion and uncertainty: teachers worked to adapt pedagogy to the online platforms which became the central medium for their work, as public health guidance and scientific research on the coronavirus evolved. Teachers strived to exercise their professional judgment to the best of their ability, amid changing provincially mandated policies around synchronous and asynchronous teaching and the evaluation of student work. Teachers quickly found a focus in dealing with the mental health consequences of the pandemic for students, both related to the direct consequences of the loss of in-person schooling as well as from the larger societal implications.

2. **Teachers' work was fundamentally transformed over the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years** -Through periods of mostly in-person and all-online learning, new quad- and octomester timetables, required for cohorting to reduce student contacts, led to widely felt, adverse consequences, among them the loss of much of the functionality of preparation time and the overall intensification of work. Teachers grappled with how to address learning gaps for many students due to previous extended periods online. The stress and tendency towards burnout, experienced by many teachers, intensified in fall 2021 in school districts that replaced temporary virtual schools with hybrid learning, where a teacher is responsible for students in-person and online at the same time. Through the decision-making of the Provincial Government and many school districts, the capacity of teachers for professional judgment was consistently overlooked due to the top-down in implementation of policy. Moreover, teacher input on solutions for improved teaching and learning conditions was ignored.

3. **Exacerbation of stress and overwork for precarious teachers** – New teachers, especially those working as Long Term Occasionals (LTOs), were even more likely to lose access to preparation time due to changes in school district timetables like quad- or octomesters. The Provincial Government's new Math Proficiency Test added an unnecessary burden to teacher certification. The rescinding of Regulation 274 hiring policies during the pandemic increased the precarity of occasional teachers pursuing LTOs and permanent positions, while placing more discretionary power over hiring in the hands of school administrators. The introduction in January 2021 of a Temporary Teaching Certificate for teacher candidates who had not yet completed their preparation programs, while attempting to address challenges with unfilled short-term jobs, led to much confusion and stress related to certification.



## Remembering the “Before Times”

*I was standing in the main office of a high school in eastern Toronto on Thursday, March 12, 2020, at the end of the day as students were streaming out of the building, when over the radio, the Provincial Government decreed that elementary and secondary schools would remain closed for two weeks after March Break due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moments later, I walked into a cramped, unventilated office, shook hands, closed the door, and sat down at a table elbow to elbow with four vice principals and teachers, all of us unmasked, chatting about the most immediate consequence of the news: plenty of students would surely take off tomorrow, a Friday, and get a head start on the break. There was initially no imagining what would happen next, particularly within the path dependent institutional realm of schooling. But for most people, comprehension of the scale of the pandemic and the crisis it incurred came quickly. (Personal notes)*

## Emergency Remote Learning Phase (March-June 2020)

The subsequent period from mid-March to June 2020, during which all schools were closed in Ontario and in nearly all jurisdictions across North America, has been widely defined by policy makers and academics as “emergency remote learning” or “emergency remote teaching” (Cooper et al 2021; Trust & Whalen 2021).<sup>11</sup> The term served to distinguish it from established forms of virtual and distance learning, emphasizing the ad-hoc roll out of synchronous and asynchronous online pedagogical systems, with which few teachers or students had significant prior experience. It also suggests the stress and anxiety experienced by both groups as the pandemic unfolded and many traditional processes of schooling underwent a transformation (Cooper et al 2021; Gallagher-Mackay et al 2021; OPSBA 2021).

<sup>11</sup> It was officially referred to by the Ontario government as the “Learn at Home Initiative” (Ontario 2020).

Considerable research has been conducted on the implications of this period for both the academic work and the emotional wellbeing of students in Ontario, other provinces and around the world. Some of the most insightful studies have assessed the uneven impacts of the closure of in-person schools, particularly how these closures have compounded existing class and racial inequalities, as well as for newcomer English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with special needs. Many of these reports have made use of extensive interviews with teachers and frontline support staff, among the best placed to understand these dynamics. Interviews with Ontario secondary teachers from March to April 2020 by Cooper et al (2021), and a large-scale online survey from April to May 2020 of teachers Canada-wide by Trudel et al (2021), on initial experiences working in the pandemic, identified prominent concerns with equity issues. These included a lack of needed technology: both laptops and reliable high speed internet suitable for video conferencing programs like Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Google Meet, varying degrees of parental support, senior students getting jobs with long hours to supplement the family income due to parent layoffs, unmet needs of students with exceptionalities, the challenges of multiple siblings and a lack of study space and regular access to computers, and how some courses were easier to adapt to a meaningful online format than others, affecting student engagement. An Ontario-based qualitative survey from March to June 2020 by Timmons et al (2021) which interviewed K-2 teachers and parents, identified equity issues and challenges related to access to devices, the availability of parents to guide young children in using computers and participating in activities, children missing peers, and diverging opinions on the optimal usage of synchronous vs. asynchronous teaching strategies. Raby et al (2021) identified variations in children’s experiences, with some having greater access to parental assistance in doing schoolwork than others due to duo or single parents and their work schedules, more or less access to a quiet learning space at home and missing greater access to teacher support for schoolwork.



The recognition of a need for attention to student mental health was universal, with Gadermann et al (2021) and Browne et al (2021) identifying it as a crisis, particularly affecting children, as well as many of their parents. This was compounded by having limited access to friends and physical exercise, the latter again an example of inequity between students with access to backyards versus peers in high rise apartments (Mitra et al 2021). Symptoms of the decline of student mental health included drops in academic achievement and rising absence rates, and was most likely to be observed in students experiencing systemic social marginalization (Gallagher-Mackay et al 2021; OPSBA 2021). Most teachers identified student wellbeing during closures as their primary concern, prioritizing it over academic work, in the formulation “Maslow before Bloom”, referencing anthropologist Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs and educator Bloom’s taxonomy of higher order thinking (Trudel et al 2021: 10). K-12 teaching has long been recognized as a profession rooted in care work and “emotional labour” (Vogt 2002), carrying strongly gendered connotations, particularly in the earlier grades as a feminized occupation (Griffin 1997). Teachers engaged in new and more intensive forms of care and emotional labour during the pandemic with little additional support or guidance from above, to connect with students remotely in times of uncertainty and stress, particularly for families who were at risk during the pandemic as workers in “essential” and “frontline” jobs (Poncela et al 2021). From intensive online interviews with Ontario teachers during March-June 2020, Barrett (2021a) identified how educators strived to overcome the limitations of the remote learning medium, which most were initially unfamiliar with, and the barriers and disincentives for student engagement, especially among the most marginalized. Teachers used pedagogy that prioritized student wellbeing through focusing on building a sense of belonging, trust and shared purpose in their classes through “high quality interaction” (Barrett (2021a).

In this context, teachers strived to “make it work”. However, in an online survey of over 800 elementary and secondary teachers in Ontario and follow-up intensive interviews with 50 conducted between May and June 2020, Barrett (2021b) found

widespread discontent and frustration. The generalized malaise was associated both with the new difficulties the online mode created for teachers’ work, and the perception of teachers that many of their students were struggling. Similarly, a large-scale survey of hundreds of American teachers during March to June 2020, found them self-reporting lower efficacy as teachers, irrespective of their years of experience or grade level, especially if they were only teaching virtually (Pressley & Ha 2021). In the words of one veteran elementary teacher who prioritized experiential learning, “It’s just not who I am. It’s not how I teach. I’m not comfortable with a lot of what it is and there’s no training. There’s nobody to help you, you’re sitting in your own house trying to figure it out.” (GTA Elementary Teacher 3).

Secondary teachers in Ontario interviewed by Cooper et al (2021) in March-April 2020, found self-reported prior technological proficiency to be a major determinant in how teachers adapted to “emergency remote teaching” during the pandemic, with a strong correlation to their mental health. Similarly, Dolighan and Owen (2021), in an online survey of over a quarter of all teachers employed at a southern Ontario Catholic school board, found their perception of efficacy teaching online in March-June 2020 was linked to previous engagement in online learning themselves, through professional development or additional qualification courses or from using an online teaching platform. Dolighan and Owen did not find a correlation between reported technological efficacy and years of experience. The authors noted an overall context of higher stress levels for teachers amid the pandemic. According to a large-scale online survey by the Alberta Teachers’ Association of their membership (ATA 2020), and a national survey by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF 2020) of 13,770 educators, of whom 5,498 were educators in Ontario, teacher stress and frustration over increasing workload from new and changing tasks including time adapting to technology and converting existing lessons to an online format, led to burnout and some considering leaving the profession during the “emergency remote teaching” period. Similar findings were reached by Gallagher-Mackay et al (2021), the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association in a survey of administrators (OPSBA 2021), and



Farhadi and Winton (2021), interviewing Albertan teachers. A survey in November and December of 2020 by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) on mental health in which over five thousand members participated, found that 79 percent of women and 71 percent of men had a burnout score above 75 (in reference to a scale from 0 to 100), due to "high work demands, fast work pace, little predictability, role conflicts, and fear," (ETFO 2021). The average burnout score in a similar survey taken by education workers in 2019 was 54 (ETFO 2021). Members engaged in hybrid instruction reported the most adverse effects on their mental health.

Tellingly, considering the fraught context of education politics in Ontario discussed earlier, the CTF survey found a majority of Ontario's educators experienced a high degree of frustration due to both "continual shifts in their work environment" and "public perceptions of their job", and that 93.5 percent said they were not supported or barely supported by the Ministry of Education, while 70 percent felt unsupported by their school board. ETFO's member survey found that just 6 percent of its participants, "felt the government was doing its best to protect them and others at work." (ETFO 2021). Conversely, the CTF's survey found 79 percent felt supported by their administrators and 93 percent by their colleagues (CTF 2020).

## The Restructuring of School and the Transformation of Teachers' Work: 2020-21 and 2021-22 School Years

While the fall of 2020 saw most teachers returning to their physical classrooms, with interruptions corresponding with the peak of subsequent waves of the pandemic in Ontario, a profound transformation of the nature of teachers' work unfolded over the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. Key factors were the restructuring of daily and semester timetables with implications for the ability of teachers to effectively use preparation time, new health and safety duties in the classroom, an increase in emotional labour to address the greater mental health challenges experienced by students,

and the implementation of hybrid (also known as fractured) learning. Hybrid learning, most prevalent at the intermediate and secondary levels, but also in several boards at the primary and junior levels, considerably intensifies teachers' work by requiring them to simultaneously engage with the group of students physically present in the classroom, as well as individual students viewing the class via video on a computer. The dual mode of instruction inevitably constrains the pedagogical repertoire teachers typically use to draw on their professional judgement to most effectively educate students. While many of these features are specific to the health and safety contingencies of a pandemic, other aspects may amount to lasting changes in the years to come. Through this experience, we have seen considerable challenges to the ability of teachers to exercise their professional judgement and autonomy (Bocking 2020a), as well as an overall intensification of teachers' work. These developments can be associated with the tendency of the neoliberalization of education to degrade teachers' work and thereby their power both as individual, skilled workers and as a collective. In turn, with teachers being the primary actors within education, the undermining of their work portends the undermining of education as a public good.

While scientific research indicated that risks of coronavirus transmission increased for teenaged students, elementary schools also grappled with particular risks in the younger grades that had an impact on teaching and learning, and the wellbeing of students and staff. In the 2020-21 school year, the Provincial Government did not initially apply the mandate for wearing masks to students in Kindergarten to Grade 3. Masks were later made mandatory at all levels following pressure from the teachers' federations. Teenagers became eligible for vaccination over the summer of 2021, with the vast majority obtaining their second shot before returning to school in September. Vaccination for children aged five to twelve began months later, and as of the winter of 2022, fewer than half were fully vaccinated, as many parents remained cautious. Many elementary teachers struggled with the physical constraints of their classrooms and the number of students to maintain physical distancing, as cash-strapped boards hired limited





additional teachers, and could not take recourse to alternating time spent learning from home as was done with older students. As a result, the pandemic presented particular threats to the elementary classroom environment.

For elementary teachers, the drastic disruptions to their work which began with the 'emergency remote learning' phase that required them to adapt pedagogy reliant on in-person engagement, continued with their return to the classroom. Conventional modes of teaching from reading circles to rotational activity stations, and even outdoor experiential education that required intermediary transportation, were ruled out due to the need to maintain physical distancing and avoid handling common objects<sup>12</sup>. As a result, in many respects, decades of progress in pedagogy were rolled back and the essential medium of instruction reverted to students sitting in rows of desks with the teacher at the front of the room, though now a projector attached to a laptop often supplanted the blackboard and some older students had their own digital devices. As a Grade 3 teacher observed:

*They weren't sitting on the carpet having a teacher read with them. It's a very sterile environment. So I think that affected students, as well as teachers actually because I really even now, I miss having a carpet, I miss having groups of kids interacting across a table, instead of just like old school rows of students separated by as much distance as I can possibly give them. (GTA Elementary Teacher 1)*

While this form of learning left the needs of many secondary students unfulfilled, the implications were particularly difficult at the elementary level, and especially in the aftermath of months of isolated remote learning.

Nor did the pandemic's exacerbated effect on the mental health of students and their parents (and of course on teacher and support staff as well) end with the return to school buildings. Though parents no longer needed to manage their children's

12 The latter concern diminished by 2021-22 as scientific research on transmission of the coronavirus advanced.

learning at home and students could see their peers, the atmosphere of risk created by the pandemic persisted and deepened on the edge of each successive wave. Despite the political prominence of new but often temporary initiatives promoted by the Provincial Government to address student mental health, many teachers observed the persistence of the pre-existing paucity of dedicated staff. As a teacher at an urban elementary school explained:

*They have eight schools per social worker. If a social worker goes on leave they don't replace them all. ... if you ask me... that's got to do with funding. And they keep saying that they're going to help them with their mental health they're going to help the system, but you know one social worker cannot do eight schools. There are almost 700 children in my school. There are, I would say, a good hundred to 120 children who need to see the social worker. Wouldn't that be a full-time job for one social worker at one school? I would think so. (GTA Elementary Teacher 3)*

As noted earlier in relation to issues around education funding and health and safety, Ontario's teacher federations struggled to be heard by an openly hostile Provincial Government (Osmond-Johnson & Furhrmann 2021). In the context of the reopening of schools in the fall of 2020, and frequently thereafter in debates about modes of learning and the structure of the school day and semester, they were frequently demonized by Premier Ford and Education Minister Lecce in the press. While claiming the unions were unreasonable and obstructive, the Premier and Education Minister strove to construct false dichotomies between the interests of students and teachers, and between teachers and the union leaders that they elected. Relationships between local unions and school districts varied considerably across the province. This led to divergences in the degree to which teacher voice was heard and addressed in the creation of new school time tables and semester structures (such as quadesters and octomesters) intended to address health and safety issues raised by the pandemic, and which also carried considerable implications for how teachers conducted their



work.<sup>13</sup> These decisions, from which teacher input was largely ignored, included: creating periods of time between different groups occupying classrooms, during which they could be intensively cleaned (especially earlier in the pandemic before COVID-19's greater propensity for airborne diffusion versus from touching physical surfaces was understood): the splitting of classes, especially at the high school level, into "cohorts" which alternated on a weekly or biweekly basis from in-person to online forms of learning; and modes of instruction, including fully online and hybrid learning.

Affecting these decisions were variations between the extent that local school districts opted to use their new ability, granted by the Provincial Government, to dip into their own reserves to fund the hiring of additional teachers, usually on a temporary year-long basis. A local OECTA leader working at a school district in eastern Ontario noted it as a "rare occasion, they took our advice on this one," (Eastern Catholic Teacher) that her board hired a large number of new elementary and secondary teachers (a decision helped by a long-term trend of rising enrolment), deploying them mostly to staff new wholly virtual central elementary and secondary schools in the 2020-21 school year. The vast majority of existing teachers remained in their in-person classrooms, which now had slightly fewer students due to the departure of some to the virtual schools. The virtual schools continued in the 2021-22 school year at a smaller

13 In at least one high profile case, the provincial government overturned agreements made between a school district and local unions. Over the summer of 2020, the TDSB reached an agreement for a modified quadmester school day with OSSTF Toronto that preserved a standard amount of daily prep time. The agreement was publicly criticized by Minister Lecce as an example of teacher and union intransigence in the face of emergency circumstances and vetoed three weeks before the start of classes. While the schedule ensured a minimum amount of classroom time was maintained for students, a slightly higher amount above government guidelines was allocated for asynchronous work. The new arrangement was one generally seen across the province where prep time was compressed into alternating quadesters, rendering it much less useful on a daily basis, as teachers now alternated very heavy and light workloads (Personal Notes; Rushowy 2020a).

scale (as more students returned to in-person classrooms), with the school district fully covering the additional funding due to the loss of extra pandemic funding from the Provincial Government at the end of the 2020-21 school year. This decision ensured no hybrid classes were created. This experience was contrary to what was the predominant experience reported by interviewed teachers across the province, where in-person elementary classes did not become smaller, despite some students moving to the virtual school, because few or no new teachers were hired. At the Toronto District School Board, approximately a hundred temporary long term occasional (LTO) teachers were hired to run much of the central secondary virtual school in 2020-21. However, the central secondary virtual school was closed at the end of the school year, leading to the implementation of hybrid teaching in 2021-22, despite opposition from OSSTF Toronto and frequent protests by parent, student and educator activist groups.

A Francophone Catholic AEFO leader in southwestern Ontario described the daily timetable for high schools in his board, in which a cohort of students were kept together in a room all day long with the same teacher for a quadmester, as perhaps the worst timetable in the province. The model was imposed without any consultation with the federation. "Nothing regarding fairness or equity was taken into account with regards to staffing. The response from the board was, 'well that's just the way it is.' No, that's the way you chose for it to be." (Francophone Board Teacher) Whereas in other boards, high school students were sent home for lunch and a period of asynchronous learning during which teachers had some prep time, followed by a 75-minute remote video class, students at his rural board were kept in the same classroom all day. He believes this was done to save money on busing. He felt guilty that he could at least walk outside at lunch and eat in his car, while the students were required to remain in the room. From the start of the school year until the end of the quadmester in mid-November, he did not receive any prep time, doing all marking and lesson planning in the evening and on weekends.



Various versions of quad- and octomester timetables were implemented by school districts at the secondary level in 2020-21, as students were old enough to alternate attending school remotely from home and in-person in “bricks and mortar” schools. It was a strategy to have both smaller class sizes for greater physical distancing, without needing to hire a large number of new teachers, and to create “cohorts” of students, which would reduce the number of peers with whom they would share classrooms and, thereby, hopefully reduce the potential for spread of the coronavirus. To do this, high school students typically were enrolled in two courses at a time, rather than four under the normal semester system, ostensibly learning each at twice the speed under quadesters, or four times the speed in octomesters. An OSSTF teacher leader from central Ontario explained the impact of octomesters for teachers’ work and student learning in his board:

*So you take an entire course and you condense it into 22 days... Come home from school, grab a snack, start to work, eat some dinner, go back to work, and go to bed at 10pm, to get up and repeat the process all over again. It was prepping from brand new, because almost none of the lessons or materials that had been previously used in 97 day semesters were useful or applicable in 22 day octomesters. So the workload imposition was massive, there’s no other way to put it... we need a certain number of nights to mark, and when that number is 22, not 97, you have to look at the number of assessments that you can possibly grind through. It doesn’t matter how many you’d like to, there’s only so many nights, so many weekends to do the work. The reporting becomes absurd, because where you might give an early warning report in early October, you’re now giving it four days into an octomester. So you met students, yes you’ve been together all day long, there’s been some intensive contact, but there hasn’t been a chance to build rapport, to remediate, to set expectations, all those things that have been jammed into a four day timespan. And now there’s an early warning report coming out, there’s an official midterm grade coming out after 11 days together, and so the assessment, the reporting and the instructional practices*

*are all absurd in octomesters. The board I’m talking about moved to quadesters this year so now we’re into 45 day or so quadesters instead of 22-day octomesters. Some degree of improvement. ... I have two kids in high school and seeing the impact on the kids is absolutely massive as well. There’s no science that suggests trying to jam something into 22 days and 22 sleeps—we know so much about brain research and the impact of sleeping and reflection, rumination, refinement. None of that happens in 22 days. You’re just memorizing full speed, hoping to survive. [This] impacts every element of teaching, and for the students as well. (Central Secondary Teacher 2)*

A teacher leader from a southwestern Ontario board corroborated:

*Last year [in 2020-21] we were in a quadmester system where the teacher taught one course for the whole day for five days in a row, and then the following week, they would teach a different course. So it was a massive change for secondary teachers. Elementary teachers have the same kids all day, every day, nothing really strange about that. But if you’ve never done that before, to have 17 to 18-year-old students in university level chemistry class, to keep them engaged for a full day’s worth of learning where the content can be rather heavy, is a significant challenge. (Southwest Catholic Teacher 2)*

This teacher estimated the compression of covering subject matter at the secondary level had led to a 25% increase in workload due to adapting lesson plans and materials, and much faster turnaround time for reporting and evaluation (Southwest Catholic Teacher 2).

Perhaps even more difficult for secondary teachers across the province was the reduction or loss of daily prep time. Normally established within school timetables where a teacher is responsible for classes during three of the four daily 75-minute periods, quads and octomesters meant teachers alternated for up to ten weeks with little or no prep, spending



the entire day in front of students, with a subsequent period of equal length with only half the time spent with students. These arrangements preserved the total minutes of prep over the course of the school year<sup>14</sup>, while negating much of the functionality of this time. Theoretically, a teacher could use the long blocks of prep time in alternating quads or octomesters to carefully plan each class in the following quad or octomester, when they would have little or no prep. In reality, there are limits to the extent any course can be minutely planned, weeks ahead of time; and, of course, there is no mechanism whereby a teacher can preemptively or retroactively even out the marking of assignments, follow-up communications with parents and students, or meetings with Special Education teachers, guidance counsellors or youth workers, among the many tasks performed by teachers outside of direct classroom contact time. Additionally, while prep time is not to be mistaken as a rest break, it is typically a less intensive form of work, with the pace and tasks more under the control of the teacher, than when one is directly in front of and immediately responsible for a large group of students. In this way, prep time helps maintain a daily balance of heavier and lighter work.

A Special Education teacher who taught in the TDSB's secondary Virtual School during the 2020-21 school year, described how the imbalanced workload created by quadesters, in which most prep time is concentrated in alternating ten-week periods, intersected with the challenges of learning how to teach students with a high degree of special needs online:

*[F]or half of your year you were doing what I called hell quads. That meant you were teaching two and a half hours virtually, you had lunch and then you're teaching two and a half hours virtually. After that you had to get off and figure out what the hell you're going to do with all these kids the next day for five virtual hours of instruction. And the level of planning required... where I had to think about every activity that I did for the kid in my class who cannot type, for the kid in my class who cannot speak, for the kid in my class*

*who cannot read, for the kid in my class who cannot write, and we had to figure out how all of us are going to go on a journey that ends with understanding a concept, through our computers. The amount of planning required to do that and doing that virtually, so making sure all of your links work and you've got your worksheets set up, was incredibly labour intensive because we're also figuring out how to do all of these things with virtual tools we had not necessarily ever used before. So you're learning how to use Zoom on the fly while you're also figuring out pedagogically how you're going to deliver curriculum content. It was completely insane and, in my case, I did two back to back hell quads....what that genuinely meant for me was from September to the end of January, I never had a single day where I did not spend at least 10 hours a day working. And I mean if there was a weekend I spent 12 hours working. If it was the Christmas holiday, I gave myself Christmas Day off and then I went right back then I stayed 12 hours a day working. ... The other thing that that meant was for half of the school year I taught for two and a half hours a day. And then my day was over, and I just had yawning chasms of empty time that I didn't need anymore, because I didn't need to plan that much. So, in terms of actually being able to make it possible to do your job, the entire schedule of everything was just a gigantic hurdle. (GTA Secondary Teacher 2)*

Within this context, while affirming the importance of creating smaller class sizes by alternating groups of secondary students online and in-person, teachers expressed doubts on whether the stated goal of school districts, public health units and the Provincial Government of cohorting was actually effective, and if the quad and octomester were worth the problems they created. The local OSSTF president of the Trillium Lakelands District School Board referred to octomesters as "an unhappy attempt to support the narrative of cohorting.... which created a false sense of security in cohorts that simply do not exist." (Winter 2020). While most school districts structured timetables to try to prevent students from congregating during lunch, at the end of the day students would meet up; and particularly in rural

14 Except for some long term occasional teachers working multiple contracts over a school year, as is discussed below in this section.



areas, students sat next to each other on the bus for long rides home as in pre-pandemic times.<sup>15</sup>

In response to concerns of how the quad and octomester schedule affected teachers' work and student learning, at the start of the 2021-22 school year, many boards across the province implemented a new modified timetable at the secondary level, whereby students would alternate every two weeks in two courses, studying a total of four courses at a time, rather than focus on just two courses under the quad or octomester system. Under the new timetable, teachers had a very heavy week of teaching, with 2.5-hour classes in the morning and afternoon, followed by a light week in which they received their prep time and only taught one 2.5 hour class. Prep time was still unbalanced, but more functional. The model meant the time students were enrolled in a course was not as compressed as under the quad- or octomester system, though it still provoked frustration that the one week on, one week off for each subject disrupted the flow of learning, and difficulties in many subject areas of maintaining student focus 2.5 hours (Miller 2021). The announcement by the Provincial Government in mid-November 2021, supported by the chief medical officer, that high schools could revert to the conventional four periods a day semester system was greeted with relief by students and teachers alike (Rushowy & Teotonio 2021). While recognizing the pedagogical problems of modified semesters and quad/octomesters, the announcement also occurred at a moment when coronavirus case counts had declined considerably. The decision was not reversed despite the skyrocketing of cases associated with the fourth wave Omicron variant from December 2021 through February 2022, suggesting an official recognition that attempts to cohort high school students through modified timetables, were not worth the considerable problems they created.

In addition to the uneven redistribution of prep time under quad- and octomesters and the added burden of reinterpreting curriculum and reinventing pedagogy to fit intensified periods

15 Citing from Southwest Catholic Teacher 1; Central Secondary Teacher 2)

of learning and online instruction, secondary, and perhaps especially elementary teachers, in rural and urban areas across the province, identified a shortfall of occasional teachers (OTs) as a major contributor to a loss of prep time.<sup>16</sup> When a teacher absence was not filled by an OT, other teachers at the school, normally scheduled to have prep time were instead obliged to do an on-call to cover the class. Local collective agreements provide varying limits to the number of times an individual teacher can be asked to do on-calls. Two weeks prior to the shutdown of schools across the province in early April 2021 due to the third wave of the pandemic, the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board reported that nearly 50 percent of elementary teacher absences went unfilled (Loriggio 2021). Seldom are schools permitted to simply dismiss a class, even at the secondary level where students are in their late teens, but during the height of the Omicron variant fourth wave in late January 2022, schools were allowed to shift some teacherless classes online as a last resort, where presumably students would asynchronously complete posted work. A provincial elementary union leader explained the importance of regular access to prep time for the members of her union to prevent burnout exacerbated by a tendency among elementary teachers to strive to be a cooperative team player willing to self-sacrifice, at the expense of their own health and well-being:

*You need to be refreshed, be able to plan. You have a lot of stress, it's important that you take that [prep time] because, this is not going to go away. Because then you're doing it on your own time in the evening and the stress continues, so it was really sort of helping our members push back on that because, elementary teachers, you know tend to, we all want to get along, we want to work together. You want to support our colleagues, so I'll just do it, and then there's the burnout rate and then they're accessing our Long Term Disability, our benefit plans and that's the impact... the higher rates of dispensation of medication and depression. Of those things too, because that sort of saviour syndrome comes into play,*

16 Citing from GTA Elementary Teachers 2 & 3; Southwest Elementary Teacher 3; Southwest Catholic Teacher 1; Provincial Union Official 5.



*quite a bit with elementary and to let people know this is going to be long term. Self-care is going to be important, this is about self-care and self-preservation. You need to have it back you need to advocate for yourself, and that was something we had to do a lot of work around. (Provincial Union Official 5)*

As a result, campaigning in districts across the province for enforcement of regular access to prep time was a priority for elementary teachers and their unions.

Causes of the shortfall of occasional teachers include, on the one hand, a sharp increase in demand during the pandemic due to rising teacher absence rates, attributed both to contracting the coronavirus, as well as from stress-related causes. Meanwhile, a significant number of occasional teachers, particularly those who are older and retirees, reduced their work or stopped entirely, over concerns about working in different classrooms on a daily basis and thus being exposed to a much larger number of potentially ill students than an average teacher. Some subject areas including French, have also faced chronic shortages of qualified teachers. The Provincial Government responded by pushing an amendment to raise the maximum number of days that retired teachers could work during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years without affecting their pension, and by issuing temporary teaching certificates to student-teachers within the last year of their two-year degree program. The latter elicited concern from the federations over unqualified staff entering classrooms. The teachers' federations urged greater safety measures for occasional teachers (Loriggio 2021). Some school districts reached agreements whereby occasional teachers would be assigned to specific schools, also providing the benefit of greater stability and predictability of work. However, such measures were uncommon due to school district concerns this could lead to increased expenditures on occasional teachers.

For elementary teachers, the imperative of covering course content, particularly in the context of EQAO standardized tests in reading, writing and math, has been challenged by the necessity of implementing new health and safety protocols that take

considerable instructional time out of the school day<sup>17</sup>, creating new pressures to balance these priorities:

*Where at one time kids might go on their own to the bathroom now there's actual periods of time that they can go as a class. ... so like it could be, in the middle of math class, it could be during social studies, that is their time to go to use the bathroom facilities that way they're not mixing with other cohorts. They're cleaning desks at least twice a day. Sometimes it's teachers, sometimes it's students, sometimes it's custodians. So that takes time for protocols just putting on masks and taking off masks half the class eats lunch at one time. I don't know if you've heard about the checkerboard thing? For lunchtime every other kid takes off their masks to eat, while the other kids have their mask on while their neighbours are eating, to try to minimize the amount of time that all the kids have their masks off at the same time, so that takes time. At our board we actually are having some classes eat lunch during the instructional day and... during lunchtime they're actually just doing desktop activities. (Southwest Elementary Teacher 1)*

Responding to students who have experienced disruptions due to school closures and online learning during the pandemic has forced teachers to adjust their expectations of what to teach and how to teach. An elementary teacher says:

*We feel like we have to change our expectations of success, and like little things we need to see as victories. Whereas before it was not a big deal, but now if we can get Johnny to sit in his seat for the whole period that's a win. You know, but I mean basic things. Kids can't problem solve, interacting with each other, with other people. We're having kids come into FDK [Full Day Kindergarten] who have no concept of letters, no foundation, whereas before they had a little bit, but now starting at absolutely zero, nothing, so it can be a little bit depressing for teachers. We're having to figure out how to now assess because a lot of the assessments, I*

17 Citing: Southwest Elementary Teachers 1, 2 & 3; GTA Elementary Teachers 1 & 2; Southwest Catholic Teachers 1 & 2.



*mean standardized or not, they had benchmarks, but do we adjust those ourselves, are we to take our own professional judgment and figure out what constitutes a B now a level three? There is no guidance. The [Education] Ministry it's you know very... the silence is deafening like I don't know if they have a clue. (Southwest Elementary Teacher 2)*

Both elementary and secondary teachers widely expressed their concern that the long periods of online learning, especially from March to June 2020 and April to June 2021, left considerable learning gaps for many students unable to fully engage with the mode of online learning, but particularly those who were racialized, whose parents worked in precarious jobs, and/or who had special needs. These gaps would be reflective of these students' capacities in subsequent years.<sup>18</sup>

Changes to the structure of the school day which unbalanced the workload of teachers, as well as the broader adverse consequences of the pandemic for student learning and wellbeing, contributed to an overall intensification of teachers' work. Writing in Education International's 2021 Global Report on the Status of Teachers, Thompson (2021: 7-8) observes that while heavy workload has long been a concern within the teaching profession, intensification should be understood as the increasing difficulty and complexity of growing volumes of work, with implications for wellbeing and work-life balance. Intensification was experienced by many teachers through rising levels of stress. Commenting on the work required to adapt to the earlier "emergency remote teaching" period based on an online survey of over 2,000 Canadian teachers from April to May 2020, Trudel et al (2021) cited the "Job Demands-Resources" theoretical model of organizational psychologists, Bakker & Demerouti (2007, 2014). Bakker and Demerouti identify work stress arising from a mismatch between rising job demands defined as: "physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job which require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills" (Bakker & Demerouti 2007: 312) and physical, social, psychological

resources available to help one do their job. Unmanaged high stress during the pandemic tended to lead to teacher burnout. The disruption of regular access to prep time and an acceleration of teaching work coincided with a push to develop new pedagogies suitable for the longer period of instruction, or for new modes of online and hybrid instruction (OPSBA 2021; Barrett 2021b). Teachers surveyed by Trudel et al (2021) voiced a need to manage the pace at which new methods and technologies were introduced for teachers. When this was not respected, it contributed to burnout. There was also a need for school administrators to respect teachers' capacity for professional judgement and to avoid micro-managing while supporting teachers in setting boundaries and limits on after hours work for their own well-being. Thompson (2021) observed that, too often, support from central and local authorities for classroom teachers has been limited to messaging and sporadic professional development oriented around "positive psychology" that individualizes stress and separates its unpacking from an analysis of larger systemic factors. As one teacher in Toronto commented:

*I think teacher burnout is not being talked about enough... I'm worried about the repercussions. I think the quality of education is taking a hit this year, especially. And yeah [school] boards are trying to help out, but the way the boards help out is really corporate-style. It's like wellness emails and things, and it's like no one, no one is paying attention to this. No one is using this. (GTA Secondary Teacher 3)*

Effectively addressing the root causes of rising levels of stress and burnout means confronting the various ways in which teachers' work has been intensified during the pandemic. However, meaningful solutions require a greater degree of teacher voice in the decision-making of school districts, which has varied across Ontario depending on relations with local unions, while in the Provincial Government, which ultimately controls K-12 education finance, unfortunately lies the greatest resistance to genuine teacher voice. All of these factors have been exacerbated in the context of hybrid teaching and learning.

18 Citing: Southwest Catholic Teacher 1; GTA Elementary Teachers 1 & 2; GTA Secondary Teacher 2.



## Hybrid Teaching

In circumstances of school district budget shortfalls and/or low student enrolment in specific courses, some courses—predominantly at the secondary level but in some areas in elementary—have been taught as a “hybrid” of most students and the teacher physically present in a classroom, while other students joining the class remotely via online video. This approach was massively expanded and its prevalence grew exponentially in the 2021-22 school year, as most districts closed central and regional virtual schools that had been established during the 2020-21 school year with the support of additional funding. According to a 2022 survey of principals by People for Education, the proportion of elementary schools offering hybrid instruction rose from 11 percent in 2020-21 to 27 percent in 2021-22, while the number of secondary schools declined slightly from 50 to 47 percent (the percentage of secondary schools that were fully virtual dropped from 7 to 1 percent) (Hodgson-Bautista, Liu Hopson & Pearson 2022: 9). These numbers do not indicate the prevalence of hybrid instruction within each school, and likely downplays the number of actual classes conducted in a hybrid format. The following subsection reviews the implications of hybrid learning on teaching and learning in Ontario. Principally, the approach has resulted in an acute intensification of teachers’ work, with increasing numbers reaching the edge of burnout. It has also exacerbated the various features of remote learning described above, which have caused students to struggle, particularly those with the least access to supports traditionally provided by in-person physical schools. Demands for the elimination of hybrid learning have grown over the 2021-22 school year, and many educators fear the model may outlast the pandemic.

In the fall of 2020, when school districts across Ontario reopened after the first wave of the pandemic, the vast majority<sup>19</sup> established central Virtual Schools at the elementary

19 The experience of the Simcoe County District School Board, which during 2020-21 instead opted to outsource the delivery of courses at the secondary level to TVOntario, will be discussed briefly in the next section focusing on existing and potential future vectors for the privatization of K-12 education.

and secondary levels, which pooled together individual students from across schools, who had opted out of in-person attendance due to health concerns. While students enrolled in conventional in-person learning ended up spending periods of time online during provincial, district-wide or school level shutdowns, virtual school students spent the entire year online. Across the province, lower income and racialized students tended to disproportionately opt for virtual instruction, while students from white and more affluent families tended to remain in-person, with the trend most well documented by data released by the Toronto District School Board<sup>20</sup> (Gallagher-Mackay 2021; Crawley 2020). This tendency raised the concerns of educators and researchers (Milana et al 2021; Trudel et al 2021) that the pandemic has served to exacerbate existing inequalities, including the digital divide within education, for students with access to smart phones but not the computers required to fully participate in online learning. By the first quadmester of 2020-21, school districts across Canada reported declines in student high school credit accumulation due to hybrid and remote learning (Alphonso & Perreux 2020).

Yet, when most school districts decided not to continue running central secondary virtual schools in 2021-22 (in the absence of pandemic funding that was available in 2020-21) and turned to hybrid instruction, the consequences have been worse. A local teacher leader describes some of the pedagogical problems of hybrid learning:

*[I]t’s been often referred to as fractured learning. A teacher has to divide their time between the students in front of them and the students online. It’s not uncommon for teachers to have difficulties with the internet connection, technology... so connecting the students at the beginning of a period isn’t always perfect and if that’s the case you’re delaying the start of your instruction by five minutes.*

20 At the TDSB during the 2020-21 school year, 31 percent of students enrolled in-person were from low socioeconomic status families as opposed to 46 percent in the central virtual schools, while 37 percent of in-person students were from high socioeconomic status families, but only 15 percent of students in the virtual schools.





*Depending on how many hybrid students you have and the issues that they're trying to manage, it may be more than that. But it also changes the method of teaching. As a teacher in a classroom, I really enjoyed walking around the room and having one on one conversations with students. But if I'm essentially tethered to my webcam to ensure that those at home are also engaged it's difficult to continue that type of teaching style, so that's a challenge to basically stay in one spot for the purpose of being available to those students at home. (Southwest Catholic Teacher 2)*

This teacher continues, discussing the challenges of learning how to improvise with hybrid, and the new novel problems it creates:

*We just don't have enough experience with hybrid to have a list of best practices. When we have new teachers coming in, they get professional development on report card writing or they can reach out to a mentor teacher in their department about how to run an effective lab. Or what activities work well with students who have these particular needs, there's a lot of established practice in classroom teaching. But when it comes to hybrid... we're essentially running an experiment on how best to engage students at home, while also trying to maintain some semblance of normalcy in that classroom. So without that list of best practices, it's really difficult to support teachers to do the best job they can. They're basically winging it and that puts them in again a very stressful situation to try and learn what works best in a very short period of time without a safety net. Oftentimes students at home are logged in but their cameras are not on. You know there's some safety and security concerns, how do I know if that student's even present? What if I see something at home that's not safe? It just opens up a whole other element that teachers are not used to, when you have a defined classroom environment, you know the authenticity of student work. When they're at home that's a challenge. (Southwest Catholic Teacher 2)*

The effects of how hybrid learning “fractures” teachers’ attention, leading to limited pedagogical options for both in-person and virtual students, become evident in specific subject areas:

*Imagine something like Phys Ed... even if there was wifi outside, how would I deal with the kids in the Zoom call on my phone or on a Chromebook while other kids are kicking a ball on the field? Most teachers, what they've done is they just default not going outside at all because of a lack of wifi and even in the gym they've got like 30 kids practicing with basketballs, and for kids on a Chromebook what? ... Same would be true for tech areas, teachers were saying things like how on earth am I supposed to manage kids in a workshop using power tools that present danger to life and limb when I've got kids on a laptop and what the hell are the kids doing on a laptop anyway, using power tools at home? It's not even conceivable, what are they supposed to do? Music performing arts, food prep classes and so on, drama, dance, you name it, but even in those academic classes of math, English, social sciences, it's a disaster. (GTA Secondary Teacher 1)*

People for Education’s 2021 survey of school principals across Ontario found most were concerned that hybrid was less effective pedagogically; observing declining student engagement and rising teacher and administrator stress (Kotasinska & Hopson 2021: 7, 15). By People for Education’s 2022 survey, principals were describing hybrid as “a disaster” and “the most difficult task assigned to teachers to date.” (Hodgson-Bautista, Liu Hopson & Pearson 2022: 15).

Concerns were also raised by teachers of credit integrity, as students may be able to more easily cheat or coast through online classes while their teachers’ attention was divided: “So a kid logs in and turns off the camera on their computer and sits there and plays Minecraft for the period. That wouldn’t cut mustard in a classroom, but how do we as a teacher monitor that, how do we do anything about it?” (Southwest Catholic Teacher 1).



A secondary special education teacher observed that for some students experiencing anxiety and other mental health issues often exacerbated by being in a school building with their peers, remote learning could have some benefits. Reflecting on teaching fully online classes in 2020-21, she argued they were far better for these students than hybrid:

*Those students that do flourish more in a virtual learning environment would have done much better if they had a dedicated virtual teacher, the way that I was able to teach last year, when all my students were online. I think trying to mix the two is really problematic. It means that sometimes the students in my classroom are not getting my attention the way that they need, and then, most of the time, the students on my laptop are not at all getting the attention they deserve. (GTA Secondary Teacher 2)*

Assessing the distinctions between teaching a fully virtual class and hybrid teaching, she continues:

*When you're a virtual teacher your thinking is very different. Your planning is all based on what that experience is virtually, so your main focus is always on the virtual delivery. But when you're putting virtual into your classroom it's just like, I have group activities, I have think-pair-share activities and when you slap a laptop in front of a kid and you're like, here's your partner. It's just not the same experience for them if you can't have a marker in your hands, putting your ideas down on paper with your classmates... But if you're in a virtual classroom and we're all putting our ideas on a jam board [a collaborative online program] together, you know at least you're part of a group, we can sort of simulate that experience. But the hybrid model just puts you where you're failing at both things at the same time and you're cut in half. (GTA Secondary Teacher 2)*

Another outcome of hybrid, and all virtual teaching, was a new challenge to teachers' professional judgement from a changing relationship with parents. This was particularly evident at the elementary level, where younger children are more likely to

need parental support to participate in an online class. With students entering classes from home, teacher lessons were now potentially subject to more parental scrutiny than had ever been the case when all instruction occurred within a school building. Local leaders interviewed here as well as journalistic coverage, described increased confrontations from parents criticizing teacher lessons (Southwest Catholic Teachers 1 & 2; Macdonell 2020). The balance between teachers' professional autonomy and accountability to the communities they serve, especially those that are systemically marginalized, has long been a fraught issue in education. However, as the pandemic dragged on, reflecting on the more negatively impacted and politically polarized context of the US, Brockes (2021) observed parental hostility towards teachers as a manifestation of a general tendency of societal fatigue and frustration. Another attributable phenomenon could be described as an 'Uberization' of how parents relate to teachers —as service users who see rating the work of service providers as a means of exerting control in a context in which they otherwise feel powerless.

A baseline level of technological familiarity is assumed of parents to ensure their children are logged in to their classes' online Learning Management System (LMS), like Brightspace or Google Classroom, and participating in real time (synchronous) lessons over video. People for Education's 2022 survey of nearly a thousand principals across Ontario, attributed this as an explanation (among other causes) for high levels of student absence rates during hybrid (and remote) instruction, particularly at the elementary level where parental support was most important (Hodgson-Bautista, Liu Hopson & Pearson 2022). Students in lower income families were less likely to have home computers, and relied more on smart phones, which are not as effective for accessing their LMS, and depended on the efforts of school boards to distribute tablets. They were also more likely to have slower internet connections. Several Elementary teachers interviewed by the author, observed that a significant amount of class time typically needed to be spent assisting students and parents.



Alongside leading to an intensification of work, hybrid teaching has also affected teacher wellbeing due to perception of many that they are unable to fully meet the needs of their students, as one secondary teacher asserts, “I leave every hybrid class feeling like a failure, because I know the kids sitting in front of a laptop aren’t getting the education they deserve.” (GTA Secondary Teacher 2). A provincial federation leader observed the overall impact of hybrid learning on teacher stress and its effects on mental health, including increased use of medication, as well as leaves of absence from the classroom:

*So it’s extremely stressful on the teacher. I think that a lot of the satisfaction from teaching is seeing kids succeed and thrive because of your efforts, and when you feel like you’re failing them all the time it’s incredibly demoralizing and it affects your own self-worth. We have seen huge increases in anxiety and depression and mental health related leaves by teachers. Our benefit plan is seeing quite an increase in the use of antidepressants and in counselling and almost 50% of our long term disability claims are now primarily mental health-related. (Provincial Union Official 3)*

In the face of these experiences, a Toronto-area teacher union leader is unequivocal about the rejection of hybrid teaching expressed by members in his district:

*The feedback from members has been overwhelmingly uniform on this point. We conducted a survey of our own members on hybrid and what it’s like for them. ...almost 2,000 responses ... 99.7% of the members that responded to that said, this should absolutely not continue, no matter what.... There would be no circumstances under which they thought that it would be pedagogically appropriate to repeat or perpetuate this model, and it was literally 0.3% of the members who thought they would be okay to do so. (GTA Secondary Teacher 1)*

Over the summer and fall of 2021, parent and educator activist groups and local teachers’ unions, especially in the GTA, organized against the hybrid mode, with in-person rallies outside

school district offices augmented by online petitions, emails to trustees and “days of action” where all members wore stickers to work with messages against hybrid teaching.

Several school boards, on the other hand, touted the use of hybrid teaching and learning. According to officials with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the York Region District School Board (the latter also ran hybrid learning in elementary, drawing vociferous opposition from many parents and teachers), the model keeps students connected to their home schools and offers families the flexibility to relatively easily move their child from in-person to virtual learning if they need to quarantine (Yousif, Bowden & Javed 2021). At least one teacher believed the flexibility was also used by some families on vacations, despite increasing the workload of the teacher and restructuring the classroom experience for other students (Southwest Elementary Teacher 2). Proposals from local unions to enrol online students taking the same course in the same school or across schools into the same class were often resisted by school districts on the basis of its administrative complexity, though this measure would reduce the number of affected classes (Southwest Catholic Teacher 1; Fox 2021b). According to secondary teachers at the TDSB, senior board administrators encouraged principals to set up “hubs” with other schools to offer fully online courses, but the vast majority of principals found this logistically very difficult to implement. Some larger schools did succeed by limiting the range of courses available for virtual students, enabling them to be pooled into sufficiently large classes to allow them to be entirely virtual, while keeping all other courses in the school solely in-person (Personal notes). Ultimately, many teachers, union officials and concerned parents concluded, when considering comparable districts that maintained their central elementary and secondary virtual schools, that the issue came down to cost, and the rollback of additional funding



provided by the Provincial Government in 2020-21 (Yousif, Bowden & Javed 2021; Kalata & Draaisma 2021).<sup>21</sup> In the face of public outcry that any supposed benefit of hybrid was greatly outweighed by its negative features and a journalistic investigation finding that top administrators at the York Region District School Board dismissed recommendations from board staff as well as other school districts against hybrid, especially at the elementary level, a York Region DSB spokesperson conceded that cost was a major factor (Javed & Sarrouh 2021).

While hybrid has generated strong, well publicized opposition from many parents, teachers and students, in the absence of an increase in provincial funding or the end of the coronavirus pandemic, many school districts across Ontario remain poised to continue with this mode of instruction. When asked about which potential long-term trends in education to emerge out of the pandemic era they were most concerned about, interviewees most frequently cited hybrid instruction. They feared that, in the context of a few parents or students believing the model was convenient, indifference for its negative impact on teacher workload and student learning, plus its potential for cost savings by facilitating a broader range of course offerings with fewer teachers, the Provincial Government and school districts could potentially opt to maintain hybrid instruction. The issue will surely be critical in the next round of K-12 collective bargaining.

## Exacerbation of Stress and Overwork for New and Precarious Teachers

Many of the issues discussed above relating to stress from the intensification of work and undermining of professional judgement during the pandemic were even more pronounced for new and precarious teachers. While new teachers typically

21 For the large urban boards in the GTA and Ottawa, the districts without hybrid, or which moved away from hybrid, included the Durham District School Board and the Ottawa Catholic District School Board —both of which combined digging deeper into financial reserves with greater fiscal flexibility due to long-term trends of rising student enrolment in the suburban areas included in these districts.

report longer hours of work than their colleagues, due, among other reasons, to needing more time to create teaching materials and understanding how best to use them, new teachers entering the pandemic were plunged into a context that their more experienced colleagues were also struggling to grasp. The “normal” stress of teachers in LTO positions, as well as permanent but low-seniority teachers, who are regularly reassigned from school to school, of having to prepare lesson plans and gather resources with a day or two’s notice of their assignments, was augmented with even more reliance on improvisation, due to having no time to plan in advance. During the term, LTOs were often less likely to get full prep time equivalent to their peers (Farhadi & Winton 2021: 126).

Other characteristics of the pandemic, from the inability to gather in large groups or in-person at all, to a reduction in professional development opportunities due to a shortage of replacement teachers, meant new teachers struggled even more than they likely otherwise would have. Further, while one of the defining features of the pandemic experience in education has been the intensified implementation of technology, as noted above by Dolighan & Owen (2021), teacher self-reported competency was in proportion to prior experience in its usage, which was not necessarily related to age. New teachers did not necessarily enjoy an inherent advantage due to often being younger than their colleagues. Or if they did, this proficiency was overshadowed by learning how to effectively teach their subject area while supporting student wellbeing —always the fundamental challenge of being a teacher, but a problem that few, if any, of their colleagues would have any experience of how to address in a pandemic context. A local union leader at a Francophone Catholic board observed of new teachers in his school:

*They look like they are not really enjoying what they’re doing principally because of the pressures that they feel to maintain these two jobs that they have right now. The one job, which is delivering a curriculum, evaluating the students and making sure that they are succeeding, and this other factor of keeping everybody safe... To guarantee the safety of*



*students through the pandemic, is something that is an extra weight that they're carrying on their shoulders that I didn't have when I started teaching, and which makes them, I think, really consider have they made the right choice? It's difficult to have that conversation because I'd like to tell them it's all going to be better, but I don't know when that's going to happen. I don't think anybody knows. (Francophone Board Teacher 1)*

In Mexico, vacant teaching positions may sometimes be filled on an interim basis indefinitely. In US jurisdictions including New York State, under recent evaluative systems, as little as 60 percent of new probationary teachers obtain so-called “tenured” status. In both contexts, many elementary and secondary teachers work precariously from contract to contract (Bocking 2020a). A large majority of K-12 teachers in Ontario experience relatively stable conditions of full time, permanent employment once they are hired to fill a vacancy and they successfully complete a New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP). That a teaching position known as a “true vacancy” (ie. not due to a temporarily absent teacher or pending a re-calculation of staffing between schools) must be filled by a permanent teacher, is stipulated in law under the province’s Education Act, and enforced by teachers’ unions at the local level through elaborate staffing processes with the school districts. In the Ontario context, precarious K-12 teachers include “occasional” ie. substitute teachers working on a daily basis or covering “long-term” for a teacher absent from two weeks to a year, with no guarantee of employment. However, despite strong legal and contractual measures ensuring that by default, teaching in a publicly funded K-12 school is done by a full-time, permanent employee, the relative role of temporary and occasional teachers has increased during the pandemic in Ontario, and not just due to rising levels of health leaves mentioned above. Thompson, in Education International’s 2021 review of teachers’ work reports on a rising usage of temporary teachers during the pandemic, with lower pay and reduced access to benefits than regular teachers, and no employment stability. Around the world, increases in the proportion of teachers

employed on a temporary basis has been driven both by school authorities struggling to rapidly address a need for smaller class sizes and separate virtual classes during the pandemic, as well as pandemic-era funding increases from government typically being time-limited and subject to contingencies. These circumstances were certainly the case in Ontario.

To staff a new central virtual school at the secondary level during the 2020-21 school year, the TDSB reassigned hundreds of teachers from existing high schools, beginning with those who made requests on medical grounds due to being immunocompromised.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the TDSB hired approximately one hundred new teachers for the central secondary virtual school, but as LTOs rather than permanent teachers. This was despite apparently being placed in “true vacancies”, and not filling in for an absent teacher per the contractual definitions of permanent teachers and LTOs in their respective collective agreements, and the stipulations of the Education Act. The TDSB argued that the temporary nature of the additional funding from the Provincial Government, which supported the hiring of these hundred teachers, necessitated that their status also be temporary. OSSTF promptly filed a grievance in the fall of 2020, which as of early 2022, was still wending its way to arbitration. The dispute over employment status held significant implications for the affected teachers. The most obvious is that, by definition, temporary teachers work on fixed term contracts, at the end of which the school district holds no obligation to ensure their further employment, unlike permanent teachers who, should they be “surplussed” from their school due to declining student enrolment, are entitled to be placed elsewhere according to their subject qualifications and seniority. Secondary LTOs in Toronto, for example, are

<sup>22</sup> This example draws on the author’s experience at the time as vice president of OSSTF Toronto’s Occasional Teachers’ Bargaining Unit.



paid according to the salary grid of permanent teachers, have similar access to sick days and pensions, and are supposed to have a comparable workload<sup>23</sup>. However, the key problem that emerged during the pandemic was when LTOs were hired into a position during a quad/octomester when the absent teacher was not assigned a prep, and the position ended before the LTO would have received their proportionate access to prep in a subsequent quad/octomester. Then, the occasional teacher typically applied for a new LTO in the subsequent quad/octomester, in which they again taught without a prep period. Smaller schools could claim there was simply no additional work available for the LTO at the end of the quad/octomester. At the TDSB's central secondary virtual school, with thousands of students and dozens of teachers in the smallest subject-area department, the argument was less credible. Many individual principals (each responsible for a subject area within the virtual school) used projected student enrolment in future quadesters to extend as long as possible the employment of LTOs in their department. Yet even the common scenario of an LTO who began teaching in quadmester 2 (when the virtual school grew considerably) with two courses and no prep, subsequently received a prep in quadmester 3, and no prep in quadmester 4, ended the year having taught the equivalent of five of six periods, a heavier workload than the standard six of eight periods (ensuring one prep period per semester) over the course of the school year.

The OSSTF occasional teachers' local tracked the affected members and grieved the practice, asking for a remedy of either the LTOs receiving the prep time that they were owed in a subsequent quadmester, or where that was not feasible, additional compensation in proportion to the increased workload. Other district school boards across the province, ranging from Ottawa-Carleton, to the mid-size suburban Halton and Thames Valley, to the small, rural Algoma, reached agreements with their local unions of OSSTF whereby LTOs

23 Some schools had been known to assign a disproportionate number of on-calls to LTOs during their prep periods prior to new contractual language negotiated in 2021, clearly linking working conditions (Personal notes).

would be paid at a rate of 1.33 times their salary if they taught two courses in a quadmester and did not receive a prep period in the following quadmester and, conversely, at the rate of 0.67 their salary if they taught just one course and received a prep, and did not teach two courses the following quadmester (a rare occurrence). These proposals were rejected by the TDSB as being too costly to apply to its affected LTOs. The OSSTF's grievance filed in the winter of 2021, is currently wending its way to arbitration. Most of the affected teachers were in the first or second year of their careers and cited the absence of prep time for months longer than that experienced by permanent teachers, as contributing greatly to their stress. Some contemplated leaving the profession.

At the provincial level, the Ford Government made two high profile interventions into education policy with a significant and largely adverse impact on new teachers. Both measures tapped into the longstanding priorities of a political party that was elected into office with relatively few policies clearly articulated to the public in relation to K-12 education. The first, announced prior to the pandemic in August 2019, was a requirement that, effective March 31, 2020, new teacher graduates would be required to pass a standardized Math Proficiency Test (MPT), irrespective of whether they would in fact be teaching math, and whether they would do so at the primary, intermediate or secondary level. During the 2018 Ontario elections, the Conservatives blamed the governing Liberals as well as teachers for a dip in EQAO standardized test scores in mathematics, which the Conservatives, among others, asserted was a crucial metric for measuring not merely how students performed at math, but the long-term economic health and competitiveness of the province as a whole. The Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) and, ironically, the EQAO —the agency tasked by the government with administering the test— published reports which reviewed the academic literature and found there was no basis from experiences elsewhere (as well as the short-lived Ontario Teacher Qualifying Test in the early 2000s), to claim that a standardized test would actually improve math instruction (OTF 2019; EQAO 2019). A newly formed Ontario Teacher Candidates' Council (OTCC) brought a legal challenge



to the provincial superior court, which struck down the test in a December 2021 ruling. The court determined that the onerous burden placed on teacher candidates could not be pedagogically justified and would hamper efforts to diversify the teaching profession (Ontario 2021b).

The second measure was the revocation in October 2020 of Regulation 274, Hiring Practices by the Ford Government.<sup>24</sup> Regulation 274 had previously been established through collective bargaining between OECTA and the Liberal Government in 2012 to regulate teacher hiring according to subject area qualifications and then seniority<sup>25</sup>, in order to curtail widespread nepotism and favouritism on the part of principals and school districts. The creation of local seniority lists, in conjunction with publicly available information on the subject qualifications of individual teachers, were intended to streamline hiring for permanent and LTO positions, and indeed were implemented as such by many school districts across the province. In others, Regulation 274 was viewed by many principals as an infringement on their managerial prerogatives to determine the best candidate for the job and was regularly circumvented, with minimal oversight from the central district office. Among new teachers, Regulation 274 was also contentious. While many viewed the hiring system it created as transparent and thereby offering them a fairer opportunity, others saw the tiered aspect of the system, in which new teachers must first work for a year as a daily supply teacher before potentially being eligible for permanent positions, as obstructing their career. They believed they would be hired by

24 The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) won a legal challenge in June 2021 on behalf of 14 locals that had not yet concluded local negotiations with their school boards, on the basis of the revocation of Regulation 274 violating the statutory right under Ontario Labour Relations Act for terms and conditions of employment to remain "frozen" during the course of collective bargaining (Ontario 2021d). As a result, the rescinding of Regulation 274 was postponed in these boards until the conclusion of local negotiations.

25 Regulation 274 did not entitle an applicant to a position based on subject area and seniority, but rather to be part of an initial group of five people granted interviews, among whom the successful candidate would be chosen by the principal.

a principal without the allocation of interviews on the basis of seniority. Typically, support for Regulation 274 increased with the number of years in the profession. However, it also varied depending on the actual effectiveness of its implementation, with teachers in districts where it was routinely flouted, being more skeptical of its value.<sup>26</sup>

In rescinding Regulation 274, Education Minister Lecce drew on well-worn anti-union tropes, commonly deployed in many other areas, in asserting that seniority in hiring prevented the recognition of true "merit". In his framing to the media, he ignored and misrepresented the primary importance of subject area qualifications over seniority in Regulation 274. A considerable body of academic research has found experience (which can be closely equated to seniority) to be one of the most reliable measures of teacher effectiveness (Kini & Podolsky 2016). Lecce insinuated that seniority favoured long-serving but mediocre occasional teachers, while disadvantaging bright new teachers, and that in doing so, was also hampering the entry of more racialized teachers into the profession. Implicit was the idea that individual school administrators and districts were free of bias in hiring, and that they would surely act to diversify teaching if given the free hand to do so (Rushowy 2020e). This faith in management, which asserted that the counter-power of a union in the role of safeguarding equity in the workplace was irrelevant and that principals should be given expanded powers to hire and fire, followed the concept in education policy circles of "school autonomy", also known as "school-based management", which has gained prominence since the early 2000s amid the neoliberal push to "run schools like a business" (Bocking 2020a). One teacher interviewed described herself as "a testament to fair and transparent hiring practices; I got a job really because of it," citing a decade previously spent supply teaching as a racialized woman, while observing the influence of familial connections in a predominantly rural district

26 These observations emerge from the author's experience on a local occasional teachers' bargaining unit executive since the enactment of Regulation 274, during which time the hiring policy was a subject of interest for members, and from discussion with occasional teacher union leaders at other school boards.



(Southwest Elementary Teacher 2). Also lost in public discussion, was the reality that many long-time occasional teachers were in fact racialized; often, they had obtained their credentials overseas and spoke English with an accent (Bocking 2020b). By virtue of being older, many also had children of their own, which prevented them from committing to the range of after school extracurricular activities requested by principals. Many lacked Lecce's optimistic assessment of school administrators' commitment to equity.

While the Ford Government's Math Proficiency Test and its decision to rescind Regulation 274 reflected a clearly delineated trajectory in policy making independent of the pandemic itself, both were implemented in its context. They added to the changes and, arguably, difficulties experienced by new teachers during this singularly difficult time to start one's career. They also fit in more broadly with Lecce and his government's "free market" neoliberal world view in the context of openings for privatization. This will be explored further in the next section. While less wholly deleterious, an additional policy introduced by the Ford Government mid pandemic, the Temporary Certificate, also had a particular impact on beginning teachers.

A growing number of researchers and advocates have emphasized the need for "education recovery strategies", properly funded to address student learning gaps, that are focused on the most disadvantaged students during the pandemic, and that are carried out by public school boards, rather than left to individual parents who may or may not have the private means to do so (ATA 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al 2021; Thompson 2021; Tranjan et al 2022). This may include intensive, high quality, small-group tutoring during and after the school day, and extra time and opportunities for teachers in different subjects and grade levels to compare notes on the needs of specific students. It certainly means more mental health supports for students, including more social workers, child and youth workers and counsellors and psychologists, as well as school outreach to community groups in marginalized constituencies. School principals reported in People for Education's 2022 survey, that while "on-call" access to mental

health and wellness support staff had increased over the two years of the pandemic from the 2019-20 to the 2021-22 school years, much of this increase was due to virtual consultations, rather than in-person visits. While likely enabling the scheduling of more meetings, these were less effective for students at risk. Meanwhile, the regularly scheduled presence of social workers and nurses actually declined by 4 and 3 percent respectively, and rose by only 1 to 3 percent for mental health and addictions specialists, child and youth workers and psychologists (Hodgson-Bautista, Liu Hopson & Pearson 2022: 9).

Ontario's education system entered the pandemic immediately after having suffered significant cuts in funding from the Ford Government, including class size increases for Grades 4 to 12, which some school districts attempted to mitigate by reducing vital support staff, including educational assistants, child and youth workers, social workers and early childhood educators, among others. More than ever, the pandemic has demonstrated the need for small class sizes, as well as for the range of supports offered by these and other social service professionals to address student mental health and special needs. A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has found that reversing previous cuts to educators and support staff, hiring more mental health professionals, and also closing over a ten year period Ontario's \$16.8 billion school repair back log, could all be done for \$4.3 billion a year, and that this number could be funded by canceling planned corporate and personal income tax cuts, the costly proposed Highway 413, and with a modest increase in income taxes for the province's top earners (Tranjan et al 2022).





## Analysis

Overall, teachers' working conditions in Ontario worsened during the pandemic. There was the stress of potentially contracting the coronavirus while working in person, and health consequences for those who did, as was of course the case to varying degrees for all workers who conducted their jobs face to face with other people. In addition, for educators there was the stress of striving to keep students safe. When schooling moved online, this focus shifted from physical to mental wellbeing.

Through all of this, many teachers experienced both an intensification of their work and, in various contexts, an undermining of their ability to exercise their professional judgement. These processes particularly affected newer teachers who entered the pandemic during the profession, especially those employed as Long Term Occasionals, some of whom had weaker protection of prep time. Intensification occurred through the loss of prep time from increased on-calls, the inability to meaningfully use prep time to support one's daily duties as a result of quad- and octomester timetables, as well as the additional preparatory work required to adapt one's teaching to a new format of longer class periods. Work intensification was particularly evident in the context of hybrid learning, due to the literal "fracturing" of teachers' attention between in-person and online students, each of which required different pedagogical modes of instruction which, in turn, constrained the pedagogical choices teachers could make, often forcing them into a more rote, teacher-centric format, resembling of a large lecture class in a university— a model ill-suited for most students.

Through the pandemic, there was a concurrent practice of top-down policymaking which constrained educators exercising their professional judgement in some areas, and a lack of clear, consistent direction in others, both of which created stress for educators. Examples of the former include the rigid directions during the "emergency remote teaching" phase of a mandatory number of synchronous, online minutes per week, irrespective

of the particular needs of specific classes and students, which their teacher would have been best placed to determine, and the mandate to conduct hybrid teaching. Examples of the lack of top-down guidance where it was needed included how to address the learning gaps of students that became increasingly evident to many teachers, especially at the elementary level, by the second and third year of the pandemic. While apparently contradictory, both tendencies were symptomatic of an apparent generalized disinterest in teachers' capacity for professionalism, and their wellbeing, on the part of the Ford Government, as well as underinvestment in supporting the longer-term needs of students that have arisen due to the pandemic.

The context of the pandemic affirmed the importance of professional autonomy by highly trained and experienced teachers to ethically push back on government and school district policies that they assess are ill-suited to their classroom. Farhadi and Winton (2021) describe how this was critically important in Alberta, in the context of that Provincial Government's push in 2020-21 to return to "business as usual", and even implement cuts to education funding, despite ongoing threats to the physical and mental health of students and staff during, at times the highest coronavirus infection rates in Canada. Through these circumstances, and many others as seen in Ontario, teachers have demonstrated they are not "passive policy subjects" (Ball et al 2012: 92; Farhadi & Winton 2021; Bocking 2020a) and confronted the challenge of school administrators who do not understand or trust teachers' work (Trudel et al 2021). The experience of teachers' work during the pandemic has provided another example of the broader and consistent need to push back on the neoliberal tendency towards intensifying, precarizing and deskilling or disempowering labour. This tendency has often co-existed with the particular contemporary phenomena of the co-option of widespread societal concern about mental health, into platitudes about "wellness" and "self-care". Individualizing mental health issues minimizes the problem by divorcing society's understanding of the matter from the larger structural contexts that affect it, typically in the absence of costly material



improvements such as paid days to care for mental health, or greater worker control over the labour process.

For periods requiring virtual learning due to the pandemic, school districts must be further supported by the Provincial Government to ensure all families have universal access to high speed internet and the necessary devices for their full participation (Cooper et al 2021: 94-96). At the same time, Williamson et al (2021) observe critically how widespread, justified concern over pandemic “learning gaps” has been channelled by some governments into reinforcing the over-usage of standardized testing, to the benefit of enterprising ed tech businesses eager to marketize new ‘learning analytics’, and to the detriment of classroom time teaching the curriculum. Finally, Goodson and Schostak (2020) remind us that a post-COVID “return to normal” in the world of schooling, with its focus on uncritically preparing students for an uneven and precarious labour market, may not be desirable. They urge us to imagine the liberatory potential of an education oriented towards helping students grapple with the manifold crises, many of which have only been accentuated by the pandemic, including inequity and climate change, that are shaping the 21st Century.

# 3

## Privatization and the Pandemic

### Overview of key points:

**1. Centralization of e-learning course provision in TVO/TFO** and the supplanting of long-standing e-learning systems operated by school districts, despite widespread criticism from existing providers (school districts), administrators and teachers, and evidence of lower functionality from a board that earlier outsourced some of its online courses. This has also fuelled widespread concerns of a plan by the Ford Government to enable the outsourcing and privatization of e-learning, combined with a mandate by TVO/TFO to commercialize its online course offerings.

2. While generally continuing to exercise fiscal austerity towards public K-12 school system, the Ford Government offered **direct cash payments for individual families** during the pandemic, with funding drawn from the provincial K-12 education budget. The stated goal was to assist parents with additional purchases such as computers, required during shifts to remote learning. While many low-income families have needed greater access to resources, this would have been much more effectively addressed through procurement by the school districts. Instead, the measure underfunds the public system and potentially subsidizes private options, including tutoring businesses and online credit mills.

**3. The platformization and digitization of education has accelerated during the pandemic, increasing the role of ed tech companies within public education.** This has emerged, in part, from historic and ongoing decisions by Provincial Governments and education authorities to outsource the development of ed tech to for-profit companies. While new ed tech companies have boomed during the pandemic, the largest and most established firms, such as Google, have particularly benefited, in part through a mutually reinforcing network of services and products that are popular among students and educators. The re-centering of teaching around Learning Management System (LMS) platforms is both a form of privatization, and a potential threat to teachers' professional autonomy, and may facilitate a further standardization of education, particularly if the role of teachers in distilling curriculum through dynamic pedagogy is supplanted by the use of search engines and test preparation powered by artificial intelligence. Further on the horizon are new ed tech firms that purport to offer a comprehensive online for-profit alternative to K-12 public schools, resembling an "Uberization" of education.



## E-learning as a Vector for Privatization

When the Ford Government announced a bundle of major K-12 education policies in March 2019 alongside the provincial budget, attention was understandably directed to the headline item: average intermediate and secondary school class sizes would rise over the next three years, leading to the elimination of thousands of teaching positions and, in the process, severely curtailing the range of courses many schools could offer. Immediately following in attracting widespread opposition was a new requirement that high school students complete four courses online as e-learning credits. This generated widespread concern that the medium of online learning was pedagogically ill-suited for many students (Farhadi 2019). Both issues (as well as other budget cuts) galvanized teachers, education workers and many parents to protest, leading to rolling strikes by the four teachers' federations across the province in the winter of 2019-2020, which garnered broad public support. The federations mitigated the government's measures at the central bargaining table, just prior to the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic, but the concept of mandatory e-learning survived with the minimum number of credits halved to two and the addition of opt out provisions. Attracting less attention in this context were vague plans by the government to centralize the provision of e-learning courses. Presumably this meant removing their operation from local school districts, leading to fears that given the now clear ideological disposition of the Ford Government, e-learning would be outsourced and privatized.

E-learning subsequently became ubiquitous on a scale unimaginable prior to the pandemic, from Kindergarten to Grade 12, attracting widespread concern for its implications for student learning and wellbeing, especially in its "hybrid" form, as was discussed in the previous section. The Ford Government appears to be taking steps to ensure e-learning will remain a prominent feature of the education system post-pandemic. His administration has steadily advanced its plan for a long-term restructuring of e-learning in Ontario, by shifting its delivery and

administration from local school boards and their networks to the provincial French and English-language public broadcasting agencies *Télévision française de l'Ontario* (TFO) and *Television Ontario* (TVO). Critics across the education system, including the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, the Ontario Student Trustees' Association, the Ontario Teachers' Federation, and People for Education, fear this restructuring will facilitate subsequent forms of marketization and commercialization of schooling, setting a course that is confirming fears that the ultimate destination is outsourcing and privatization.

In July 2020, the Ford Government used its legislative majority to introduce, speed through debate and pass into law in less than two weeks, the omnibus Bill 197: COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act, 2020.<sup>27</sup> Amid legislation revising municipal building codes and development charges, processes for environmental assessment of construction projects, and regulations for pay day loans, among many other areas, were two significant measures related to K-12 education. The first repealed the requirement that school board directors in Ontario must hold credentials as a teacher and a school district supervisory officer, ie. a superintendent. This measure immediately raised fears among educators of an interest by the Ford Government of enabling the importation of a trend from the United States since the 2000s of prominent figures, frequently corporate CEOs or celebrities, being appointed as school system leaders. Many of these individuals, high profile examples of which included Joel Klein in New York City, Arne Duncan in Chicago, Michelle Rhee in DC, and more recently Austin Beutner in Los Angeles, were associated with an aggressive push towards the neoliberalization of education through their support for publicly funded, privately run charter schools. Their support for privatization was paralleled by fervent anti-unionism, and a contempt for educators and their expertise for teaching and school leadership, seen through practices like Value Added Measurements, which purport to use algorithms

27 See <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-42/session-1/bill-197> for the text of Bill 197: COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act, 2020, granted royal assent on July 21.



to calculate the effect of an individual teacher on the test scores of their students as part of a means to evaluate teachers. An early attempt to use the Bill 197 legislation by the York Catholic District School Board ended in failure. A businessman from the financial sector, who had taught for three years at a private school, resigned after just a month as director, following public revelations he had repeatedly disrupted an equity training program for him and other senior district leaders. Earlier, he had erroneously issued a statement that district schools were closing due to the pandemic (they closed the following week) (Sarrouh et al 2021).

The second education policy in Bill 197 amended legislation to expand the mandate of TVO and TFO to include the development and provisioning of online K-12 courses. Since their establishment in 1970, the mandates of TVO and TFO have included the provision of “distance education programs” through the former’s Independent Learning Centre, originally in the form of “correspondence courses”, which were primarily used by high school students in rural communities to access locally unavailable courses. More recently, TVO and TFO have developed a roster of online pedagogical resources geared to elementary teachers, including the release in 2022 of complete “course packs” aligned with the Ministry of Education’s K-8 curriculum (TVO 2021). Meanwhile, most school districts in Ontario have operated their own e-learning programs since the widespread public emergence of the internet in the late 1990s. These programs have been operated by their own assigned teachers, subject to conditions under collective agreements and mandated per-pupil funding, as with in-person teaching. E-learning programs have been particularly important for predominantly rural districts, especially in northern Ontario and sprawling Francophone boards with small schools that may be hundreds of kilometres apart. In the early 2000s, school districts began pooling resources for e-learning course development, as well as administrative functions for enrolling students, forming the Ontario eLearning Consortium, the Northern eLearning Consortium, the Ontario Catholic eLearning Consortium, and the Consortium apprentissage virtuel de langue française de l’Ontario, for public Anglophone, northern Anglophone,

Anglophone Catholic and Francophone districts respectively (Barbour & LaBonte 2019; Barbour 2020). This institutional trajectory resembled processes in other high population Canadian provinces, while the northern territories and some Maritime provinces opted for systems coordinated centrally by the education ministry (Barbour et al 2020).

Several months after the passage of Bill 197, on November 18, 2020, the Ministry of Education invited representatives of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association (OPSBA) to a confidential presentation on a planned expanded role for TVO. The leaked slides introduced a now more articulated plan for TVO (and TFO) to oversee the development of a complete set of virtual courses ready for the next school year. The Ontario Teachers’ Federation (OTF) responded in a statement, “where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” considering the capacity of TVO to both outsource the creation and the eventual delivery of these courses, as realizing fears of impending privatization (OTF 2020a). OPSBA responded to the Ministry of Education by strongly criticizing the government’s proposal to centralize e-learning within TVO, citing its concern that “outsourcing e-learning” could lead to its privatization and a commercial, rather than a pedagogical focus. OPSBA argued that the existing consortia already ensured students across the province had access to high quality e-learning. The system’s effectiveness was due in great part to being thoroughly integrated into the operations of individual districts, ensuring students are fully supported by their local teachers, who in turn help develop the online resources. As a result, there was no rationale for TVO/TFO’s being granted control over e-learning (OPSBA 2020)<sup>28</sup>.

In late March 2021, amid the third wave of the pandemic and less than two weeks before schools across the province would be forced to shift fully online, the Provincial Government presented a further developed proposal to restructure e-learning to a larger circle of groups including trustees, teachers’ unions and school administrators, which was leaked to the public. The government subsequently announced \$40

28 OPSBA (2020) also noted the imminent planned closure of centralized e-learning systems in Alberta and Michigan.



million in funding over two years to operationalize its vision for mandatory e-learning which had initially been announced in March 2019 in the form of secondary students taking at least four courses online, later reduced after collective bargaining with the federations to two. While promoted by the government, reported by the media, and subjected to criticism by many other groups as a measure to “make e-learning permanent” (Alphonso 2021; Freeman 2021b; Katawazi 2021), the concept was to some extent a misnomer as e-learning has long existed at the secondary level across the province. In fact, what was new was its broad expansion to the elementary grades.

However, what was truly significant and problematic in this development was the centralization of control over e-learning in TVO/TFO, the clear mandate given to marketization of these courses, and the possibilities for various forms of privatization. OPSBA’s admonishment to maintain the existing school board e-learning consortia was clearly disregarded, as the proposed system would essentially duplicate their activity and make them redundant. Building on the previous legislative changes to expand the TVO and TFO mandates, a system would be established whereby from the 2022-23 school year onwards, students across the province would select the two mandatory e-learning credits (one credit may be recognized from fully or partially remote courses in the 2020-21 school year), with content developed and administered centrally by TVO or TFO (Alphonso 2021; People for Education 2021). A teacher at a northern Francophone school district described her confusion and frustration over the planned takeover of e-learning by TVO/TFO:

*Why not use something we already have, that is created for and by the 12 francophone school boards? ...and that is not TFO’s mandate. Like they do a great job, they are a partner with AEFO for many, many projects. TFO is great to add resources for a classroom... but they are not teachers. TFO is not built to offer courses like this... Whereas we have school boards, we have teachers, that is what they’re meant for, that is what we should be doing, we are and in French, we already have something in place that works. (Northern*

44 *Francophone Teacher 1)*

The proposed e-learning courses would be of three types. First are elementary or secondary synchronous classes funded at the same level as in-person classes, led by teachers employed by a local school district.<sup>29</sup> The second type of courses are described as primarily asynchronous “teacher-supported” online learning for secondary students with class size averages of 30:1 with a limit of 35, run by a teacher from a school district. The third type comprise fully independent online learning for secondary students, which would be entirely asynchronous and more like an old-fashioned correspondence course, with little or no feedback on assignments submitted by students. There would be no class size limits (conceptually there may not be “classes”) in this latter type of course, run by staff at TFO and TVO’s Independent Learning Centre (ILC) —despite insistence from Education Minister Lecce that “the system will continue to be run by a publicly-funded system of education, led only by Ontario-certified teachers.” (Freeman 2021b). For the third type of course, TVO and TFO would set a per-pupil, per-course fee, paid by their school board, initially estimated at over \$500 (People for Education 2021).

Along with concerns about the quality of the courses operated by TFO and TVO and whether they will be developed by teachers engaged with students, People for Education (2021) raised concerns about the implications for student wellbeing of the third option promoted by the government, asking, “How will students develop vital social, emotional, collaborative, critical thinking, and creativity skills, through content delivery models that have little interaction with other students or teachers?” People for Education noted that TVO provided online credits

29 The provincial government explicitly stated no additional funding would be provided for administration to operate a central virtual school, making it likely that school boards may run these classes in a hybrid format —fulfilling fears that this mode could outlast the pandemic and become a ‘new normal’ (People for Education 2021).



in 2020-21 to 19,400 students, mostly adults, and asked how will it be scaled up to accommodate the Ministry of Education's estimate of 250,000 students who will be taking online courses by 2023, once this proposed system is fully operational. Recognizing the apparent challenge, the education advocacy organization asked, why is this being rushed and how much will this cost? They observed that, as of yet, no estimate had been publicly presented of the massive funding increase that would apparently be required to expand TVO and TFO to coordinate e-learning across the province and directly offer many more asynchronous courses. Also not insignificant, People for Education notes that school boards are governed by democratically elected trustees and are subject to greater public scrutiny than TVO and TFO, which are overseen by appointed volunteer boards. Further, while boards will pay fees to TVO and TFO for students taking asynchronous courses, the government has not announced if funding will be provided for the staff, physical space and technological infrastructure required for students to be present and supervised in school buildings while taking any of these types of courses. Meanwhile, equity issues persist for rural areas without access to highspeed internet, and families across the province without computers at home (OPSBA 2021; OPSBA 2020).

The case of the Simcoe District School Board which outsourced its 'virtual school' for Grade 11 and 12 students in the 2020-21 school year to TVO for the delivery of courses that resembled the third category above, may provide a cautionary example of the prospects for the large-scale centralization of e-learning. According to a local teacher leader, the board subsequently recognized the system was "a disaster", after having spent nearly a million dollars in fees for fully asynchronous courses that left students unengaged, with many subsequently required to retake the courses in "credit recovery" in order to obtain their high school diplomas. TVO seemed barely able to handle the burden for one board; how would it handle an entire province? As she explains:

*There's so many problems. Not just the privatization of us literally paying a third party to teach our kids, but there's*

*nobody in a school for them to connect to when they were struggling with the platform. TVO had a huge increase just because of the students that were enrolled in their system because of Simcoe DSB. [They] couldn't keep up with all of the support requests, all of the IEP accommodation requests... so what our school board did was assigned our teacher librarians because libraries were closed, to be essentially support people for those students who were enrolled. About 800 students, but we're talking about 5,000 credits over the course of the school year... Librarians were acting as a sort of guidance counselor support person for trying to make sure that those kids are getting the credits. But there was such a lag time because that TVO system was not set up to have that many students submitting work, and wouldn't hear for two months about just feedback on that work, so [students] wouldn't do anything for those two months, while they were waiting to do the next step of the assignment or the next step of the course and then they ran out of time. Guidance counselors are, unfortunately, we're tasked with withdrawing students at the last minute, so that they wouldn't have to show up on transcripts. So right before the non-disclosure date, guidance counselors were given a list of all of the kids who weren't going to be successful in TVO courses and we're asked to drop them all, and it was thousands of credits that were not even attainable. So we as a board invested in a system that wasn't built to support that many students, we literally wasted thousands of dollars enrolling kids in these courses, not hiring teachers to sit with kids one-on-one or to teach them offering additional sections. Because it's much cheaper to buy an \$800 course for us than it is to hire enough teachers to have that many sections open. (Central Ontario Secondary Teacher 1)*

She further observed that the shift of students to TVO's ILC courses meant the merging of many other classes due to the decline in enrolment, with dozens of LTOs losing year-long teaching positions at the board. However, the teacher leader noted that the board reported to school trustees only credits that existed after the non-disclosure date, so ultimately the program appeared more successful to the public than it was in



practice. She suggests that most Grade 11 and 12 students in her board likely didn't understand that they were enrolling in an asynchronous course with minimal support:

*I thought I was getting an e-learning course, maybe with a teacher from my own school, like the Grade 9s and 10s were offered but I wasn't. I was sent a link. This is now your course and if you need help contact the teacher librarian who may have for example, a science or English background and I'm taking a course in French. How can they give me help? So then they call the ILC's call centre and the support lines for TVO are overloaded because we've added 800 kids to their system. (Central Ontario Secondary Teacher 1)*

This experience suggests both the unfeasibility of the asynchronous correspondence model being operated at a potentially massive scale by TVO/TFO, absent a parallel, large increase in its internal capacity, and also how this pedagogical model is ill-suited to many students.

In addition to paying a fee to TVO and TFO for students enrolled in their courses, school boards will also lose revenue by additional rules preventing school boards from directly enrolling students from out of province or internationally. Meanwhile, at the behest of the Provincial Government, TVO/TFO have been mandated under a "global development strategy" to market e-learning courses to private schools within Ontario as well as to overseas markets as a revenue generator. It appears that while these broadcasters have been publicly funded since their inception —though both have seen their funding frozen for the past several years— they are endeavouring to adopt a self-funding business model, either at the direction of their own management and/or under pressure from the Provincial Government, to offset the cost of TVO/TFO's existing not-for-profit public interest journalism and education programming (TVO 2021; TFO 2021). Annie Kidder, the Executive Director of People for Education, observed that a focus on generating revenue from selling courses abroad risks shifting the overall mission of TVO/TFO from providing a public service to earning a profit (Press Progress 2021). While this may also appear to

be a means to raise additional funding for the public education system, the Ford Government's policy since 2019 to claw back \$1,500 in provincial funding for each international student enrolled at a school board (their tuition had been a growing source of extra revenue in recent years, especially for urban boards) (TDSB 2021), suggests the same approach would likely be applied here, reducing public funding alongside increased private revenue generation.<sup>30</sup>

## Vouchers for Education?

At two particularly difficult moments of the pandemic, on January 2, 2021, amid news that schools would remain closed and students would return to online learning for several weeks after the winter break due to the peak of the "second wave", and again in late March, less than two weeks prior to another province-wide school closure at the height of the "third wave", the Ford Government announced direct cash transfers of \$200 to the parents of K-12 students or \$250 for those with children with special needs.<sup>31</sup> The Provincial Government's rationale was that these payments, totalling \$400 and \$500 respectively, would offset additional educational costs incurred by families due to online learning (such as buying a computer), although no conditions were attached to their usage (Ontario 2021c). To fund these payments, the government allocated \$1.8 billion from the

30 This model has been applied over the past two decades at Ontario's universities, with rising tuition fees and fundraising increasingly substituting for government grants.

31 The initial payment was made available earlier to parents with children in elementary school.





provincial K-12 education budget (Rushowy 2021d).<sup>32</sup> The policy aligns with a recommendation of management consulting firm Ernst & Young, commissioned by the Ford Government after their election in 2018 to conduct a “line by line audit” of the previous government’s spending, to increase “direct funding to individuals” as a substitute to providing public services (Ernst & Young 2018: 24).

School boards associations, unions, and many educators have expressed concerns that this diversion of funding will both worsen the shortfall of money available for schools. OTF responded to the March 2020 parental payment through a statement entitled “It’s time for a U-turn”, in which the Federation identified the funds provided by the Provincial Government as being akin to “a voucher tryout” rather than a “leg up for families” (OTF 2020b). In the words of one elementary teacher leader, “We’re still working with the same number of kids, but with less money. It’s a return to the line, ‘do more with less’ of the [previous Conservative Government of] Harris era.” (Southwest Catholic Teacher 1) Interviewees raised concerns over how it was offered to all families, irrespective of financial need. Further, as a cheque, the money could be used for anything. Eligible interviewees reported spending it on items ranging from groceries to political donations to opposition candidates. A far more efficient means to serve the purported rationale of the payments would have been to allocate this funding to school districts, which could then have made further, large-scale purchases of digital devices at far better prices than individual families can secure, while also improving access to highspeed internet in rural areas. A former provincial education policy advisor and current academic described it as:

*Privatization. It’s taking money out of the publicly funded system. There are parents absolutely in need. But... if it had been done through the school boards, they have agreements*

*around education discounts and bulk purchasing so they could actually get Chromebooks or whatever, at a discount versus two million kids’ parents trying to buy laptops or something. That’s what I think is incredibly inefficient, if the goal was actually to support the children that most needed support at home. (Former Provincial Government Education Policy Advisor 1)*

Another teacher leader considered the policy in the context of the Ford Government’s pre-pandemic measures to cut the K-12 education budget, “Is it privatization per se? I think it’s deprivation. It’s a government intent on destabilizing the current form of education, and this is one form of accelerating this destabilization by depriving funding.” (Central Secondary Teacher 2). Some interviewees believed the payments could be best explained as a politically motivated bribe to parents, “This government is very cognizant that there’s an election around the corner. They are basically giving this money to parents, I believe, as a way of buying their vote.” (Southwest Elementary Teacher 1).

Could the government transferring money to families, ostensibly to spend on education, open the door to larger sums in the future as a rebate for buying private services like tutoring? Would this ease in the idea of school vouchers, where parents receive a subsidy to send their children to a private school, with a proportionate deduction in funding from their local school board? In President Reagan’s America of the 1980s, proponents of the “free market” belief in the inherent superiority of the private sector over the public sector began to apply this concept to K-12 education. They concluded that, rather than the shortcomings of public education being due to inadequate funding, its inequitable distribution and racial segregation, the problem was the lack of a competitive market system’s disciplining effect on the default neighbourhood school (Erickson 2015). Consequently, “school choice” became one of the dominant education policies into the 21st Century, with implications for education systems around the world. While school voucher systems remain rare, the empowerment that “school choice” purports to provide to the parent when

32 The Ford Government had also previously offered to parents a cash payment, described as a form of childcare subsidy, of \$25 to \$60 per student depending on their age, during the 2019-2020 full central strikes by the teachers’ federations. The government did not publicly state the funding source for this money.



transformed into a consumer, became the official political discourse rationalizing the proliferation of publicly funded, privately run charter schools in the US (Chen & Moskop 2020).<sup>33</sup> Considering the Ford Government’s cash transfers to parents in this context, a teacher leader reasoned:

*I do believe it can be viewed as testing the waters for a voucher system. If you view educational funding on a continuum, where no direct money is provided [to private schools] versus providing full costs, like some of the States do with a voucher system, you know it’s an extreme leap to go from nothing to anywhere on that continuum; and now we’re on it... (Southwest Elementary Teacher 3)*

The measure could be a means to overcome the historic unpopularity of public subsidies for private education in Ontario, despite the efforts of previous Ontario PC Governments and electoral candidates. In 2001, the Harris-Eves Government introduced a controversial private school tax credit of up to \$1,500, which was repealed by the incoming Liberal Government two years later. During the subsequent provincial election in 2007, the PCs vowed to bring back the tax credit specifically for religious private schools; a promise that was widely believed to have contributed to their defeat in that election. During the 2019 federal elections, the Conservative Party of Canada briefly floated the idea of a \$4,000 private school tax credit (an unusual campaign plank as K-12 education is under the jurisdiction of Provincial Governments), which was dropped after attracting widespread criticism (Bocking 2020c). However, private schools in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Quebec receive public subsidies ranging from 50 to 70 percent (Institute for Public Education 2020). In Quebec, over \$549

33 In Canada, charter schools have so far not spread beyond a handful opened in Alberta in the mid 1990s. Yet “school choice” manifests itself within Ontario’s public K-12 education system, particularly within urban areas, in the form of competition for enrolment between secondary schools, the contribution that EQAO test scores makes to real estate prices for homes within the catchment area of high achieving elementary schools, and competition among public, Catholic and Francophone boards for student enrolment (Bocking 2020c).

million was allocated to 170 private schools in the 2018-19 school year (Bradley 2020).

While these direct subsidies do not exist in Ontario, some teachers reported that a growing number of secondary students in their boards enrolled in online “credit mills” during periods of remote learning when in-person schools were closed, an activity potentially subsidized by the Ford Government’s pandemic payments to parents. Prior to the pandemic, so-called credit mills were known as “no frills private schools”, often operating out of nondescript storefronts, in which students could take individual courses while remaining enrolled in their regular public school. As a whole, they have a reputation for lacking in academic rigour and integrity and, at worse, delivering “course credits for cash” —with grades inflated to ease enrolment into university (CBC Radio 2020). The widespread move to online learning has had a beneficial effect for credit mills which, when virtual—and especially if they are predominantly asynchronous—remove the impediments of time and geography, while also potentially offering a lower cost business model. A secondary teacher from central Ontario, reported instances of students in her board obtaining Grade 11 credits from a business operating via the URL [torontohighschool.com](http://torontohighschool.com), who found themselves unprepared for Grade 12 courses offered within their school district. More research is needed to understand the scope and characteristics of the fast-growing world of “credit mills” in Ontario, and its implications for public education. Currently, they represent a low-profile business sector, well-placed to take advantage of “no strings” cash transfers ostensibly intended to support access to education—a policy that may avoid the political stigma attached to tax credits for attending private schools, but which nevertheless amounts to a step in the direction of school vouchers.



## The Ascendance of Big Tech and the “Platformization” of Education

The pandemic consolidated the rise of yet another privatization trend that had begun in the late 2010s. The “platformization” of education is defined as a restructuring and reorganizing of schooling around comprehensive online software applications, ie. “Learning Management Systems” (LMS) that are chiefly produced by a handful of oligopolistic tech firms (Ideland 2021; Kerssens & van Dijck 2021; NEPC 2019). The platformization of education can be understood within the context of the “platforming” of hiring rides via Uber and Lyft, or the “platforming” of retail in relation to Amazon. The most powerful forms of platformization are driven by “rule setting companies” (Kerssens & van Dijck 2021 cf. Castells 2009) that integrate hardware, software and cloud database services together into cohesive, all-encompassing systems. The systems created by the biggest tech firms, ie. Apple, Google, Amazon and Microsoft are able to consolidate their oligopolistic position through “intraoperability”, by which a firm becomes progressively more integral and thereby more difficult to dislodge by a contracting school board or other public agency. Often touted as creating user-friendly “all-inclusive” seamless integration between services developed by the same company, the downside of intraoperability is the extent to which these services attached to the platform are only compatible with the other proprietary services of the same corporation, which tends to entrench its control over the end use of data. The result is the locking in of that company’s power as a vendor when contracted by government agencies because all systems have to run through it, making it hard to extricate. To avoid this scenario, Kerssens and van Dijck (2021) described how concerned authorities in the Netherlands have strived to maintain “interoperability”, whereby systems by rival companies are required to interface and be compatible with each other, through public regulation by school districts or the Ministry of Education, where final control over data is also decided (Chituc & Rittberger 2019). However, the biggest global tech firms that are increasingly oligopolistic, have often declined to participate in these public

interest regulatory systems. In the case of the Netherlands, they partnered with smaller national tech firms that did initially agree to interoperability in exchange for massive cloud resources, tech support and hardware integration. The big tech then gradually subverted the process and school districts in practice became subscribed to one oligopoly’s products, which then controls their online education landscape (Kerssens & van Dijck 2021).

Venture capital finance has poured into ed tech since the start of the pandemic, reaching US\$16 billion by the end of 2020, as investors heralded the “digital transformation” of education, and ensured they were well-placed to profit from the windfalls that they forecast (Williamson et al 2021: 117). From May 2021 to January 2022, the number of ed tech “unicorns” —the term for start-up firms with a valuation of over \$1 billion USD that are not listed on stock markets (excluding “mature” firms like Microsoft, Amazon or Google), grew from 25 to 32, with most based in the United States or China. Of these 32 firms, which range from providing private online tutoring to full suites of interactive K-12 ‘courses’ in the case of Outschool, 22 have reached “unicorn” status since 2020. They are estimated to be together valued at over \$100 billion USD (HolonIQ 2022). By drawing on its existing market share and the ubiquity of the free versions of its products, Google has succeeded in establishing itself as one of the world’s biggest ed tech firms. Williamson et al, re-dubbed the well-known description of “emergency remote teaching/learning” during the March-June 2020 first wave of the pandemic, as the “emergency digital delegation of state responsibility”, recounting how governments around the world found their solution to the need for remote learning by spending billions on hardware and software from firms led by Google. The company’s Chromebooks entered homes and classrooms optimized to promote its platform “Google Workspace for Education” including Google Meet, Google Classroom (claiming over 150 million users in 2021), enterprise level Gmail, and more. The scale of this firm’s dominance amid the “platformization” of education has led to its potential leverage over public education systems, now dependent on its hardware and software (Williamson et al 2021: 120).



How did Ontario's K-12 ed tech sector evolve to be dominated by for-profit, frequently oligopolistic firms, whose products have become so integral to the functioning of classrooms under the pandemic, and likely for the foreseeable future post pandemic? A brief history illustrates how political choices made at Queen's Park and to an extent by school boards, have shaped our current context. The use of computers on a wide scale to support K-12 education was initially coordinated through the formation of the Educational Computing Network of Ontario (ECNO) in the early 1980s as a joint initiative of school districts and the Ministry of Education. Its initial role was to develop and maintain software, primarily for usage by school districts for office administrative purposes. In 1996, under the Harris Conservative Government, support from the Ministry ended and ECNO became a non-profit co-operative run by its member school boards, for which it continued to produce software on a not-for-profit basis. However, in 2019, its primary product, the school administrative software package, K212, was privatized by sale for \$400,000 to a small Etobicoke, Ontario-based ed-tech company, Edsembli<sup>34</sup> (ECNO 2022). No longer producing and maintaining its own software in-house, ECNO now primarily functions to vet privacy, security and pedagogical features of (privately developed) tech applications for adoption by Ontario school districts. Having

34 Edsembli extols the virtues of virtual learning on its website, describing it as "the best of both worlds" in relation to hybrid learning and what it refers to as "traditional" ie. in-person education (Edsembli 2022). The web page quotes a claim widely repeated on ed tech websites, "On average, students remember 25-60% more of what they learn online than in-person," based on a purported study from the Research Institute of America. This authoritative sounding organization was a business-oriented research agency, focused on US taxation policy that became defunct in 2000. The study cited was likely performed in a university context in the late 1990s, with no peer review, but rather for investors interested in the early wave of e-learning (Snook 2019).

dropped its earlier ambitions to develop in-house tech, it extols its role in facilitating a "dynamic public and private sector partnership" (ECNO 2022).

Desire to Learn or D2L, is a much more ambitious, for-profit Waterloo, Ontario-based firm which, in part through contracts with the Provincial Government, has grown into a significant ed tech company, primarily catering to K-12 and post-secondary clients across North America, Europe, Australia, Singapore and Brazil, since its founding by a student at the University of Waterloo in 1999. Beginning in 2006, contracts for the development of online learning modules for various provincial ministries led to the licensing of learning platform software for the province's K-12 and post-secondary institutions, at a value of \$3 million by 2013. Controversy emerged in 2014 when former premier Dalton McGuinty, under whose tenure contracts with D2L had begun, became a lobbyist for the company, a year and a half after resigning from leading the Ontario Government (McGuinty asserted that he was helping to create jobs in Ontario) (Leslie 2014). The Ontario Government's contracts with D2L to provide a "Virtual Learning Environment" Learning Management System, known as Brightspace, for all publicly funded school districts was most recently extended in 2018 under the former ruling Liberals for four years, with options for a six-year extension, at a cost of \$84 million. The Brightspace LMS platform allows functionality with other major video platforms like Google Meet, Microsoft Teams and Zoom, as well as its in-house Bongo application (Mahoney 2020).

The enormous expansion of its platform, reaching 15 million users worldwide, its centrality within schooling and increasing institutional reliance during the pandemic in Ontario, coincided with D2L raising \$120 million in its initial public offering on the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX) where it is listed as DTOL. The company hoped for a \$1 billion valuation. In 2021, D2L earned 20 percent of its revenue from K-12 education and 60 percent from post-secondary institutions. In 2020, it boasted a 15 percent rise in revenue to \$126.4 million, which ascended further with a 20 percent increase between January 31, 2021, and July 31, 2021 (Davis 2021; Rauf 2021).



D2L's impressive rise remains small compared to a global behemoth like Google, especially since the former is unable to exercise the latter's economies of scale for research, resources for cloud databases or range of products to corner a client's services via establishing intraoperability. The rapid expansion of tech applications within schools in recent years pre-dating the pandemic, has been enabled considerably through their grassroots adoption and promotion by tech savvy teachers. Arguably, no single company has benefited more than Google. The "early adoptions" of new tech are formalized when these teachers are provided with training and free versions of the tech products. Google offers a hierarchy of certifications for teachers as "coaches", "trainers" or "innovators" in the use of its products among their peers (Ideland 2021). Teachers may earn these certifications for free by completing online courses offered by Google, independent of their school district employer (Google 2022). In addition to making a teacher proficient in using digital resources in their work, certifications may also benefit teachers as a credential to add to their resume (a suggestion by Google), within a context in which a socially constructed imperative for schools to "digitize" is taken for granted by many school administrators. Certifications determined and issued by Google may come to be seen as bearing an authority alongside teacher Additional Qualifications issued by Ontario universities. Under the Ford Government, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), an ostensibly arms-length regulatory agency for the teaching profession, has lost its self-regulating role and has largely served to rubber stamp the government's directives.<sup>35</sup> Given the ensuing apparent political harmony between the

35 Under the Ford Government, changes to the Ontario College of Teachers' Governing Council reduced its numbers from 31 to 12, and shifted from a model in which a majority, including the chair, were K-12 educators elected by their colleagues, to being entirely comprised of appointees made by a government-directed supervisor. In 2022, half were teachers, academics or school district leaders, and half were a mix of non-profit directors and corporate executives.

pro-privatization Ford Government and the OCT, it is not a far stretch to imagine the OCT in the future granting formal recognition to credentials created by Google and other major ed tech companies. Such a measure would be both a novel technique in the privatization of post-secondary education and would give considerable additional legitimacy and popularity for these credentials and further prominence for their firms within Ontario's school system.

Google's enormous expansion within public education, thanks to organic up-take by teachers and staff, is greatly assisted by its basic suite of products being free, favouring the very biggest tech companies that can afford to provide widely used, free versions of their software, while earning revenue from more advanced institutional subscriptions, advertising or gathering user data. Pre-pandemic, while many school districts officially operated through enterprise subscriptions to Microsoft Office and its related products, a large proportion of educators on their own volition used Google's *G Suite for Education*, now known as *Google Workspace for Education Fundamentals*, including its apps, Google Classroom and Google Meet, considering them to be more user-friendly and dynamic. The popularity of these programs which also streamline administrative tasks, including easily enabling students to upload assignments, allowing absent students and their parents to access materials, emailing automated reminders to students who have not submitted work, and generating individual progress reports, among the more basic features, is also unsurprising in the context of the increases in class size and general intensification of work described in the previous two sections of this report. Free products like Google Docs and Google Slides have often been more accessible for students using their own devices than downloading software officially licensed by their school district. While each of these products may be used separately, per the principle of intraoperability, they are designed to work seamlessly with Google Classroom, and are pre-installed on the Google Chromebooks, bulk purchased by school districts and distributed to students during the pandemic.



As a result, there was a degree of grassroots resistance from both teachers and students when, at the start of emergency remote learning, many school districts rushed to standardize their e-learning platforms, typically opting for D2L's Brightspace, given that it was already paid for by the Ministry of Education. Postdoctoral researcher in e-learning and TDSB secondary teacher Beyhan Farhadi tweeted on March 25, 2020, the results of an informal poll over social media of several hundred Ontario secondary teachers of their preferred LMS, with 18 percent selecting D2L's Brightspace and 72 percent choosing Google Classroom, and 10 percent other platforms (Farhadi 2020). While school districts may impose their selected platform (Brightspace) by fiat, the grumblings of a large proportion of the teaching staff who preferred the Google Classroom with which they were already familiar and found more user-friendly, acts as an influential form of free, grassroots lobbying to the benefit of one of the world's most powerful tech companies, making its strategy of providing entry-level, free software an excellent investment.

## Analysis

It may be an excessive assignment of agency and intention to claim that this context of the consolidation of ed tech was a deliberate objective of the Ford Government during the pandemic. However, it is evident that the influence of for-profit ed tech companies within the K-12 education system has grown enormously in Ontario, as it has in public school systems around the world that have the resources to enter into large-scale procurement contracts (Ideland 2021), and this development has certainly been welcomed and encouraged by the Ford Government. Periods of fully remote learning have entrenched the already growing influence of big tech in how schooling functions, from the ubiquity of course management platforms like Brightspace and Google Classroom, to increasing reliance on platforms like Google's YouTube as teaching aids (Coulter 2021). Even after the return to in-person learning, these systems have continued to influence and frame classroom teaching,

with greater reliance on online resources than on pedagogical techniques based on more traditional resources such as photocopied handouts, notebooks or physical textbooks. While the latter, print-based media had long also included vectors for the corporatization of education, perhaps led by the UK-based global publishing conglomerate Pearson (Froese-Germain 2016), the digitization of education has created many new prospects for ongoing marketization, with arguably a greater tendency to entrench powerful oligopolistic firms like Google. Williamson et al, (2021: 118) observed that widespread calls from many policy makers, academics, and business groups at the start of the pandemic for "short-term opportunities for digital experimentation have evolved into demands for long-term digital transformation," as the pandemic dragged on and new technologies became more entrenched in everyday schooling.

The profound implications of the "digitization" of education through LMS platforms like Brightspace and Google Classroom, that are now used in the vast majority of Ontario's schools for teachers' work and student learning, can also be understood in how it restructures schooling from a "traditional" system defined by a combination of attributes including place-specificity and difference (ie. based on the particular pedagogical styles of teachers or priorities of a given school or community) to a "network" based on "flows" (Ideland 2021, cf. Castells 2011). In practical, fundamental terms, this can be seen in the shift from schooling being centered on teachers delivering lessons in a specific physical location, within a set period of time, to posting live or pre-recorded lectures and activity modules online that can be viewed or completed at any time, from any place, by students. The decoupling of schooling from buildings and scheduled classes, in favour of personalized schedules from wherever and whenever a "user" wishes, in line with the Silicon Valley cultural ideals of creativity, flexibility and the cultivation of individual freedom and choice (Houlden & Veletsianos 2021), is reflected in the rationales promoted by the Ford Government for the expansion of mandatory e-learning. However, in reality, there are still constrictions of time and place. As People for Education, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, and



the teachers' federations have all asked, where will students do the e-learning courses? Who will supervise them to ensure they participate on-time? Will this be done by teachers within public schools, or will these roles be foisted onto parents at home or unregulated entities and uncertified personnel? Will teachers be expected to "flexibilize" their working schedule to be continuously online, providing round-the-clock feedback at the behest of students and parents? Absent from the optimistic futuristic prognostics are concerns about uneven access, due to forms of systemic inequity, to the resources required (Houlden & Veletsianos 2021), as well as the implications for the mental health and stress of both students and teachers from the destructuring and open endedness of schooling and teachers' work. There are implications both for students and teachers, grounded within the broader neoliberal flexibilization of work (Houlden & Veletsianos 2021) in relation to teachers' labour, and in relation to the ideal graduates adapted for the "world of work" that they will enter.

The transformation of form and medium seen in Ontario is also accompanied by a philosophical rationalization originating from the ed tech sector of Silicon Valley: the distinctive role of the teacher applying their professional judgement to interpret curriculum and create pedagogy, is replaced with the teacher in an arguably more passive role as "learning coach". According to Ideland's (2021) interviews with Swedish "edupreneurs", proponents of digitization and platformization of education, in their roles as business people, education NGO staff and classroom teachers, often assert this process replaces a hierarchy of knowledge (ie. teacher giving knowledge to students) with a horizontal, individualized, "flow" of knowledge which students learn to access with the help of "coaching" from their teacher through the digital platforms. Some proponents assert that even this role will be diminished with the progressive introduction of artificial intelligence "assistants" personalized for the needs of each student, in which case the teachers' role will be re-centered again according to one interviewee as, "supporting and pep talk... Maybe also the social fostering, which is more difficult to solve digitally." (Ideland 2021: 39).

Advocates of this view of education generally align with an idealized 'Peter Pan' Silicon Valley tech sector culture in which supposed "flat hierarchies" enable creativity, innovation and the unleashing of passion (Ideland 2021). Conversely, this purported openness, personalization and freedom also enables "responsibilization" (Foucault 2007), whereby individuals are held to be personally accountable and are fully evaluated based on their effectiveness within this system—a disciplinary neoliberal mode of governance (Houlden & Veletsianos 2021). Meanwhile, the impact of systemic and structural inequities created by capitalism, racism and misogyny, as well as individual special needs, are ignored or overlooked.<sup>36</sup> Despite the appearance of empowerment, this worldview would surely have regressive consequences when applied to policies affecting Ontario's students.

While access to sources of information via online learning that is enabled through digital platforms is potentially infinite (creating the pedagogical challenge of how to interpret it), what we see in practice is not a *laissez faire* system, but the solidification of a new, more centralized hierarchy, constrained by the LMS platforms, and a standardization and homogenization of teaching, enabled by the private, for-profit platform provider, on whose LMS teaching resources are curated. In the case of Ontario, this would ultimately be implemented by TVO/TFO at the behest of the Ford Government. According to TVO's proposals analyzed by People for Education, local teachers delivering both synchronous and primarily asynchronous courses within its centralized system will be provided with a default course shell, including lesson plans, resources and assignments, which can be removed or supplemented according to the instructor's preference. However as with other curricula structured around "out of the box" instructional resources, it is easy to imagine a tendency of the default course template

36 However, within Google, collective protests by contractors and employees against sexual harassment, and for unionization, have earned headlines in recent years. Revelations of Facebook's complicity in maintaining an online environment that harms children's mental health, and also undermining democracy and empowering the far right, have also diminished much of the tech sector's idealized image.



becoming less subject to modification by the individual teacher, due to habit, or through a formal mandate for a standardized learning process. The likely result in this scenario is a curtailing of teachers' professional autonomy to apply their full expertise to address the particular and unique needs of their students, and a reduction to the role of "coaches" who interpret data produced by student participation in these LMS platforms as a proxy for the assessment of learning (see Ratner, et al 2019; NEPC 2019). The result is a deskilling and deprofessionalization of educators.

It is likely the case that realizing the ideal held up by the Silicon Valley-inspired tech enthusiasts of digitization, enabling a free-roaming style of education in which students are largely self-directed in doing online research, collides with another dominant contemporary concept in education politics, in which Ontario's ruling Conservatives are particularly invested. This is the notion that schooling must prioritize students absorbing "the basics"/"3Rs" of numeracy/literacy, as measured by EQAO test score results, lest the province's economic competitiveness perish in the face of global capital. Along this line of thinking, a large body of knowledge will be deemed to be best learned in a highly prescribed way, perhaps through artificial intelligence-assisted online modules, as are currently being used on a wide scale by private tutoring firms Squirrel AI and Alo7 in China (Hao 2019). Again, this replaces one purported "hierarchy" based around teachers' expertise, with one centralized around the platform providing this new content. Ideland (2021) further observes that digitization or platformization of education also amounts to its de facto marketization/privatization, given that through digitization/platformization private sector actors enter the public education system and take over core roles in structuring the experiences of teaching and learning.

Thus, we are discussing two sets of implications here from the platformization of education. The first is what it means for teachers to surrender their roles related to their subject-area expertise, and expertise in teaching those subjects through pedagogy, to become that of a "learning coach" and interpreter of digitally generated data, through the engagement of students

in more centralized systems. The second, which is typically only superficially acknowledged by the digitization enthusiasts, are the implications of these processes for student wellbeing in general. Even less addressed, in line with the aforementioned tendency towards overlooking structural and systemic inequity, are its implications in particular, for students with special needs and/or from marginalized backgrounds.

## Future Directions

While there is currently no provision for the recognition of its courses towards an elementary or secondary school diploma in Ontario, a further step along ed tech's trajectory towards privatization may be the Silicon Valley-based Outschool, founded in 2021 and with a valuation in early 2022 of \$3 billion USD. It has been described as the "Netflix of education" —a website where students choose from among thousands of courses delivered over Zoom, which last from a single class to a semester in groups of up to 18, for an average fee of \$18 USD per class. It is purportedly popular among home schooling parents and has grown rapidly during the pandemic. No credentials are required for the instructors accepted to post their courses on the website, other than a criminal background check and residence in Canada, the US or the UK, and Outschool states in its Terms of Service that it "cannot guarantee the authenticity, quality, safety, legality, or appropriateness of the Classes" (Outschool 2022c). The instructors receive 70 percent of the fees paid by their students, with 30 percent remaining with Outschool (Outschool 2022a; Randazza 2022). Like many ride or delivery app platforms, Outschool promotes itself as a flexible source of income, on your own schedule. Similarly, its Terms of Service state that teachers do not become employees of Outschool through this process. As an instructor, you have the ability to set your own course prices and then compete for student enrolment in the free market of its course listings, ranked by default by popularity ratings. UK academic Sam Sellars has described





Outschool as the “Uberization” of teachers’ work and a new frontier for the privatization of education.<sup>37</sup>

Outschool’s miscellaneous courses do not currently align with the official curriculum of any governmental authority in Canada or the US, appearing to limit its scope to actually supplant the education provided by public schooling. However, in the context of the Omicron wave in January-February 2022 and school closures, Outschool invited public and private schools in the US to apply to receive free access for their students to its online courses (Outschool 2022b). This “limited time offer” appears to be a shrewd strategy to increase the legitimacy and profile of Outschool. Given the recent history of the neoliberalization of education in the US, including the growth of publicly funded, privately run charter schools, intersecting with the rapid growth of the for-profit ed tech sector during the pandemic, and along with the ongoing precarization of employment in general, it is easy to imagine Outschool being a next step in the privatization of education. One could see Outschool as a potential inspiration for TVO/TFO’s roster of online Independent Learning Centre courses, with the addition of curricular guidelines and public funding to cover tuition. In the meantime, Outschool would be a product ideally suited to absorb the Ford Government’s cash transfers to parents, making them truly proto-school vouchers.<sup>38</sup>

Is it possible for ed tech to take K-12 education into a different direction that supports rather than undermines public schools, teachers and students? Does ed tech have to be outsourced to for-profit corporations? In her book, *The Sport and Prey of Capitalists* (2019) journalist Linda McQuaig presents a fascinating account of Canada’s important history of public enterprise —that is, public agencies that produced goods and services for the common good rather than for profit. Her timely examples include the Connaught Laboratories, formerly based at the University of Toronto, which prior to its privatization in the early 1980s, invented and mass-produced vaccines at-cost, aiding in the worldwide eradication of diseases including polio and smallpox, and the founding of Ontario Hydro, which enabled the rapid electrification of rural regions of the province and spurred industrialization with affordable energy. What if, rather than becoming a vehicle for enabling Public-Private-Partnerships for a narrow range of school software, ECNO or a similar entity could be bolstered by the combined resources and scale of Ontario’s school districts and Provincial Government, into becoming a non-profit developer of the key tech platforms used by the province’s students and teachers? Rather than pursuing market share or harvestable user data, we could imagine ed tech being developed at scale, to complement and reinforce – rather than seek to supplant – teachers’ expertise and professionalism, a mechanism truly created with the interests of learners in mind.

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37 Remarks at the conference of the Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education, May 21, 2021.

38 Another example of the digitization and privatization of education, in this case alongside the profound deprofessionalization of teachers, is the US-based for-profit Bridge International Academies, which operates hundreds of private schools in Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria through tuition fees and capital from Silicon Valley investors. Low paid instructors without teaching certifications lead classes by reading daily lesson plans off of tablets, in which every word and minute is scripted from the US head office, and the instructors are evaluated on the extent to which this plan is followed to the letter. In response to a campaign by national teachers’ unions and Education International, the World Bank ceased financing private schools and governments have closed unsafe schools (Ludwig & Webster 2022; Anderson 2018).

# Conclusion

Despite the unprecedented historic, political, economic and social implications of the coronavirus pandemic, and the active interventions required to contain it, there were significant continuities from the Ford Government's pre-pandemic K-12 education policies, which imposed fiscal austerity and promoted privatization, while maintaining an adversarial and partisan posture towards critics and particularly the teachers' federations. In the Ford Government's battle for public opinion led by Education Minister Lecce, the message consistently presented was that schools were safe and well-funded. Much of the additional funding provided for pandemic-related health and safety measures in fact came from the Federal Government, supplemented by school boards from their own reserves, and by the Provincial Government. While vital and overdue improvements to ventilation were carried out in some schools and portable HEPA filters were placed in many classrooms, not all schools that needed them benefited from the more costly structural retrofits. To the extent that it was acknowledged at all, insufficient attention was given to the risk of airborne transmission, as opposed to more easily contained physical surface or droplet-driven transmission of the coronavirus within schools. Extra funding for additional teachers to lower class sizes and to staff standalone virtual schools was short-lived, and did not evenly improve conditions in all school districts. Its withdrawal led to widespread hybrid/fractured learning and large classes, which not only made physical distancing difficult, but also exacerbated the challenge for teachers of diagnosing and addressing the learning gaps experienced by students during prolonged school closures. While formal legal challenges launched by the federations against unsafe workplaces were dismissed, work refusals by staff at sites with major outbreaks and protests by educators and parents against practices like hybrid learning attracted public attention and helped put pressure on the government.

During the initial "emergency remote learning" phase from March to June 2020, educators adapted from classroom to remote teaching. They grappled with, on the one hand, top-down directives from the Provincial Government, specifying grading policies and the number of synchronous minutes per

week, issued without any prior consultation. On the other, they received minimal guidance and relied on the support of their peers for accommodating the new realities of student learning while online. During the following school years in 2020-21 and 2021-22, measures intended to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, including new health and safety routines, cohorting and quad/octomesters, created profound challenges for teaching, including the loss of preparation time for protracted periods, resulting in the negation of its intended purpose and the ensuing intensification of work. There was also the challenge of sufficient instructional time to prepare classes to succeed on EQAO standardized tests and also address prior learning gaps. Hybrid/fractured learning has been particularly disruptive, and many educators fear that it could become entrenched in a post-pandemic future as a cost-saving measure. Many of these changes were particularly difficult for new teachers, who lacked baselines of "normal" teaching experiences, as well as access to a full range of professional development opportunities, and whose work generally became more precarious.

The pandemic has created new prospects for the privatization of education. The centralization in TVO/TFO of the administration of e-learning courses, which have grown enormously in profile due to remote learning and the requirement of secondary students taking at least two courses to graduate, opens up many potential forms of privatization. The Ford Government's cash transfers to the parents of students during the pandemic, while claiming to enable families to pay for expenses arising during remote learning, ignored that these needs could have been more easily and appropriately met by local school districts. While depriving the public system of needed funding and potentially subsidizing private education, the transfers could be a prefigurative form of school voucher. The pandemic rapidly accelerated existing trends towards the "digitization" and "platformization" of education, in the process facilitating privatization. The computers and learning management systems that have been in great demand have overwhelmingly been outsourced by governments including Ford's in Ontario, to for-profit ed tech companies that have grown dramatically amid the demand for hardware and software during remote learning.



The principal beneficiaries include some of the most powerful firms in the world, such as Google. It appears the increased role for ed tech in education will outlast the pandemic; the political question is whether it will prioritize the public interest or private profit.

In the context of vacillations on policy during the pandemic, commentators have periodically suggested that Premier Ford is neither ideologically driven nor closely aligned with the traditional big business backers of the PC Party<sup>39</sup>. Rather, he simply craves broad public approval and reelection (Cohn 2021). It is said that the best evidence of a government's true priorities are the actions it takes at the beginning of its term in power —when new governments typically enjoy a honeymoon in popular opinion and less organized opposition. Among the first substantive actions of the Ford Government in 2018 was the repealing of progressive labour law legislation, implemented by the outgoing Wynne Liberal Government, including paid sick leave and a planned raise to the minimum wage. The following spring, the Ford Government announced its sweeping cuts to public education. Resistance ensued and then the pandemic arrived. Ford and his key ministers have since strived to cultivate an image as compassionate and even-keeled leaders<sup>40</sup>, which served them well during the arrival of the pandemic and when the successive waves declined. Tellingly, Ford firmly resisted two urgent policy measures which had wide public support, including among PC voters, yet were clearly against his ideological orientation: the reinstatement of paid sick days

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39 However, a clear correlation has been identified between intensive lobbying by Ontario's most powerful corporations in retail, construction, logistics and manufacturing, and otherwise inexplicable exemptions from pandemic public health policies for these firms (Warnica & Bailey 2021).

40 Notwithstanding several back bench MPPs, who vocally opposed public health measures and were expelled from the PC caucus in the legislature.

and the government takeover of long-term care and nursing homes with high numbers of resident deaths. He ultimately implemented half measures in both cases. By the second year of the pandemic, public opinion became more volatile, with pressure from both the many concerned that the government was not doing enough, and vocal but marginal anti-vaccine and far-right activists who were upset the government was doing anything at all. With the next provincial election on the horizon in June 2022, Ford has made overtures towards sectors of the political block otherwise expected to mobilize against him. These include some important private sector unions and even a major public sector union, despite Bill 124 remaining in effect, which caps public employee wage increases at one percent at a time of rising inflation. Yet Ford and Minister Lecce's hostility towards the teachers' federations has remained consistent, likely calculating (correctly) that there was no prospect for a pre-electoral rapprochement following the policies and events detailed in this report.

Soon after the election of the Ford Government in 2018, the author met with a Toronto-area PC MPP. In response to queries, she said with a smile that despite her personal support for the measure, school vouchers were not in the plans for *this* government, suggesting that it could be in a future term. In relation to mandatory e-learning and its centralization under TVO/TFO, as well as cash payments to parents, ostensibly for education expenses, there are significant precedents that a PC Government could build on in a second term in office to further undermine public education and expand its private provision. Similarly, the experience of hybrid learning and the restructuring of teaching timetables and staff shortages, leading to the loss of daily prep time, are also disruptive experiences that a government interested in austerity and unconcerned with the integrity of the teaching profession, may be interested in revisiting and entrenching.

While there are significant trends established or reinforced during the pandemic towards the privatization of education and the further intensification and precariousness of teachers' work, this trajectory is not inevitable. At various times in Ontario,



elsewhere in Canada and around the world in recent decades, movements of educators, parents and others concerned with equity and the common good have emerged to turn back initiatives that would degrade and diminish public education. The coronavirus pandemic has produced enormous suffering for many people and disrupted pre-existing patterns of everyday life. Yet how societies and governments respond is ultimately a political decision, in which there are many different possible directions. Amid all of these challenges and threats, we can still choose to work towards strengthening and rebuilding public education.

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# Appendix: List of Interviews

- Northern Ontario Secondary Teacher, Interviewed November 2021
- GTA Secondary Teacher 1, Interviewed November 2021
- Provincial Union Official 1, Interviewed November 2021
- Central Ontario Secondary Teacher 1, Interviewed November 2021
- Former Provincial Government Education Policy Advisor 1, Interviewed November 2021
- Southwest Elementary Teacher 1, Interviewed November 2021
- Central Ontario Secondary Teacher 2, Interviewed November 2021
- Southwest Elementary Teacher 2, Interviewed November 2021
- Southwest Elementary Teacher 3, Interviewed November 2021
- Provincial Union Official 2, Interviewed November 2021
- Southwest Catholic Teacher 1, Interviewed December 2021
- Provincial Union Official 2, Interviewed December 2021
- Southwest Catholic Teacher 2, Interviewed December 2021
- Eastern Ontario Catholic Teacher, Interviewed December 2021
- Southwest Francophone Teacher, Interviewed December 2021
- Northern Ontario Francophone Teacher, Interviewed December 2021
- GTA Elementary Teacher 1, Interviewed December 2021
- GTA Elementary Teacher 2, Interviewed December 2021
- Provincial Union Official 3, Interviewed December 2021
- Former Provincial Government Education Policy Advisor 2, Interviewed December 2021
- GTA Secondary Teacher 2, Interviewed December 2021
- GTA Elementary Teacher 3, Interviewed December 2021
- GTA Secondary Teacher 3, Interviewed December 2021
- Provincial Union Official 4, Interviewed December 2021
- Provincial Union Official 5, Interviewed January 2022









EMBARGOED  
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