

URGENT: #PivotPLAN for a Safer September in Ontario Elementary Schools

August 14, 2020

I teach grade 1 in Trillium Lakelands DSB. I am acutely aware of the anxiety and worry in parents and teachers at this time - I too am feeling stressed like never before in my 30 year career. Our worry and concern is flooding media and social media with **calls for smaller class sizes** as one part of assuring ourselves a safer return to school. It's basic. Even though Minister Lecce announced increased funding on August 13th, it is not enough to hire the requisite staff to reduce class sizes significantly. "If the province were to lower all elementary classes to 15 students, as has been requested by many critics, it would cost more than \$1 billion, according to estimates by the Ontario Liberal Party." *Jacquie Miller, Ottawa Citizen, 14.8.20*

And that is \$1 billion only for staffing. I am not a fan of this current government, and I dare say that if @1every5 were in place, we would not be in this mess as our Minister of Education and Deputy would be versed in how a classroom and a school operate. That aside, I do recognize that our province was not in a fiscally stable situation before Covid hit. I also recognize that we are not just staring down a few months here, but will likely need to be approaching school in an alternate way for 2-3 years, so where possible, if we can approach challenges with creativity, it will benefit us.

Thinking about a solution to the class size problem brought a flood of ideas. And thus evolved my proposed **#PivotPLAN**. It is my analysis that has evolved since May as I have spoken with parents, teachers, occasional teachers, principals, a trustee, and community members. Does it cover all the bases? No. But I challenge everyone to think about back-to-school a little differently. So please give this a read and comment with your thoughts and questions. And please be kind; I am but one teacher who is trying to better a difficult situation. If you see takeaways here that are worth sharing, then I ask you to do so, so that we can raise awareness and get the attention of the government.

Before I get into the nitty gritty, I want to highlight some **tenets**, which are:

1. **If we fail at this back-to-school experiment, we could very well put our province back into lockdown.** So whether people have children in elementary school or not, it is in everyone's best interest to make this work – more on that shortly.
2. **Any back to school plan depends on teachers** being there day in and day out.
3. **The current plan from the Ontario Government is economy-centric.** By that I mean that it assumes the stance that education (getting kids back to school) serves employers and our economy (so that parents can get back to work and we can get the economy back on it's feet again). Not that I don't believe that this is important, I do, but at this time I believe it to be a backwards approach. I believe that for now we would do well to regard this major

move of back-to-school as something that **the economy needs to flex** with, in other words, employers and employees need to make this work, otherwise, we're back to #1 above. One more caveat: if you read this and compare it to what we used to have, before Covid hit, then you will be disappointed. If you read this, and compare it to lockdown, then you will see the feasibility of it.

Here are the basics of this plan:

In terms of teachers, it's all hands on deck. Specifically, the following teachers all take a homeroom class: core French teachers, specialist teachers, prep teachers, itinerant teachers, consultants, and teachers seconded to the Ministry. Instead of looking to hire externally, use the resources that we have and are already on the payroll. This saves us money \$\$.

- Yes, we have a federal mandate that all students are to get a certain number of minutes of French instruction per year; perhaps the son of the older Trudeau who implemented this requirement might find a way to waive it temporarily during the opening of schools in this pandemic.
- Yes, teacher federations would need to amend their collective agreements to make this possible – they may be willing to do so if parents and teachers overwhelmingly want this plan, and if the government also steps up to the plate in all the ways that are needed to put this plan in place.
- **We do not need consultants at this time.**
- **We do not need curriculum writers at this time.**
- Exempt from the call for 'all hands on deck' in terms of teachers on the ground would need to be our local federation Presidents and VP's – they will never have worked so hard as now
- Also exempt are the teachers of system level classes e.g. Practical Academic Learning Skills classes, and Coaching classes etc., those need to stay as they have been – their own autonomous bubble - they also have a lower class size by design
- The status of **Special Education teachers** in this plan bears more thought as we would likely need a Spec Ed teacher contingent in every school, to look out for our Special Education students
 - ➔ perhaps one per school? Depending on the population
 - ➔ or VP takes this on? – not sure
 - ➔ keep in mind with our special needs students, that when class sizes are smaller, it's more possible for their teacher to cater to their needs
 - ➔ also keep in mind that whereas peer mentoring and assistance has often been a successful strategy in the past when it comes to assisting students with special needs, that will now be highly curtailed

I did some **rough calculations for my school**, for example: we have 22 full time teachers, and two part time teachers. If we were to **increase the allotment for our part time teachers**, (which

is what I am advocating for, in every school,) we would have 24 teachers (not including ECE's). Before re-registration we had about 425 students. Not including bringing 'home' 1 staff member who is a consultant in the board, the straight division gives us **class sizes of 17.7** (including reducing combined JK/SK classes to that size). If we include our consultant, then the class sizes **reduce to 17.0**. Of course this could be massaged in every building a little bit, depending on where our special needs students are, but to me that sounds far more manageable, than the numbers we are staring down in the current plan (e.g. status quo where Kindergarten has a cap of 29, Grades 1-3, a cap of 20 but can get up to 23, and junior and intermediate classes in the 30's).

- ◆ those teachers who are not full time, **bump them up to 1.0 FTE** and give them a class all day – so yes, a cost \$\$ there, but fairly low
- ◆ there would be **no movement of part-time teachers between schools**; consulting with administrators they decide at which school they will stay, and get increased to 1.0 FTE

Students would be with that one teacher only, all day.

The plan then could go one of two ways, either:

- a) **students would go home 48 minutes early, every day**, to give teachers their prep time, or
 - b) **students go to school 4 full days per week**, and on the 5th day teachers get their prep (either at school or at home) and deep cleaning of the school can happen
- I recognize that this goes against the **Education Act** in Ontario, which stipulates that students are in school for 300min/day, 5 days per week, however we are in a pandemic and perhaps our government could get to work, pronto, on making this temporary change

Consideration: under the current proposed plan, prep teachers come into the classroom to give the Home Room teacher their prep time. First of all, this exposes our students to another staff member. **The prep teacher is being exposed to 7 classes every day, could become infected, and transmit the virus to all of the classes that they teach.**

As well, as a HR teacher I have questions about a prep teacher coming into my room:

- How productive can I be if I don't have time in my class without students? (E.g., I will need to use the computer to prepare lessons for the smart board, and it is highly likely that the prep teacher will be using that same technology.)
- I can't go to the staff room
- If I stay in my class I can't take my mask off, and I can't get that psychological break that we are all going to need, and it is unproductive time
- In short, having a prep teacher come into my room is stress inducing.

It occurs to me that **one of the largest investments into positive mental health supports for our students and parents would be having unstressed teachers** (or as de-stressed as possible).

So to de-stress our teachers we need to:

- Provide them with lower class sizes

- Assure them that sick children will not be coming to school
- Provide up to date ventilation systems (thank you for the HVAC rehab funding on Aug 13th Minister Lecce - 3 ½ weeks to curtains up, but appreciated nonetheless)
- Assure them that they will be the only teacher teaching that class
- Give them prep time without students around
- Shelve the new Math curriculum for the moment
- Lower expectations radically for report cards this year
- At the beginning of this return-to-school, have **the entire province working on keeping children in 2 bubbles only: their home bubble and their class bubble***

If we went with option a) where students go home 48 minutes early, teachers would have time to prep in their room and likely sanitize a lot of things that custodians don't and won't touch (e.g. books, tech, manipulatives etc.)

Option b) comes with two benefits:

- it allows for deep cleaning in the schools on that 5th day (which could be the middle of the week, or Friday - whatever works for a district), and also
- it would save on bussing – offsetting the cost of increased transportation expenses because of spacing students on school buses

The economy needs to be flexible, to help make this a #SaferSeptember:

- **Employers need to negotiate with their employees who have children in school**
- One parent per family will need to be able to come into work after safely seeing their child(ren) to school, and
- One parent per family will need to be home earlier to get their kids from the bus or to pick them up from school.
- In a solid community effort to keep kids safe, could we make this sacrifice?
- I keep hearing from our Premier that “Ontario is Stronger When We Work Together”...
- In a solid provincial effort to keep ourselves out of lockdown and on a positively upward economic trajectory, could we temporarily commit to making this happen?

With this plan there would be **no before or after school daycare programs** – parents need to negotiate with their bosses to be able to respect the new school day schedule. Keeping our classroom bubbles intact is paramount.

- For now, daycare programs would cater to pre-school children only
- Perhaps the Provincial and Federal Governments would be willing to step in and subsidize

With this plan, for the moment, there would be **no extra curricular activities, generated by the school or outside of the school.**

Students have their classroom bubble, and their home bubble, (and possibly a bus bubble) - that's it. When we institute this, and we are stable for a number of weeks, and our district numbers stay low, or keep dropping, maybe then we can start cohorting classes (e.g. 2 out for recess at a time). When that works, and we are stable for a number of weeks, and our jurisdictional numbers stay low, maybe then we can start extra curricular activities etc. Phase things in for school boards, as was done with regions in the province. Or break school boards down into areas since our boards are so large, (e.g. Trillium Lakelands could be broken into the 3 regions of City of Kawartha Lakes, Haliburton, and Muskoka).

There are **empty classrooms in schools all across the province** now that many families have chosen online for their children / our students. Use them to help lower class sizes. Once they have been used, **community spaces need to be secured** to spill over into. It was reassuring to hear Minister Lecce finally refer to this on August 13 as a sanctioned move. Yes, there would be a cost \$\$ attached to that, however, first of all, these spaces are not being used right now – they are closed. And secondly, I am willing to bet that many communities would waive fees, or only ask for the costs of cleaning and utilities to be covered. It takes a village to raise a child, and I am confident that my home village of Haliburton would willingly jump in and help out.

- one argument against using community spaces is that they are not outfitted with the same security as schools are with regards armed intruders – we need to weigh the risks of possible armed intruders against this invisible virus that is routinely admitted through locked doors, unseen

I believe that the current plan proposed by the government is depending on a good number of parents keeping their children at home. With respect, I don't think that there are many parents in my county who can afford to keep their children at home in September. Regardless, it is good for all if some students can stay home. If this is the case, the best would be, if a reorganization were to happen, to reduce sizes further, e.g. if a class had 17 registered but only 5 students showed up (e.g. 12 changed their minds and opted for remote learning), then shuffle some students around so that all of the class sizes come *down* even further in that school. And let that be okay. Let a school with smaller class sizes exist as their own safer island.

A few more considerations:

Occasional Teachers:

- Firstly, if we are stringent with screening, if **students are kept home when ill** (SO vitally important!) then we will have fewer sick teachers.
- If teachers' stress load is lowered significantly by adopting measures in this plan, we will have fewer sick teachers.
- But we *will* have some sick teachers, especially when flu season hits, so what if we had 'Designated Occasional Teachers' who are assigned to one school only?... This bears more discussion.

- A twisted way to look at it is this: **if we are highly successful in protecting our teachers, then there will be very little work for Occasional Teachers, and that would be a good thing.** Not that we don't love our Occasional Teachers, but we don't want to have to need them for the foreseeable future. Like "Housing Starts" are an index to gauge the health of our economy? I can see "Occasional Teacher Use" stats being quoted - perversely, when they are low, we are doing well (clearly not OTs, but definitely the province).
- All of that said, our Provincial and/or Federal governments need to step in and subsidize this group of workers whom we hope not to need. They are in an extremely tenuous situation risk-wise and employment-wise and need special consideration.

EA's:

- at this point my thinking is that if a child needs an EA, that they have that EA for the entire day e.g. the EA cannot travel from class to class
- One approach (which principals and VP's) do instinctively, is to group students with special needs into one class so that the EA can assist several in the same class at the same time; this approach will be especially necessary this fall
- As the approach above will not always be possible, this will definitely represent another cost \$\$ item.
- If an EA is part time – they work in one classroom, and then leave school early

Buses: * For those students who go on a bus, this is their 3rd bubble - if it is not managed carefully, this could be detrimental

- Is it up to our bus drivers to manage the 3rd bubble? This feels like a huge responsibility
- More frequent, regular, deep cleaning of our buses is critical
- In a cost saving and community-involving move, could we put the call out to volunteers to disinfect buses? To ride buses, to manage the cohort on each bus?

Student Monitoring:

Feedback from Julie R, Ontario Parent

I realize not everyone has the knowledge I have about PPE and IPAC protocols but I believe that many parents and other volunteers who are available during the day would be willing to get it. I proposed my recommendations to our school principal and was shot down as apparently parents/volunteers are not part of the equation at this point with [our board]. **I believe that available parents and community volunteers that have had vulnerable sector checks and are willing and able, should be included in plans. That they learn PPE and IPAC protocols and be on hand every day to ensure masks, sanitizing hands and hand washing as well as social distancing from other cohorts is monitored and enforced (gently and politely).**

Teachers, principals and support staff were overloaded before COVID and now with all of these new safety protocols, different teaching delivery methods etc. **They cannot be expected to also monitor all of the children for compliance and make sure every child is following protocols.** Many children in my town don't have internet access at home as there is none available in bush - something Doug Ford and Lecce never addressed in this

“new plan” and therefore, will most likely be attending school or having to pick up written materials for home learning.

Whether we pull information off MoH website for our own training or public health steps in to train/lend support. As adults, it isn't hard to learn. We can have one person at entrance to monitor and then on hand throughout the day to monitor. Given that at schools in my area students eat in classrooms and one or two teachers wander the hall/ semi supervising, **I believe parents/volunteers would be a tremendous asset.**

I believe we should also be on hand to have at least one parent/volunteer on each school bus - they have enough to do just getting kids to school safely as it is. Never mind all the behaviour issues they regularly have to deal with. **Drivers need to focus on driving.** Parent/Volunteer can be on designated buses to sanitize the hands of kids getting on and ensuring masks for Gr4 and up, help with seating assignments due to social distancing and cohorting and help with safe disembarking upon arrival and loading up at end of the day.

Thank you again. If there is anything I can do to help support this proposal please let me know.

In essence, **this plan calls on everyone in our whole province to take a role to keep our children safe.** The saying, “It takes a village to raise a child” fully applies.

Also, **there needs to be societal effort put into keeping our teachers healthy and safe;** this is paramount because without them, any back-to-school plan fails.

If everyone can do their part, we keep our children safe, and **we prevent Ontario from having to go back into lockdown;** I'm sure that we can all agree that we want to avoid that outcome.

I invite dialogue over this. There is no doubt that there are gaps in this plan as there is SO much to consider; please feel free to email me. Regardless of those gaps, if you read this and compared it to lockdown, then I imagine that you will see that this is a feasible way forward.

Lastly, **we need to press for a pause on the start of the school year,** until we can get this right.

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