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LEARNING TOGETHER

January 10, 2022

Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford
Legislative Building
1 Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A1
(sent via email to premier@ontario.ca)

Dear Premier Ford,

As Chair of Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board and on behalf of the Board of Trustees, I am writing to request renewed attention to rural infrastructure to support student learning during remote periods and decreased class size in our schools during in-person learning.

At a Special Public Board Meeting held on January 3, 2022, the following motion was brought forward:

Trustee Chatten moved a motion that our Board write a letter to the Government to request smaller class sizes to accommodate the landscape of the Omicron Virus circulating throughout the province. The motion was seconded by Trustee Kelly who suggested an amendment to the motion to include renewed attention to rural infrastructure to include improved broadband internet access throughout the province. The amended motion was accepted by Trustee Chatten, all Trustees were in favour of this motion.

Our board and management are committed to the safety, well-being and learning of our students during this fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. While January 2022 has brought uncertainty in our communities, we strongly believe that there should be no uncertainty when it comes to ensuring safe places to learn and access to meaningful learning for all students.

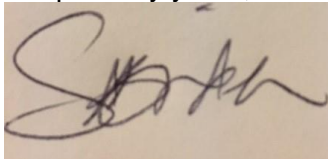
In our present remote learning environment, we must advocate for renewed attention and action for internet connectivity across our geographic region so that all of our students and families have the access to internet connectivity necessary to successfully learn online. Despite identifying the gaps in service in spring 2020, we find the current situation of our students and families has not improved. Many of our families do not have dependable and consistent access to high speed internet. We urge you to consider our families who are marginalized due to this lack of connection during remote learning and work with your peers to rectify this need and ensure better access to services.

As we consider a return to in-person learning, we know there are clear recommendations to curb the virus in congregate settings, including school classrooms. This includes increased ventilation, access to vaccinations, wearing quality masks, cohorting, and physical distancing. We are concerned with the number of students and staff in each of our classrooms, especially in our elementary classrooms. Our students are cohorted in our classroom spaces in groups of 24 or more. This number is especially concerning during lunch time when masks are removed to eat and drink. High risk exposure is now defined as "Any face-to-face or physical contact while one or both people were not wearing a mask and within two metres for **any** length of time"

(<https://hpepublichealth.ca/notification-of-high-risk-exposure-to-covid-19/>) which would include our classrooms during lunch periods. While Omicron circulates in our communities and brings high contagion, we ask you to take actions to reduce class size to mitigate exposure and increase opportunity for true physical distancing. In light of the immediate availability of staff and space, this may include alternate or half-day attendance or other creative measures to increase distance and safety for our students and staff.

We urge you and the government to consider the safety and access needs of the students of Ontario as you make decisions for learning. We need rural internet access for remote learning and safe distancing inside our classrooms when students return in-person.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background, appearing to read 'Shannon Binder'.

Shannon Binder
Chair of the Board

cc: Trustees of the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board
Katherine MacIver, Director of Education
Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education, @ minister.edu@ontario.ca
Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister of Education, @ nancy.naylor@ontario.ca
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