

ETFO's local president shares insight into education during COVID-19



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By Nate Smelle

Ontario's education system has undergone several changes in the past year. Since the COVID-19 pandemic forced the province's four major education to end its job action in protest of the Ford government's cuts to education, teachers, education workers, and students have had to adapt as the crisis has evolved. To better understand how education has changed in Ontario, The Bancroft Times will be speaking with those working to mitigate the challenges being created by the ongoing public health crisis. To connect with those working to ensure that education continues in a safe manner. To gain insight into how teachers/education workers have been working to provide elementary school students with a safe and healthy learning, The Bancroft Times' editor Nate Smelle recently interviewed the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario's local president in Hastings and Prince Edward District, Sarah Mackay.

Smelle: Taking into consideration the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in Ontario, has there been any progress in the past year on the main issues that forced ETFO to take job action in 2019/2020?

Mackay: The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic certainly had an impact on the job action ETFO took last year. While the government was asking for \$150 million in strips by removing class size caps in Kindergarten and the primary grades among other things, in the end, with the onset of the pandemic and the uncertainty it created, ETFO did reach an agreement with the government that essentially kept many of the issues status quo. Classroom sizes in Kindergarten, junior and intermediate classes continue to be a concern. There is still a need for more supports in special education and to reduce violence in the classroom.

Smelle: From your experience as president, what would you say have been the biggest challenges for ETFO members during the pandemic?

Mackay: The pandemic has created a situation in which teachers have been forced to consistently manage a moving target. The government making announcements to make an announcement has been very difficult on teachers as it creates a never-ending uncertainty. Teachers are also dealing with the safety measures in their classrooms, schools, community, and their own personal lives. It has taken a toll on the mental health of many of our members yet they remain committed to their students.

Smelle: How can the government and school board make education safer for students/teachers/education workers in Ontario?

Mackay: There are several measures that can be made to make the schools safer for everyone in education:

? Kindergarten classes have some of the highest class sizes in our schools and social distancing is very difficult for these students, yet they aren't required to wear a mask. Masking in kindergarten should be mandatory.

? In most of our classrooms it is not possible to maintain two metres of physical distancing. More funds should be made available to reduce class sizes.

? The government should be expanding the asymptomatic testing in schools. Testing in two schools per week is not enough.

? There is still a need for improved ventilation in many of our schools.

? The government should be providing access to paid sick leave and/or financial support for families so that keeping children home who are sick is not a burden for families.

The government is sitting on millions of dollars of federal aid which could facilitate many of these measures.

Smelle: One of the most pressing issues I discussed with ETFO members during the job action last year was violence in the classroom. Is this still a major problem? Please explain what actions have been taken, or could be taken to improve and make a safer teaching/learning environment?

Mackay: Violence remains a concern. Our Joint Health and Safety Committee has a sub-committee to look at the incidents and the data to make recommendations and this is ongoing. The need for increased supports for students remains an issue. The Support for Students Fund that came out of our Central agreement did allow for some schools to receive extra support for students, but there is still a need for increased supports for students.

Smelle: Since the pandemic has forced students to learn at home instead of the classroom for much of the last year, what have teachers/education workers learned about e-learning?

Mackay: There are still concerns related to equity and e-learning. There is a lack of internet connections in our rural areas, especially the northern part of the board, and not every student or family can afford multiple devices for their children to use. I think teaching online has reinforced that for the vast majority of students, in person learning provides a much richer education. There is that lack of a personal connection in online learning that is very difficult to achieve through a screen.

Smelle: What is the current situation with class sizes at elementary schools? Has the teacher to student ratio come down at all since last year's job action?

Mackay: The teacher to student ratio has not decreased since last year's job action. During staffing, our board complied with the staffing levels set by the Ministry and our collective agreement language. While some classes in schools are smaller this year as some students moved to the Virtual School, the Virtual School class sizes, especially in Kindergarten and the intermediate grades remain high.

Smelle: Have there been any renovations to improve ventilation at elementary schools in North Hastings? If so, please provide an example(s). If not, are the schools safe; and, are there any renovations scheduled to take place?

Mackay: We continue to have concerns about ventilation at the elementary schools in North Hastings. The board did have a study done to examine the ventilation systems in various schools and to make recommendations, however, none of the schools in North Hastings are mentioned in the report. I am not aware of any renovations to improve ventilation at the elementary schools in North Hastings, however, there are HVAC renovations scheduled to occur at North Hastings High School this summer.

Smelle: Have there been any new challenges, and/or lessons learned arising from dealing with the pandemic?

Mackay: Our members skills and knowledge are based on in-person teaching. All the pedagogy teachers have learned and embraced are connected to offering a face-to-face classroom experience that fosters a learning environment that is rich with experiences, allows for different learning styles, and encourages social connections. Teaching online during a pandemic has left teachers trying to create something new and meaningful. Teachers are being asked to teach at the same time that they are learning this new way of teaching. Our teachers should be commended for their dedication and the passion for their work that they do every day.

Smelle: Is there anything else that the public should know about the state of education that my questions might have missed?

Mackay: The government has made dealing with this pandemic extremely stressful. While they say they are concerned about the health and welfare of teachers and education workers, their actions speak much louder than their words. The government constantly has teachers wondering what is coming next. The constant pivoting and making decisions that seem to be made more to help their own agendas rather than for the safety of students and education workers in Ontario is concerning. The postponement of the March break while still allowing the break for MPPs is just the latest example of how the government is putting its own interests ahead of the teachers and education workers mental health.