

February 1, 2021

Memorandum to: Chairs of District School Boards
Directors of Education
Secretary-Treasurers of School Authorities

From: Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

Subject: **Federal Safe Return to Class Fund and Expanded Targeted Testing in Schools**

In August 2020, the federal government announced the Safe Return to Class Fund, with an initial phase of \$381 million provided to Ontario. This funding supported key policy initiatives related to school reopening, including health and safety, personal protective equipment (PPE), student transportation, and remote learning.

The second phase of investments provided under the Safe Return to Class Fund, totalling an additional \$381 million, has now been provided by the federal government. This funding focuses on priorities to support the learning, health and safety of students for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year, detailed below, including mitigating some potential learning gaps that may have developed during the pandemic.

Optimizing Air Quality and Ventilation

The Ministry of Education (the ministry) will provide \$50 million to support the acquisition of additional portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters and other immediate options to improve air quality and ventilation, including air quality monitors or other retrofits, repairs or upgrades to provide immediate improvements to ventilation and airflow, with an emphasis on poorly ventilated spaces (such as portables and schools with no mechanical ventilation or with inoperable windows). This is in addition to the \$50M that was announced in August 2020 to support air quality and ventilation improvement, as well as the \$1.4B in school renewal funding that can be used to address HVAC needs in schools.

In recognition that air quality and ventilation products continue to be in constrained supply, standalone HEPA units and related items will be procured collaboratively through the assistance of the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services (MGCS) and Ontario Education Collaborative Marketplace (OECM) to ensure school boards can access and receive these products in the most expeditious and cost-effective manner. As such, district school boards and isolate school board authorities are asked not to begin sourcing these items on their own.

Please see attached board by board allocations for optimizing air quality and ventilation.

Health and Safety Funding

The ministry will provide \$64.55 million in health and safety funding. This funding can be used to offset costs incurred by district school boards and isolate board school authorities associated with acquiring PPE and critical supplies and equipment (CSE) supplies, including for student transportation, beyond what has been provided through the MGCS supply chain. In addition to this investment, the ministry will continue to coordinate and provide PPE and CSE supplies through the MGCS supply chain to support health and safety. This is in addition to the \$10 million in health and safety funding announced in July 2020 to ensure training was extended to all occasional teachers and casual education workers.

Please see attached board by board allocations for health and safety funding.

Student Transportation

To recognize the important role that student transportation service providers have in ensuring enhanced health and safety measures, the ministry will provide \$5 million to address cost pressures related to COVID-19. This is in addition to the \$65.5 million student transportation funding for enhanced health and safety measures announced in August 2020.

Please see attached board by board allocations for student transportation.

Student Nutrition Program

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services will be provided with \$10 million to support the Student Nutrition Program, which helps provide healthy breakfasts, snacks and lunches to school-aged children across the province to support learning and healthy development.

This funding will support programs to effectively reach remote learners and address delivery challenges that have arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summer Learning Opportunities

Last summer, students and families took advantage of additional learning opportunities offered through expanded summer learning programs across the province. These opportunities will be extended into the summer of 2021 and further expanded with approximately \$62 million in additional funding to support summer learning and supports for students who may have experienced disruptions to their learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will include funding for:

- participation in core programming including summer school, credit recovery and reach ahead opportunities, upgrading courses, targeted math and literacy supports, and supports focused on successful transitions to de-streamed Grade 9 Math
- targeted programming for under-served students (including Indigenous students, racialized students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds)
- programming to support students with special education needs and mental health needs
- STEM summer programming
- other specific program initiatives such as pathway supports, including additional Level 1 Apprenticeship in-class training this summer and support for school board Personal Support Worker (PSW) programs, as well as supports for the development of professional learning and resources to enhance student learning and engagement.

Additional information about individual program details, funding allocations or application processes will be forthcoming in a follow-up communication.

Online Learning

This unprecedented school year has demonstrated the value of investing in a robust online learning system with greater access and choice for students. A funding allocation of \$60 million will be provided to support key initiatives related to online learning, including:

- elementary digital course packs to support remote learning for elementary students
- additional course development for secondary online courses to ensure an updated, modern and relevant online course catalogue
- technological infrastructure such as a provincewide student reservation system to coordinate online learning offerings and a centralized course catalogue with functionality for students to be able to view, preview and request registration in an online course
- one-time project funding for TVO and TFO, who will be centrally supporting Ontario's online learning system.

Additional Devices

As the ability to pivot to remote learning is a key priority given the uncertain nature of this pandemic, the ministry will provide \$80 million for additional connectivity and technological devices, such as laptops and tablets, to support school boards in procuring about 160,000 additional devices provincewide.

Funding is based on projected average daily enrolment with a top-up to ensure that every district school board generates a minimum of \$200,000. This funding is sufficient to support a minimum of 400 devices in every district school board.

Isolate board school authorities generate \$50,000 each, which is sufficient to support a minimum of 100 devices per isolate board school authority.

To assist school boards in acquiring these devices in the most expeditious and cost-effective manner, these additional devices will be procured collaboratively through the assistance of MGCS and OECM. As such, district school boards and isolate board school authorities are asked not to begin sourcing these items on their own.

This funding is in addition to the following investments to support technology related costs:

- \$15 million in June 2020 through the 2020-21 Grants for Student Needs;
- \$48.6 million last fall to High Priority Areas to support higher risk communities, including funding for additional technological devices for students; and,
- \$1.4 million last fall for the Education and Community Partnership Program.

Please see attached board by board allocations for additional devices.

Equity Initiatives

Supporting equity in our schools is of the utmost importance for this government. In July 2020, we announced bold new changes to the education system that help break down barriers for many Black, Indigenous and racialized students and provide all students with the opportunity to succeed. This included ending Grade 9 streaming into applied and academic courses, proposing to eliminate discretionary suspensions for students, strengthening sanctions for teachers who engage in behaviour of a racist nature, and providing teachers with additional anti-racism and anti-discrimination professional development.

To build on this important work, \$6.45 million will be provided to support equity initiatives, focused on supports for Black and Indigenous students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students with special education needs. Details on the specific program initiatives being supported will be made available soon.

Addressing Future Pandemic Education Needs

Given the continued uncertainty of our public health environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry is setting aside \$33 million to address future pandemic education needs. This may include additional funding to support an ongoing safe and healthy learning environment in communities that experience increased COVID-19 cases, as well as evidence-based reading supports for students struggling with reading who are at risk of falling behind.

Mental Health Supports

Mental health and well-being continues to be a critical priority. As announced on January 7, 2021, \$10 million will be provided to support student mental health, including funding to school boards to continue to support the implementation of the new School Mental Health Ontario Action Kit which promotes student learning about mental health.

This funding also includes support for Kids Help Phone to address the increase in demand for their services. At the peak of the first wave of COVID-19, children and youth contacted Kids Help Phone three times more often than prior to the pandemic.

This is in addition to \$20 million announced in June and July 2020 and \$12.5 million announced in August 2020, with the last investment being for both mental health and special education supports.

Additional Financial Flexibility - Access to Proceeds of Disposition (POD)

As an additional measure of flexibility, school boards will be allowed to access up to 15 percent of uncommitted POD-Regular for COVID-19 related expenses if there is an in-year deficit as a result of health and safety cost pressures related to keeping schools open through the 2020-21 school year. This additional relief measure will be available in the 2020-21 school year for school boards incurring an in-year deficit in excess of 1 percent of their operating allocation or their Accumulated Surplus balance, whichever is lower.

To comply with the current regulatory framework, which requires an exemption from the Minister of Education to redirect up to 15 percent of Proceeds of Disposition (POD), school boards will need to submit an attestation acknowledging that:

- They can continue to manage their current approved capital projects within their allocated budget; and
- The redirected amount from POD will not impact the board's ability to address their renewal needs.

Expanded Targeted Testing in Schools

On November 26, 2020 the government announced voluntary COVID-19 testing for students, staff and members of their household in four communities in Ontario. Approximately 9,000 students, staff and members of their households were tested. Based on the information reported to the ministry, approximately 200 cases were identified.

This initial round of testing made it easier to track and prevent the spread of the virus in schools by helping to identify cases early, inform public health decisions, and manage outbreaks.

To support return to in-person learning and the ongoing healthy operation of schools, we are now expanding targeted COVID-19 testing in schools for students, children and staff across the province. This will be a valuable tool for other parts of the province experiencing outbreaks and/or a high level of community transmission. Local public health units will determine where this testing is needed, and we will continue to work with school boards and our health partners to support this testing approach.

The ministry, working with the Ministry of Health and Ontario Health, will ensure that health partners are available to undertake the testing. School boards should continue to work closely with local public health units to ensure that, where feasible and appropriate, testing should be offered on school property. School boards will also continue to communicate with families about available testing.

Targeted testing in schools is an important and additional layer of protection that is helping to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. Testing will continue to be voluntary, and consent will be required from parents or guardians for students under 18 years old.

The ministry, along with the Ministry of Health and Ontario Health will continue to work with school boards and local public health units on the implementation and reporting components of this testing approach. We also recognize that approaches will vary by region, in order to support local needs.

The ministry looks forward to continuing to support you and your teams. If you have any questions about this initiative or would like to discuss testing options for your schools' communities, please contact: Shannon Fuller Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Planning, at shannon.fuller@ontario.ca.

Thank you for your continued support.

Sincerely,

Stephen Lecce
Minister

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

Attachments

- c: President, Association des conseils scolaires des écoles publiques de l'ontario (ACÉPO)
Executive Director, Association des conseils scolaires des écoles publiques de l'ontario (ACÉPO)
President, Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques (AFOCSC)
Executive Director, Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques (AFOCSC)
President, Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA)
Executive Director, Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA)
President, Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA)
Executive Director, Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA)
Executive Director, Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE)
President, Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO)
Executive Director and Secretary-Treasurer, Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO)
President, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA)
General Secretary, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA)
President, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
General Secretary, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
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General Secretary, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF)
Chair, Ontario Council of Educational Workers (OCEW)
Chair, Education Workers' Alliance of Ontario (EWAO)
President of OSBCU, Canadian Union of Public Employees – Ontario (CUPE-ON)
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