

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today. I am here representing the 45,000 professionals who teach Kindergarten to Grade 12 in publicly funded Catholic schools across Ontario.

These are truly unique and difficult times. Ontarians are facing tremendous challenges and making enormous sacrifices.

The situation has underscored the importance of strong public services, including publicly funded education.

Since March, Ontario's teachers have been doing everything they can to help students and families navigate these new experiences. From an immediate turn to remote learning in the spring; to managing in-class teaching amid new protocols and constraints; to helping students deal with learning gaps and mental health struggles brought by the pandemic; teachers have risen to the challenge and shown themselves to be consummate professionals.

But this year is taking its toll. Teachers are stressed, anxious, and exhausted. They are concerned that the extraordinary pressures they are under are preventing them from helping every student realize their full potential.

Teachers want nothing more than to do the job they love in a safe and productive environment. But to be at their best, they need support. Specifically, they need a government that respects their judgment, and that puts in place the necessary investments to make schools as safe and productive as possible.

The government says that Ontario has the most "robust" plan in the country. But as any teacher would tell any student, the real test of achievement is not whether you have beat your peers, but whether you

have done everything you could do to complete your task to the best of your ability.

By almost any measure, it is clear that this is not the case in Ontario.

I do not want to talk about numbers. As has been pointed out to the Minister of Education many times over the past few weeks, the lives of students, teachers, and education workers cannot be reduced to mere “data points or dollar signs.”

Instead, I want to highlight what the lack of action from the government means for our schools, and tell you what teachers and students across the province are experiencing.

The most obvious problem is the lack of physical distancing – one of the most important controls to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Even the SickKids report, on which the government claims to have based its school reopening plan, recommended smaller class sizes as a *priority strategy*. Still, we continue to see schools with class sizes of upwards of 30 students, like three elementary schools in North York, which had to close last week due to outbreaks of COVID-19.

Similarly, Ontarians have heard from experts that proper ventilation is crucial for combatting the spread of COVID-19, but the funding provided so far is nowhere near sufficient to match the scale of the problem in our schools. We have recently seen teachers sharing photos of their classroom windows propped open, despite the cooler temperatures outside and with sub-zero temperatures on their way.

The list goes on. From new nurses, custodians, and education workers – funding for which amounts to one nurse per 13 schools and one additional custodian per five schools – to transportation protocols that leave drivers and students at risk, it is simply not accurate to say that

the government has invested in every reasonable precaution to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in schools.

Teachers very much want schools to remain open. And we know the government shares this goal. But the situation is at its breaking point.

All we are asking is that the government invest in the same kinds of health and safety protocols as are expected in every other public space across the province. Instead, with the 2020 budget, they have remained content to hold course and hope for the best.

I also need to speak a bit about the learning conditions many students and teachers are facing. Because here too we see what a lack of resources provided by the government really means on the ground.

Specifically, I want to focus on what has become known as the “hybrid” learning model.

Because school boards were given insufficient resources to plan for this school year, many have been making drastic changes on the fly. In some cases, as families have left in-person learning due to their lack of confidence in the government’s planning for a second wave, boards have been implementing a learning model that has teachers delivering in-class and remote learning simultaneously.

It should go without saying that this is an unproductive and unsustainable model, which in many cases may exacerbate learning gaps, especially among students from vulnerable populations. We already knew about the many drawbacks of synchronous online learning, and about the challenges of delivering in-class learning under the constraints of COVID-19 protocols. Now we have combined the worst of both worlds into a learning model that serves absolutely no one.

In addition, inconsistencies between provincial and local public health advice, puts extraordinary pressure on teachers. Many members of my Association have expressed genuine concern about burning out. But at the end of the day, it is not for their own sake that teachers object to these learning conditions. Rather, they are primarily concerned about the effect it has on their students.

As one teacher from York region put it, “It’s just physically and logistically impossible to do [hybrid learning] and provide equitable education for all kids.”

What this all comes down to is a matter of choices. Certainly, nobody would argue that the choices the government has had to make are easy.

But now, perhaps more than ever, it is essential to invest in strong public services. Prioritizing safe and health schools will enable them to remain open, which is imperative to getting the economy back on track.

The choices that have been made thus far have not set us up for success. As the real experiences students and teachers show, much more could and should be done to make schools safer and ensure a quality education for all students.

On behalf of Ontario’s 45,000 Catholic teachers, I strongly urge the government to reconsider this budget, and to put the resources in place that will enable schools to stay open and students to thrive.