

The Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Ministry of Education
5th Floor
438 University Ave.
Toronto, ON
M5G 2K8

September 15, 2020

Dear Minister Lecce,

On behalf of the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB), we hope you are keeping healthy and well, during this uncertain and difficult time. Together, our administrators and staff at all levels of the organization, in collaboration with our Board of Trustees, have been preparing for the return of learning for the 2020-2021 school year. The process of preparing for, and actually reopening our schools has not been without unprecedented challenges. We are committed to supporting our students who will be attending in-person and online, their families and our staff to a return to education in markedly different environments.

The DPCDSB Return to School Plan is rooted in three key considerations: I) Ensuring the safety of students and staff, II) Adapting to Public Health/Ministry of Education direction regarding mode of Catholic teaching and learning, III) Supporting student faith formation, well-being and achievement. It is based upon these guiding principles that the Board of Trustees has unanimously voted to share with you and the Ministry of Education, the DPCDSB's concerns regarding our 2020 reopening and maintenance of our schools. Within the context of ensuring the safety of students and staff, our intent is to bring to your attention the need to improve our school ventilation systems and the allocated funding provision we require, to do so in an effective and timely manner.

Maintaining optimal air quality in school buildings is one of several risk reduction strategies for safely reopening schools. The transmission of the COVID-19 virus is known to be influenced by environmental conditions and airflow, spreading well in poorly ventilated indoor spaces. As we are sure the Ministry of Education is already aware, many schools in the province of Ontario have suboptimal ventilation. Air quality and air flow are important contributing factors to ensuring the health and safety of our students and staff.

The DPCDSB has been fortunate to work with the guidance from the Ministry of Education and our local public health units, Peel Public Health and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health. We are following the guidance provided by the Ministry, Public Health Ontario and our local public health units for the operation of HVAC systems and ventilation in our schools. As you are aware, the Region of Peel continues to experience higher incidences of new and unresolved COVID-19 cases compared to other regions within Ontario. We hold steadfast to our moral obligation to protect the health and safety of all who learn, work and play in our school environments. Ultimately, it is our shared responsibility to prevent virus transmissions within our schools, and unnecessary illness from accelerating a second wave of this global pandemic, in our communities.

On August 14, 2020, the Ministry issued the *Additional Guidance and Funding for School Reopening* document that indicated \$50 million in new funding to help support improved ventilation, air quality and HVAC system efficiencies in schools. It was also noted that the Ministry advised school boards to focus on improving air systems, especially in older schools and portables. Of the \$50 million announced by the provincial government, approximately \$1.7 million in funding has been allocated to the DPCDSB. For the 2019-2020 school year, the DPCDSB received approximately \$26 million in school renewal and school condition improvement funding. This helped to address a variety of urgent repairs and maintenance, including school roofs, windows, boilers, plumbing, and HVAC systems. However, even as we prioritize current needs across our system of 151 schools, to date there remains a significant cumulative backlog of school renewal needs of approximately \$250 million.

The DPCDSB's HVAC needs alone require approximately \$60 million. While we welcome the allotted \$1.7 million provided by the Ministry of Education, the confirmation of this funding was only received on August 25, 2020, leaving our staff very little time to assess and undertake work in our schools prior to the start of the school year. Furthermore, this funding amounts to only \$11,000 per school, which proves insufficient for the needs of a large GTA board with approximately 11,000 employees and serving almost 81,000 students. At this time, DPCDSB has not received this specific funding.

DPCDSB staff continue to assess and prioritize our renewal funding needs to undertake the critical renewal and maintenance work required across all our schools. The guidance released by the Ministry of Education on June 19, 2020, included that, where feasible, school boards should ventilate indoor environments with fresh air, avoid or reduce the recirculation of air, ensure recommended maintenance is followed and that filters are clean and replaced. Our board has scheduled the ventilation units to start early every day to ensure air changes are made prior to the school/building being occupied by staff and students. The percentage of fresh outside air intake is adjustable through the Building Automation Systems (BAS) in our schools. Some of our HVAC systems may not allow changes to outdoor air fractions, and those that do may require adjustments to filter maintenance protocols. In these situations, ideally outdoor air levels would be enhanced by opening windows.

While classrooms should have windows that remain open during the school day, we are cognizant that some classrooms, especially those located in school basements, do not have any windows. In other classrooms, the windows cannot be opened. We are currently performing a school by school assessment on how many classrooms are impacted and have limitations to improving fresh air flow. To date, many of DPCDSB's elementary schools (55) have limited or no air conditioning. In minimizing the use of fans and portable air conditioners as much as possible, as informed by Public Health Ontario and our local public health units, uncomfortably high temperatures will occur in these classrooms, in the event of warm seasonal temperatures this fall. While we plan to prioritize classrooms with limited ventilation currently, opportunities for students to go outside will be provided, including staggered recesses. All children can benefit from outdoor time dedicated to play, physical activity and social interaction within their designated cohorts, however, the above mentioned issues inside our classrooms remain a concern.

The DPCDSB Board of Trustees most recently approved the use of accumulated surplus up to 2% of our operating revenue, for the proposed 2020-2021 school year budget. The budget adjustments required are due to increases in additional expenditures for our board, particularly in the areas of transportation, personal protective equipment, enhanced cleaning, technology, sick leave, inflation and implementation of collective agreements. As we work to address the needs across all our DPCDSB schools, we must also ensure these funds can be distributed as equitably as possible. To that end, our budget remains limited. It is financially imperative for our board to operate schools within the budget parameters of our two-year deficit management plan.

Minister Lecce, addressing the DPCDSB's HVAC renewal needs, improving ventilation within our building systems and designs to optimize air quality and flow, does require funding and time to do so. In this regard, while the \$1.7M in funding from the Ministry from the \$50 million across the province is welcome and necessary, it does not support our immediate reopening measures to the fullest extent possible.

As we engage our communities for their input and respond to the concerns and needs of our students, families and staff, we value discussion at the board level in public session. Our essential reopening concerns have been raised at our most recent Board of Trustees meeting on August 25, 2020. For more detailed information, please review the [Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning Status Report](#) from the August 25, 2020 Regular Board Meeting.

We continue to inform our parents/guardians and school communities about the multifaceted processes and the various aspects of our reopening plans as the pandemic situation evolves. Our DPCDSB parents/guardians with children in elementary school are deeply concerned with the plan for students to return to school in a conventional model, without a change in class size. These concerns are amplified in the Region of Peel as the number of new cases and unresolved cases continue to rise. COVID-19 is primarily transmitted via direct contact and droplets propelled from various distances. Physical distancing has been advised by the Region of Peel as one of the Core Four Behaviours to limit the spread of COVID-19 (i.e., distancing, masking, washing hands, staying home if you are ill). Larger class sizes in elementary classes, without a change in the funding model, cannot provide physical distancing of two meters. Parents have expressed the need for their children to return to school with the angst of sending their children to school environments that pose an increased risk of COVID-19 transmission.

As we begin the 2020-2021 school year, our vision remains clear. The health and safety of our students and staff are of utmost concern and is our shared priority. We are relying on the Ministry of Education to adequately meet the school renewal needs of the DPCDSB. It is imperative that our schools can successfully continue with the opening process, but also be well positioned to safely remain open through the duration of the pandemic. We formally request that you prioritize a safe return to school with appropriate funding that invests in illness prevention to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

We are experiencing a higher number of students than anticipated moving to online schooling as parents are continually concerned about the health and safety of their children. While we will, of course, offer online learning to the 21,700 students who have chosen it, this does present more issues of concern in terms of technology and supports.

Keeping our community transmission low is vital to the health of everyone attending the schools within our communities. As referenced by Dr. Allen, Head of Infectious Diseases at Sick Kids Hospital, "what happens in schools, in terms of the level of COVID activity reflects what is happening in the community." Adequately ventilated classroom environments are expected to be associated with less likelihood of transmission compared with poorly ventilated settings. The ventilation considerations we have identified, including ongoing maintenance and upgrading of HVAC systems, have significant impact on the public health measures our schools have implemented. In this regard, provincial funding is critical to support DPCDSB's plans for reopening schools, as safely as possible.

As the DPCDSB Board of Trustees, we will continue to partner with the Ministry of Education as we serve all those entrusted to our care. We strive to foster ongoing communication with our school communities and stakeholders from a lens of accountability, transparency and financial stewardship.

Our commitment is to provide every student with a quality Catholic education, so they can be successful and thrive in academics, health and well-being and faith development. Together, we must ensure our schools remain safe and healthy environments for all upon reopening and throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our students, families and staff are the heart of everything that we do.

We wish you many blessings.

Yours truly,



Sharon M. Hobin

Chair

On behalf of the DPCDSB Board of Trustees

CC: Hon. Douglas Ford, Premier of Ontario

Members of Provincial Parliament - DPCDSB

Parents/Guardians

Members: Central Committee for Catholic School Councils (CCCSC) - DPCDSB

Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) - DPCDSB