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Town hall call: recap

April 2021

It's unanimous: CUPE school board local presidents approve OSBCU safe schools campaign

On April 7, OSBCU held a town hall call to discuss ongoing concerns that CUPE education workers have about their safety at work in the pandemic, and what we could do about it collectively.

Just as I did on the call, I congratulate all local presidents on the great work they have done in providing leadership, advocacy and guidance for their members.

Because of a lack of action by Ford and his government, we find ourselves in the midst of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic – or as CUPE Health and Safety Representative Paul Sylvestre put it recently, the first wave of the new variant pandemic.

Whatever we call it, responsibility for the current situation lies with the Ford government: this wave was completely preventable, if only this government had taken the correct actions.

Last Thursday, amid record high numbers, Premier Ford announced that he was applying the “emergency brake,” but what was supposed to be a lockdown was really only a “mockdown” and had very little effect. Less than a week later, Ford issued a province-wide stay-at-home order and this week he closed schools province-wide.

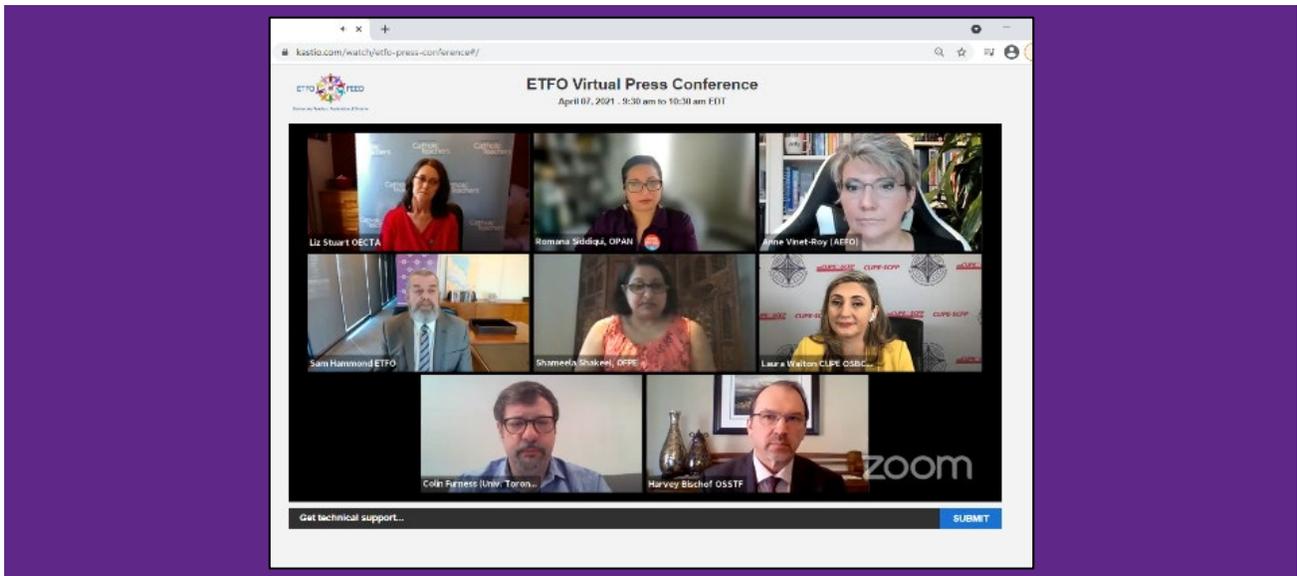
News conference

On the morning of that announcement, I joined our fellow teacher unions and education allies in a virtual news conference organized by ETFO about vaccines and school safety. Speakers pointed out that, while the data clearly shows cases are on the rise, this government has been negligent in keeping education workers, students, and communities safe. I made it clear that



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choices made by the government have a greater impact on education workers than they do on teachers, and that we must be kept safe! (Our event must have hit a nerve as Stephen Lecce called into CP24 in the midst of the airing to provide his own brand of spin.)



What stay-at-home means for education workers

On April 7, Ford announced a provincial stay-at-home order for the province. Public Health had closed schools in response to case numbers in Toronto, Peel, and Thunder Bay. Education workers working directly with special education students across the province were eligible for vaccination beginning the week of April 12. All education workers in designated hot spots (Toronto and Peel) would be eligible for vaccination beginning the week of April 12.

Then on April 12, the Ford government announced that schools would be closed for two weeks after the April break to help control the spread of COVID-19. Even though most students would return to remote learning, schools would remain open for in-person learning for students who required it. That means that workers like EAs and custodians would continue to work in schools.

We got assurances about things like access to emergency child care and the appropriate PPE. We will make sure the government keeps those promises.

Provincial campaign

On Tuesday, April 5, OSBCU's executive board members held an emergency meeting to discuss the current situation in schools. The motion they approved was also approved unanimously by the CUPE school board local presidents who were on the town hall call. It reads: OSBCU will launch a comprehensive provincial campaign that will be amplified by the local leaders and members, which will call for a real, sustainable plan to ensure safe schools



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through the following pieces: expedited vaccination of all essential workers; paid sick leave for all workers; smaller class sizes, with real cohorts for workers and students; active daily screening prior to entry into building; increased asymptomatic testing with use of rapid test kits in hotspots and outbreak zones; fully funded ventilation improvements, maintenance and a provincial cleaning standard; recognition of all hotspots and delivery of funds to fight the outbreaks; proper training for all staff and high quality PPE; true collaboration between education workers, school boards and public health moving forward.

Thanks to presidents' approval, we will now go ahead with the development of a campaign that will rely heavily on local involvement. Thank you in advance for your support.

Final thoughts

From the beginning, we have said that schools need to be open, but they need to be safe. We believe that this needs to continue. But nothing we have gained from this government has come without a fight.

To date we fought and won for our members to be paid during the shutdown last year. The government officials have intimated that we should not expect that moving forward. We cannot place our members in financial difficulty.

During the pandemic we have seen school boards layoff entire classifications of workers, citing the provision in Letter of Understanding #3 of "catastrophic event." While we will fight these losses to the fullest extent, the truth is some workers are out of jobs. We must ensure that this doesn't happen province-wide. Already we are hearing rumours of employers monitoring facilities budgets and tasks, especially in areas where classes have moved to virtual. This is worrisome.

Moving classes to virtual has also created a class divide within our membership. We must not allow this to continue. We know that not all members can transition their work to virtual. Many of our members have been and continue to report to physical buildings – they should not be feeling like they are sacrificial.

Another piece has also been key in our minds: we are entering into bargaining preparation. We have been successful in starting to raise the profile of our work. During the pandemic, we have the opportunity to continue to raise the profile and value of our work. We have been on the ground providing services that have been key to the delivery of public education, from the enhanced cleaning, improvement of ventilation systems to seamless supports for students, the management of contact tracing and so much more. We must capitalize on the fact that we have been on site all along and be prepared to raise these facts as we move forward towards real gains for our members.

But keeping schools open comes with some demands. These demands are captured in the motion that we are putting forward to you and in the campaign we are planning. Achieving these demands will require advocacy on all levels. We have seen great success regarding vaccination



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through local advocacy. In areas like Windsor and Lambton Kent, advocacy has led to vaccination days before the Premier's announcement. In Thunder Bay and Durham, work by locals has moved their school board trustees and employer to work with public health units to expand vaccinations as well.

We look forward to achieving more in partnership with you.

Finally, I would like to thank Brothers Dave Chezzi and Paul Sylvestre for joining us on the call to answer presidents' questions about Health & Safety, WSIB claims and COVID. Brother Chezzi explained that each WSIB claim is unique and has to be made individually and so, unfortunately, blanket answers cannot be provided for specific cases.

In solidarity,



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