



ASSESSING ONTARIO'S PANDEMIC SCHOOL CLOSURES AND WHAT STUDENTS NEED

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Executive Summary

In the past two years in Ontario, educators, parents, and students navigated numerous periods of prolonged school closures due to government pandemic policy aiming to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 and ease the strain on the health-care system. The most recent of these closures, in the first two weeks of January 2022, has sparked intense public debate about the intention, necessity, and efficacy of halting in-person education as an effective policy tool.

This paper attempts to contribute toward a better framework for thinking through school-closure policy by examining some of the underlying structural challenges of Ontario's current education system. Using examples from within and outside the Ontario government-funded system, we argue that school-closure policy has highlighted the need for structural reform that prioritizes students and their local context.

We propose the following three themes as starting points for building a framework for school-closure policy:

- Should in-person learning be designated as an essential service?
- How can the voices of parents and guardians be more meaningfully included in decision-making?
- Should we move toward a more human-scale form of educational decision-making and governance?

This paper argues that it is time for Ontarians to consider whether schools should be designated an essential service in which in-person learning is highly prioritized even during crises situations.

Second, we argue that the decline of parental voice to effect change within the government education system¹ in Ontario has contributed, over time, to the exclusion of parents and guardians as meaningful partners in the education of their children. Recognizing that robust engagement and communication with parents is an essential component of any successful education system at all times, not only during a global pandemic, we argue for the empowerment of parents so that they can make educational choices that meet the needs of their children. Independent schools are an excellent case study in demonstrating how to engage parents in a robust partnership, recognizing parental expertise and incorporating parents as key stakeholders in educational decision-making.

Finally, we argue that a return to education on a more human scale is imperative for the recovery and flourishing of school communities. The centralization of Ontario's

1 The terms "independent" and "government" schools are used instead of "private" and "public" schools in order to accurately reflect the distinction in governance and oversight that exists between these school systems.

education system over the past twenty-five years has led to the current one-size-fits-all policy strategy, which does not meet the specific needs of more than two million students over Ontario's area of one million square kilometres. Effective policy that places strategic decision-making in the hands of those closest to students—those most affected by policy decisions—will allow for contextualized solutions to local issues. We demonstrate that here too, the features of independent schools stand in direct contrast to Ontario's government-run systems. The majority of independent schools are small community initiatives, locally governed and relationally driven. We argue that the success of these schools throughout pandemic school closure is directly related to these features, and the road to recovery for the government-school system in Ontario is dependent on the structural incorporation of problem-solving and decision-making in human contexts.



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Introduction

The “law of unintended consequences,” first coined by Robert K. Merton in the early twentieth century, describes the phenomenon often discussed by social scientists that action or intervention into a complex system inevitably gives rise to complex results, some of which arguably fail to achieve the intended goal.² The more complex the system, the greater the likelihood of disparate experiences and complex consequences.

In the past two years in Ontario, this law has played out clearly as educators, parents, and students navigated numerous periods of prolonged school closures due to government pandemic policy aiming to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 and ease the strain on the health-care system.

The most recent of these closures, in the first two weeks of January 2022, has sparked intense public debate about the intention, necessity, and efficacy of halting in-person education as an effective policy tool. On the one hand, this debate is no surprise: the initial school shutdowns in the spring of 2020 reflected global uncertainty about the enemy we faced and a common commitment to do whatever it took to face it together. It was a strangely unified moment. Two years later, there is more scientific certainty about how the virus spreads, more effective tools to combat it, and the beginnings of data on the unintended consequences of school closures for children and youth that point to serious and harmful outcomes. Add to this a record of political leaders’ conflicting messaging and last-minute decision-making, and it is understandable, even necessary, that engaged citizens begin asking questions.

On the other hand, the nature of public discourse itself has made entry into these conversations fraught. Whereas we began the pandemic, as a province, in that moment of strange unity, it seems we are emerging as a fractured people. For a multitude of reasons, the intervening two years have arguably entrenched us within silos of reasoning rather than enabled us to build a nuanced perspective. Thus, the question that we must first ask when assessing the effectiveness of any pandemic policy is this: Are we willing to have the conversation? Is it possible to remain, to use educational language, *teachable*? When it comes to public policy, how do we make sense of multiple areas of need and seemingly competing interests? And, in the case of Ontario, how do we effectively question a government that has maintained a one-size-fits-all approach to school-closure policy in a province with vastly different regional effects and outcomes?

This paper attempts to contribute toward a better framework for thinking through school-closure policy by examining some of the persistent challenges encountered throughout pandemic learning and their relationship to the underlying structural challenges of Ontario’s current education system. Using examples from within and outside the Ontario government-funded system, we argue that school-closure policy

2 R.K. Merton, “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action,” *American Sociological Review* 1, no. 6 (1936): 894.

has highlighted the need to prioritize the learning and well-being of students.

We propose the following three themes as starting points for building a framework for school-closure policy:

- Should in-person learning be designated as an essential service?
- How can the voices of parents and guardians be more meaningfully included in decision-making?
- Should we move toward a more human-scale form of educational decision-making and governance?

These themes and associated questions can guide future policy-making not just in Ontario but also in other provincial jurisdictions. By thinking about these issues now, parents, educators, and policy-makers will be better positioned to address them if they arise again.

Why This Matters: Understanding the Impacts

Ontario has mandated the closure of schools as a policy tool to combat the spread of COVID-19 more often than any other Canadian province. Ontario's students have been learning at home for more than twenty-nine weeks of the last two years, a loss of seven months of in-person learning.³ Detailing the extent of the loss that Ontario's students have suffered over the last two years is difficult. The lack of data collection and the halt of student testing throughout the 2020–2021 school year means that data on academic performance and school-attendance rates are challenging to quantify, ensuring that the extent of the damage remains unknown.⁴ It is clear however that the unintended consequences of school-closure policy are extensive. Initial Ontario data show a sixfold increase in extreme student absenteeism throughout the pandemic (with “extreme” defined as missing more than 50 percent of classes), and data from international jurisdictions demonstrate that academic learning loss is cumulative.⁵ More recently, it has become clear that despite Canada's status as a G7 nation, some students have disappeared from education systems completely, receiving neither virtual nor in-person learning for two years.⁶

3 Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, “Ontario Returns to School: An Overview of the Science,” January 12, 2022, https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Ontario>Returns-to-School-An-Overview-of-the-Science_20220112-1.pdf.

4 K. Gallagher-Mackay, P. Srivastava, K. Underwood, et al., “COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario: Emerging Evidence on Impacts,” *Science Briefs of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table 2*, no. 34 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.47326/ocsat.2021.02.34.1.0>.

5 Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, “Ontario Returns to School.”

6 M. Sharp, “The Great Ouster: Find Lost Students and Woo Them Back to School,” *Toronto Star*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2021/09/07/the-great-ouster-find-lost-students-and-woo-them-back-to-school.html>.

Significant media coverage has begun to focus on the effect of virtual learning and social isolation on students' overall well-being, highlighting in particular the pandemic's effect on their mental health.⁷ Social workers describe being overwhelmed with requests from parents and students for help navigating symptoms of anxiety and depression. Pediatricians and child-health advocates have been warning of extensive harm to youth due to school closures, as indicated by research findings from Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children and the Holland Bloorview Research Institute.⁸ For many vulnerable and marginalized populations, in-person school attendance provides much-needed stability and routine, food security, and safety from abuse or violence. For others, it provides external regulation and social development, structures impossible to replicate during virtual or hybrid learning. For all students, seven months of virtual learning and restrictions on in-person learning has meant a loss of extracurricular activities, social relationship, and major adolescent and high school milestones.

Taken together, these initial reports and findings show that despite limiting the spread of COVID-19, closing schools has had other significant and negative impacts on students. The human scale of the impact is worth noting: Ontario's government-school system represents approximately two million students, and Ontario's independent schools represent another one hundred fifty thousand. Governments are in an unenviable position, having to weigh the risks and benefits of each approach for all of these youth. Due to the scale of these decisions, we believe that unlike Ontario's decision-making in January 2022,⁹ a concerted and meaningful review is warranted when deciding whether schools should close.

7 Children's Mental Health Ontario, "Children's Health Coalition Statement—January 3," January 2022, <https://cmho.org/chc-statement-december-january-3/>; CBC News, "Student Mental Health a Growing Worry as Ontario Kids Get Ready to Return to Classrooms," <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/children-youth-mental-health-1.6312681>; N. Yousif, "Very, Very Concerning': Pandemic Taking Heavy Toll on Children's Mental Health, Sick Kids Study Shows," *Toronto Star*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2021/07/08/very-very-concerning-pandemic-taking-heavy-toll-on-childrens-mental-health-sick-kids-study-shows.html>.

8 T.K. Cost, J. Crosbie, E. Anagnostou, et al., "Mostly Worse, Occasionally Better: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of Canadian Children and Adolescents," *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01744-3>.

9 J. Gray, "Doug Ford Goes Back and Forth on COVID Response," *Globe and Mail*, January 8, 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-doug-ford-goes-back-and-forth-on-covid-19-decision-making/>.

Theme 1: Education as Essential Service

As Ontario has progressed through the pandemic over the last two years, we have seen continued advocacy by children’s health professionals for schools to be considered essential services.¹⁰ Essential service is legal terminology: it is defined as work considered “critical to protecting life, health, or public functioning”¹¹ and under the *Public Service Labour Relations Act* is defined as “a service, facility, or activity of the Government of Canada [that] is or will be necessary for the safety or security of the public or a segment of the public.”¹² The federal government provided guidance on a list of essential services throughout COVID-19, though arguably, many of these, such as grocery stores, do not necessarily meet the legal definition as “a service, facility, or activity of the Government of Canada.”¹³ Their continued operation, however, was deemed critical to the well-being and functioning of civil society throughout the pandemic. While education did not make the federal government’s list, K–12 education remains the purview of provincial governments. It is time for Ontarians to consider if there is any essential component to education—whether schools should be designated an essential service that is allowed to operate in person, or at the least, to consider the development of a legislative framework in which in-person learning is highly prioritized even during crises situations.

It is noteworthy that those who have advocated for this position throughout the pandemic are, for the most part, professionals who have dedicated their careers to advocacy for children. They consist of pediatricians, children’s mental-health experts, social workers, and pediatric medical professionals whose vocational calling is one characterized by service to children and youth, a calling that educators share. The question of whether to designate education as an essential service contains deeper, more foundational questions at its core: What place do children and their education hold in our society? Should education be considered fundamental to the well-being of children?

Designating schools as an essential service would mean elevating the place of children and youth in our society, injecting such clichéd phrases as “the leaders of tomorrow” with actual meaning. This requires both honesty and integrity in research and action. First, it will require longitudinal study on the impact of school closure

10 E. Canisius, “Schools Are Essential Services—We Can’t Fail Kids Again,” *Toronto Star*, January 2, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2022/01/02/schools-are-essential-services-we-cant-fail-kids-again.html>; Children’s Mental Health Ontario, “Schools Are Essential,” <https://cmho.org/schools-are-essential/>; Cost, et al. “Mostly Worse, Occasionally Better”; B. Sawchuk, “Schools Should Be Among Last Things Closed: Hirji,” *Hamilton Spectator*, January 9, 2022, <https://www.thespec.com/nd/news/niagara-region/2022/01/09/schools-should-be-among-last-things-closed-hirji.html?rf>.

11 M. Science, N. Thampi, A. Bitnun, et al., “School Operation for the 2021–2022 Academic Year in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Science Briefs of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table 2*, no. 38 (2021), 4, <https://doi.org/10.47326/ocsat.2021.02.39.1.0>.

12 Government of Canada, “Guidelines for Essential Services Designations,” 2021, <https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=27987>.

13 Government of Canada, “Guidance on Essential Services and Functions in Canada during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 2021, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrn/crtcl-nfrstrctr/esf-sfe-en.aspx>.

on the holistic well-being of children and youth—on physical, mental, social, and academic outcomes, much of which we do not have definitive data on yet. Second, it will mean that as we learn more about this or any future public-health crisis, we prioritize policies to ensure that schools really are the last to close and the first to open. Additionally, it may mean legislation to ensure that school closure is not used as a way of reducing the impact on our health-care system but that, instead, adequate health policy and investment in health-care infrastructure accomplish this goal.

This approach will also require research on the impact of school closure on the education profession: how virtual and hybrid models of learning affected educators; the impact on communication and relationships among teachers, students, and parents; and the supports that educators received through professional-development opportunities and administrative leadership. Finally, designating schools as an essential service will require negotiation with teachers' unions, and study on its impact on collective-bargaining agreements, ensuring safe workplaces as well as fostering innovation and creativity for local school communities. This includes negotiation on the point at which strike action and work refusal are warranted, as employees in sectors such as long-term care, grocery stores, and health care have continued to provide uninterrupted service through extremely challenging circumstances in what are arguably higher-risk environments.

What might be the result of re-establishing our collective priorities for education and of re-centring students within its orbit? Could the designation of education as an essential service challenge Ontario's government-education system to prioritize the equitable aims it purports to have, reaching students who most need the stability and resources of in-person learning? Is it possible that the impact on collective-bargaining agreements could stabilize what has often been a volatile relationship at the negotiating table, and benefit both the professional status of educators and the educational well-being of students? The impact of legislating education as an essential service has broad research, policy, and legal questions. For the sake of Ontario's students, we should not be afraid to ask and attempt to answer them.

Theme 2: Education as Partnership

The decline of parental voice to effect change or contribute to decision-making within the government-school system in Ontario has contributed, over time, to the exclusion and marginalization of parents and guardians as meaningful partners in the education of their children. In Ontario's government-education system, the lack of representation of parents in decision-making means that parents are consistently limited to speaking from outside the system about issues that affect them and their children. This has been painfully obvious throughout pandemic school policy, as communication from the province and school boards lacked clarity and did not provide clear channels by which parents could meaningfully engage and schools could understand parental concerns regarding pandemic school policy.

Ontario has been consistently unclear with its messaging, providing insufficient rationale for policy decisions and inadequate time for school boards, educators, and

parents to pivot between virtual and in-person learning. The most recent school-closure decisions, in January 2022, were handed down without a clear rationale for conditions that would need to be met to return to in-person learning. This lack of clear communication has eroded educators' and parents' trust and confidence in government policy decisions.¹⁴ The Ford government's whiplash on school-closure policy has managed to frustrate parents and educators across Ontario's education system, both independent and government schools, as administrators attempted to make sense of unclear policy, educators pivoted to remote learning, and parents scrambled to find child-care options. Unfortunately, government-education systems' disregard of parental input is nothing new; it is a feature of successive systems and an inherent structural weakness. For its part, the Ford government's *Parents' Bill of Rights*, promised in its 2018 consultations with parents, has not yet materialized, nor has there been meaningful engagement with the outcomes of these consultations, which consisted of questions on standardized testing, curriculum content, cell phones and technology in the classroom, and more.¹⁵ Transparency, it seems, is optional.¹⁶

School boards throughout the province have not been much better at effective communication. The lack of clear communication about the trade-offs of hybrid-learning models has frustrated some educators and parents.¹⁷ Parents remain in the dark about whether plans exist to address the learning gaps that they see in their children's pandemic schooling.¹⁸ Inadequacy in pandemic schooling has left some parents trying to find their own solutions for their children through tutoring services,¹⁹ while others chose to boycott remote learning altogether.²⁰

Robust engagement and communication with parents is an essential component of any successful education system at all times, not only during a global pandemic. The commitment of Ontario's education system to equitable learning outcomes for its students necessitates prioritizing robust, increased methods of communication with

14 S. Proudfoot, "The Cruel, Ridiculous Reality of 'Virtual Learning,'" *Maclean's*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.macleans.ca/society/the-cruel-ridiculous-reality-of-virtual-learning/>; T. Yun, "'It's a Scramble': Teachers, Parents Frustrated After Ontario Moves to Online Learning," *CTV News*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/it-s-a-scramble-teachers-parents-frustrated-after-ontario-moves-to-online-learning-1.5727199>.

15 Ontario Ministry of Education, "2018 Consultation: Education in Ontario," <https://www.ontario.ca/page/for-the-parents>.

16 T. Dhanraj, "Government Consultation Shows Parents Overwhelmingly Reject Class Size Increase: Sources," *Global News*, December 1, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6239822/parents-rejected-increased-class-sizes/>.

17 S. Maharaj, "The Convenience of 'Hybrid' Education Comes at a Cost: A Compromised Learning Experience for Children," *Toronto Star*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2021/05/25/the-convenience-of-hybrid-education-comes-at-a-cost-a-compromised-learning-experience-for-children.html>.

18 P. MacPherson, "Ontario Needs a Plan to Help Kids Who Are Falling Behind in School," *Ottawa Citizen*, January 17, 2022, <https://ottawacitizen.com/opinion/macpherson-ontario-needs-a-plan-to-help-kids-who-are-falling-behind-in-school>.

19 G. Livingston, "Demand for Tutoring Soars as Parents Spend Thousands to Help Kids Amid Disrupted Online Learning," *Globe and Mail*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/investing/personal-finance/household-finance/article-parents-budget-for-tutoring-to-fill-in-gaps-in-childrens-education/>.

20 P. Tsekouras, "Group of Ontario Parents Boycott Remote Learning in the Face of New Public Health Restrictions," *CTV News Toronto*, January 7, 2022, <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/group-of-ontario-parents-boycott-remote-learning-in-the-face-of-new-public-health-restrictions-1.5732260>.

parents within each school community, so that parents are empowered to weigh the risks and benefits and make choices that meet the needs of their children.

Recent polling demonstrates that parents of independent-school students are more likely to demonstrate satisfaction with pandemic learning than their counterparts in the government-school system, and are less likely to demonstrate concern for their children's academic progress throughout the pandemic.²¹ In fact, 84 percent of independent-school parents report being minimally concerned or slightly concerned about their children's learning gaps, compared to 64 percent of government-school parents.²² Most observers of this gap will find an immediate explanation in socioeconomic status and wealth distribution: independent schools are chosen by families who can afford them, and these families are far more likely to be able to access increased supports for their children's learning. Certainly it is true that the average family that chooses independent schools for their child has a middle-class income level and therefore may be in a privileged position to address their child's needs.²³

However, we would be remiss to attribute this gap solely to economic disparity. In addition to the polling, research within the independent-religious-school sector conducted by Cardus demonstrates the flexibility of independent schools in response to pandemic school closures.²⁴ Other studies of parental involvement within independent schools demonstrate deep community relationships between educators and parents or guardians within this sector.²⁵ In a survey of five hundred Ontario independent-school parents, from both religious and non-religious school communities, parents indicated strong satisfaction with their school's communication during the initial pandemic shutdowns, corroborating the most-recent polling data discussed above. In addition, it is noteworthy that 80 percent of these parents demonstrated agreement

21 P. MacPherson, "One in Five Ontario Parents Say Kids Fallen Behind During COVID," Fraser Institute, November 30, 2021, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/blogs/one-in-five-ontario-parents-say-kids-fallen-behind-during-covid>; MacPherson, "Ontario Needs a Plan."

22 MacPherson, "One in Five Ontario Parents"; MacPherson, "Ontario Needs a Plan."

23 D. J. Allison, S. Hasan, and D.N. Van Pelt. "A Diverse Landscape: Independent Schools in Canada." Fraser Institute, June 29, 2016, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/studies/a-diverse-landscape-independent-schools-in-canada>; D. Hunt, "Flexible Education in an Age of Disruption: Embracing Innovation and Diversity in Ontario K–12 Education," Cardus, 2020, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/flexible-education-in-an-age-of-disruption/>; D. Hunt, A. Momoh, and D.N. Van Pelt, "Funding All Students: A Comparative Economic Analysis of the Fiscal Cost to Support Students in Ontario Independent Schools," Cardus, 2021, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/the-cost-to-fund-students-in-ontario-independent-schools/>.

24 D. Van Pelt, D. Hunt, and J. Wolfert, "Who Chooses Ontario Independent Schools, and Why?," Cardus, 2019, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/who-chooses-ontario-independent-schools-and-why/>; P. Marcus, D. Van Pelt, and T. Boven, "Pandemic Pivot: Christian Independent Schooling During the Initial 2020 Lockdown," Cardus, 2021, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/pandemic-pivot/>; P. Marcus, N. Brouwer, D. Van Pelt, T. Boven, and D. Hunt, "Pandemic Response: How Christian Independent Schools Responded to a Year of COVID-19," Cardus, August 2021, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/pandemic-response-how-christian-independent-schools-responded-to-a-year-of-covid-19/>.

25 J.D. VanHof, "Education as Partnership: Quantifying Parental Involvement in Ontario's Private Schools" (Major Research Paper, OISE, 2021).

or strong agreement with the statement that parents should be able to influence decision-making at the school level. Importantly, survey responses demonstrate involvement by parents in a variety of ways, reaching beyond fundraising and parent committees to school governance, including school board positions.²⁶

Independent schools are an excellent case study in demonstrating how to engage parents in a robust partnership, recognizing parental expertise and incorporating parents as key stakeholders in educational decision-making. By contrast, parents in Ontario's government-education system remain marginalized, with little opportunity to contribute effectively. Current engagement strategies (such as parent involvement on school councils) extend only to a few, and robust policy is needed to reach those parents who may not otherwise have the time or resources to volunteer.²⁷ In particular, some researchers have shed light on how the government-education system alienates parents who identify with religious and ethnic minority groups.²⁸ In her research on teacher education, Yan Guo describes how pre-service teachers operate from a "default deficit position" (a position of a deficit of knowledge and skill) when confronted with differences in the culture and religion of students and their families. The perpetuation of this lack of knowledge, she argues, serves to build a government-education system in which minority communities are not understood, and do not feel at home—one in which they are often regarded as "other" and their values as "less than," rather than as an integral part.²⁹

Research consistently demonstrates that when parents are given opportunity to meaningfully engage as partners in education, outcomes for students improve.³⁰ In the context of virtual learning, parents have gained a window into the educators' world and an appreciation for their profession more than ever before. It is time for Ontario's government-education system to recognize in meaningful ways that partnership with parents is more than lip service: it is inclusion, representation, and access. It means understanding the barriers that exist and actively working to remove them. In this regard, Ontario's parents need wholesale system change, for the benefit of students and support of their children's educators.

26 VanHof, "Education as Partnership."

27 D. McRae, "Parent Engagement: School Councils Are Not Enough," *Quest Journal, York Region District School Board*, 2012, <https://www.yrdsb.ca/Programs/PLT/Quest/Journal/2012-Parent-Engagement-School-Councils-are-Not-Enough.pdf>.

28 Y. Guo, "Diversity in Public Education: Acknowledging Immigrant Parent Knowledge," *Canadian Journal of Education* 35, no. 2 (2012): 120–40; Y. Guo, "Pre-service Teachers and Muslim Parents: Exploring Religious Diversity in Canadian Public Schools," *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 9, no. 3 (2015): 189–204; J. Zine, "Safe Havens or Religious 'Ghettos'? Narratives of Islamic Schooling in Canada," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 10, no. 1 (2007): 71–92.

29 Guo, "Diversity in Public Education," 122.

30 J.L. Epstein, *School, Family and Community Partnerships* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2010); A. Harris, and J. Goodall, "Do Parents Know They Matter? Engaging All Parents in Learning," *Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2008): 277–89; W. Jaynes, *Parental Involvement and Academic Success* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

In considering policy change to the educational landscape, policy-makers need to ask the following questions: How can parents be more intentionally included in their children's education, both during and after the pandemic? What forms of communication are most effective, given the inherent diversity within and among individual schools? How can parental engagement strategies be encouraged in teacher-education programs? How can principals and other administrators engage effectively with their broader communities? As Ontario's education system looks to recover lost learning and meet students' needs, it will be imperative to meaningfully include parents as partners and stakeholders in the process and, along the way, to pay particularly close attention to those parents whose voices may not often be heard.

Theme 3: Prioritizing Education at a Human Scale

One of the tragic consequences of school-closure policy throughout the pandemic has been the widening gap in outcomes for marginalized student populations in comparison to students of higher socioeconomic status. Ontario's government-education system has long been highly regarded internationally for its commitment to equity and quality.³¹ Maintaining this distinction, however, means a forthright acknowledgement of the ways in which this commitment may fall short of its targets. The impact of the pandemic on vulnerable student populations is clearly substantial, despite the efforts of individual educators to meet their students' needs as best they can.

The governance of Ontario's education system today must be understood in the context of its history. In his book *The State of the System*, educator Paul Bennett chronicles the slow, relentless consolidation of Ontario's education system into a centralized system of bureaucracy, and he advocates for a return to school-level management systems.³² From 1995 to 1997, the Harris government established with decisive action a near-complete reconstruction of Ontario's education system. Interestingly, the plan for some of this reform was called for and begun by the previous NDP government, and every major party's platform during the 1995 election campaign featured consolidation of resources, promises of provincial standards, core curriculum, and more testing in schools, all features of an NDP policy document titled *New Foundations for Ontario Education*.³³ The Harris government made good on the call for greater accountability and enacted sweeping change to Ontario's system, in effect modelling education after high-efficiency business standards.³⁴ The centralization of power through the consolidation of school boards was one such sweeping change, and arguably the transfer of administrative staff (principals and vice principals)

31 C. Campbell, "Educational Equity in Canada: The Case of Ontario's Strategies and Actions to Advance Excellence and Equity for students," *School Leadership & Management* 41, no. 4–5 (2021): 410, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1709165.

32 P.W. Bennett, *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 202–37.

33 R.D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 233.

34 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 234.

from teachers' unions into management positions has had as significant an effect on local school environments.³⁵ Over time, school size has grown significantly as school boards extend these efficient-management systems to the local-school level, eradicating smaller schools and forming large schools of hundreds or thousands of students.³⁶

The features of independent schools stand in direct contrast to Ontario's government-education systems. The majority of these schools are small, local community initiatives.³⁷ They are locally governed and relationally driven, and of small government schools like them, Bennett asserts that "the very strengths of smaller schools, urban as well as rural, their embeddedness in community and deep, supportive educational relationships, stand in defiance of an expanding System."³⁸ Smaller schools correlate with improved graduate outcomes: graduates of smaller schools are more likely to graduate and less likely to drop out of high school.³⁹ An intimate, relational learning environment is the desire of every educator in every classroom, and every administrator's goal is to retain and encourage these features at a school level as well. The success of independent schools throughout pandemic learning and school closure is directly related to these features, and the structural lack of these features has arguably weakened the quality and effectiveness of the government-school system in Ontario.

A return to education at a more human scale is long overdue. This human-scale approach will encourage rather than stifle community initiatives, allow for creative local solutions, and reduce the inflexibility and immobility of a large, bureaucratic system. Independent schools are an excellent model, with lessons that can be transferred and adapted to the government-education system. Additionally, the province should consider the impact of removing administrators from teachers' unions, including the unintended consequences in which the collegial relationships and educational aims of administrators and educators are forced to be at odds.⁴⁰ Here, strengthening local-school governing councils with parents, educators, administrators, and local-community representation can allow for true educational partnership in serving the needs of local students. School councils currently exist in an advisory capacity only; expanding their roles to include local decision-making power, direction and facilitation of parent-school communication, and oversight of school-level policy and budget priorities will strengthen school-level management and local accountability.

In short, effective policy that places strategic decision-making in the hands of those closest to the students—those most affected by policy—is imperative for the recovery and future flourishing of school communities. These partnerships will enable the

35 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 248.

36 Bennett, *The State of the System*, 190.

37 Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt, "A Diverse Landscape"; Hunt, "Flexible Education in an Age of Disruption."

38 Bennett, *The State of the System*, 189.

39 Bennett, *The State of the System*, 189.

40 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 261.

meaningful collaboration of local communities in weathering future crises with creativity and flexibility. In light of school-closure policies, a return to human-scale governance will allow for local solutions to local issues. Questions around when to close and reopen schools, the relative risks within an urban or rural community, and the needs of particular students and their families can all be better determined at the local level. With clearer, local lines of accountability, the current one-size-fits-all for more than two million Ontario students over one million square kilometres can be avoided. In addressing the structural challenges within Ontario's current education system that reduce the ability of local schools to control their own resources, policy-makers will need to gauge citizens' appetite for and ability to adapt to the empowerment of local schools to facilitate creative solutions to community concerns.

For far too long, education in Ontario has been unduly influenced by the political aims of the province's governing party. Doug Ford is just one more in a long line of politicians who have exercised central decision-making from Queen's Park, and it is consistently students who suffer. It is time that local school communities and the students they serve reflect on what it would mean to regain their agency and how it can be reintegrated into educational decision-making processes.

Conclusion

The unintended consequences of school-closure policy in Ontario have highlighted the inefficiencies of a large, bureaucratic education system and called into question our commitment to education as an equitable, social, public good, a foundational cornerstone of democracy, and a right that the youth of our province are entitled to. At its core, this paper asks Ontarians, What place do children hold in our society? What changes are necessary to ensure that their access to education remains as stable and uninterrupted as possible? We argue that it is time for Ontario to re-prioritize our youth, consider designating education as an essential service, and build a legal framework in which education is considered fundamental to the well-being of children. We argue for the reintegration of parents as an integral voice in educational partnership to improve communication, and we suggest ways that local communities can be more involved in education. Further, we argue for the restoration of relationships to large, inflexible systems and for a human-scale distribution of governance in order to better meet local community needs. As we face a future that will surely bring additional crises, it is imperative to balance the efficiency of bureaucracy with the ingredients for innovation and creativity to problem-solving in local contexts. Let's improve Ontario's educational systems, together.

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