

Back-to-school will mark return to normal academic year, says Province

By Brock Weir

It's almost back-to-school season and as families prepare for the 2022-23 academic year, they are doing so with more certainty than they have had since 2019.

On Monday, Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced Ontario's Plan to Catch Up.

The Plan, said the Province, aims to get students back in classrooms, on time, with the full school experience, including extra-curriculars like clubs, band and field trips.

Our government is looking ahead as we remain squarely focused on ensuring students receive the best stable learning experience possible, and that starts with them being in class, on time, with all of the experiences students deserve, said Lecce in a statement. We have a plan for students to catch up, including the largest tutoring program in Ontario's history, a modernized skills-focused curriculum to prepare students for the jobs of tomorrow and enhanced mental health supports.

The plan is focused on five key areas:

Getting kids back in classrooms in September, on time, with a full school experience that includes extra-curriculars like clubs, band, and field trips;

New tutoring supports to fill gaps in learning;

Preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow;

Providing more money to build schools and improve education; and

Helping students with historic funding for mental health supports.

With almost 50,000 children benefiting from Ontario's tutoring investments every week, and summer learning programs underway Province-wide, Ontario's plan is getting students back on track, Lecce continued. With an emphasis on getting back to basics, our government is focused on strengthening life and job skills in the classroom, so that students graduate as financially literate, technologically savvy, emotionally intelligent leaders, ready for the jobs of tomorrow.

As of the beginning of April 2022, Ministry-funded tutoring programs were underway across Ontario, said the Province. From May to June 2022, on average, approximately 49,000 students participated in tutoring programs each week, with an average group size of less than five students to provide tailored and focused support.

The Ministry of Education says more than \$26.6 billion has been allocated for this school year.

More than \$175 million will go towards enhanced tutoring programs delivered by school boards and community partners with a focus on reading, writing and math.

A further \$304 million in time-limited funding will be earmarked to hire up to 3,000 frontline staff, including teachers, early childhood educators, educational assistants, and other education workers and \$14 billion to build new schools, classrooms, and to repair and renew existing schools, with \$2.1 billion allocated for this academic year.

Additional funding will support students with exceptionalities through a \$93 million increase in funding for the Special Education

Grant and over \$9 million in funding to support the new de-streamed grade nine program, with an emphasis on supporting students most at risk including students from racialized, Black, immigrant, and Indigenous communities.

With supportive policies and programs delivered by the Ministry, school boards and partners, Ontario students have overcome many of the challenges of the pandemic, and graduation rates continue to rise, said the Ministry of Education in a statement. In 2020-21, 84.2 per cent of the 2016-17 grade nine cohort of students received their high school diploma within four years and 89 per cent of students received their high school diploma within five years.

Since August 2020, more than \$665 million has been allocated to improve ventilation and filtration in schools as part of the province's efforts to protect against COVID-19. These investments have resulted in improvements to existing ventilation systems; deployment of over 100,000 standalone HEPA filter units and other ventilation devices to schools; upgrades to school ventilation infrastructure; and increased transparency through public posting of school board standardized ventilation measure reports.