

It's official!

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Well, we certainly waited long enough and now we finally know. The kids will NOT be going back to school. It's newsworthy, even several days after the decision was announced, in part because it took so long to make the announcement. Why the delay? Why put off announcing a decision that I think we all pretty much knew was going to result in the permanent closure of schools for the remainder of this academic year? I'm reminded of the scene in *A Few Good Men* where Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise are battling it out in the courtroom and Jack blurts out, "You can't handle the truth!" I think that's the stark reality here. Doug Ford, Stephen Lecce, perhaps even the Chief Medical Officer of Health each felt that parents, already struggling under so much pandemic panic, just couldn't handle the truth that their kids weren't going to return to school this year.

I have shared in this space on many an occasion my feelings about some of the decisions Mr. Ford has made. On the whole however, during this pandemic, I believe he has done an exceptional job. On the subject of school though I do think he could have done better. Announcing a closure wasn't a big ask in my opinion, rather, it was simply a case of relieving the ongoing uncertainty and anxiety of both parents and kids about whether school would return at all this year. With many jurisdictions still seeing CoVid counts of 300+ (and in fact, on the day of the announcement a 400+ daily jump) and with an earlier invitation for educational support staff to volunteer to work in long-term care facilities, it didn't really take a genius to figure out that our kids weren't going anywhere. I firmly believe that with parents in crisis, trying to work from home, home school their kids and maintain some semblance of sanity both Ford and Mr. Lecce just didn't think we "could handle the truth." This announcement may well be the tipping point for parents who are pretty much done with parenting, policing school work, pandemic stress, online grocery orders, cooking and cleaning all while also trying to work from home.

Ironically, as Doug Ford was making his announcement, the screen froze. Every network we checked just wasn't working in our house they froze immediately after Premier Ford's first sentence, where he stated schools would remain closed for the remainder of the academic school year because he's "just not going to risk it." I'm betting the system froze because collectively, thousands of parents and children across the province all tuned in simultaneously, and whether it was cheers (kids) or groans (parents) the system was overwhelmed! That frozen web or TV screen reflected the frozen look of fear on the faces of parents who, province wide, are now staring down another six weeks of home-schooling their kids! I'm sure it was a tough decision and I fully support and appreciate Mr. Ford's comment that it was "not easy, but the right decision," because "kids safety comes first." YES, yes it does. So again, my only remaining issue is why wait so long to announce it?

After Ford came Stephen Lecce who went on to comment that the government "wants all the kids to get the support they need" and further, that schools will not look the same in September. This too is to be expected and perhaps parents can use this next 6 weeks to help their children understand both how this academic year will end and when and how the new one will begin. Finally, the government shared that they made their decision in conjunction with the CoVid19 command table, the Chief Medical Officer of Health, experts from The Hospital for Sick Children and that all of these experts will also work together to ensure that by the end of June there will be a plan in place including "strong safety protocols" and additional educational supports, for students returning to school in September. In the interim, summer learning programs will be enhanced and expanded, all children will receive report cards and those students who were "on track" in March to graduate, will still graduate this June.

Maybe Mr. Ford and Mr. Lecce were correct in delaying this announcement. Maybe the freeze that occurred during the live network broadcasts wasn't just ironic but actually a result of the collective groans of parents everywhere who may have suspected this news was coming but who just weren't ready to "handle the truth." In the words of Alice Cooper, "School's out for Summer!"