

Teachers' groups call for educators to be among priority groups to be vaccinated

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Top education groups, including major unions, are making a push for educators to be among the priority groups to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) called on governments to make teachers a priority group, and were joined by the likes of UNESCO, the global federation of unions Education International, and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF).

The bid comes as the first vaccines are being administered to frontline health-care workers and while positive numbers continue to rise both in schools and in the province at large.

While the Ontario government has vowed to keep schools safe and has made them a priority in its coronavirus response, children under 16 are not yet eligible to receive the vaccine.

"Unlike most other professionals under consideration for the priority list, teachers and education workers will be exposed daily to groups of individuals who do not have immunity against this deadly disease," stated the CTF in a press release.

"Given how essential it is that school buildings remain open for all students to learn to the best of their ability and for the economy to recover, and considering the actual working conditions for teachers and education workers, it is imperative that teachers and education workers be prioritized to receive the coronavirus vaccine," said CTF President **Shelley L. Morse**.

Harvey Bischof, the president of the OSSTF, echoed the call to prioritize educators. "Absolutely we support the call for the appropriate level of priority to be given to educators," he said, adding that the union is open to the advice of health experts to determine what that might mean, and that he thinks educators, including itinerant workers who work at multiple sites, should be "at or near that second tier" of groups to receive the vaccine.

Right now educators wouldn't be given any priority and would receive the COVID-19 vaccine alongside the general population in phase three, which could begin in April. Health-care workers, long-term care residents, essential caregivers and Indigenous people are among the groups in the first two phases before the province moves on to the general population.

Bischof made the case that there is a need to prioritize vaccines among educators as part of an effort to lower transmission where the physical circumstances of classrooms mean public health guidelines can't always be followed. "It reinforces the need to find reasonable ways to break the chain of transmission," he said of the positive cases emerging at schools.

The French-language union, Association des enseignantes et enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), agreed. "Given how the Ontario government is prioritizing keeping schools open and that its plan to keep schools safe remains inadequate — especially as it pertains to poor

ventilation — it is even more important to include members on the priority list to keep them healthy and safe," said President **Anne Vinet-Roy** in support of educators as a priority group for the vaccine.

The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) sent a sharp response calling for educators to receive the vaccine as a priority group. "Given that the Ford government has not implemented proper health and safety protocols in schools, and that asymptomatic testing is showing the spread of COVID-19 in schools to be much higher than the government would have Ontarians believe, it would make sense for those teachers who want it to be priority recipients of the COVID-19 vaccine," said **Liz Stuart**, the president of OECTA.

Stuart explained that this matter is a priority for the union, but she described the government as unresponsive. "This is one of the many issues our association is eager to discuss directly with the government. Unfortunately, they do not seem inclined to hear the perspectives of the frontline workers in publicly funded education."

The minister of health's office did not respond to *QP Briefing* with a comment in time for publication.

NDP education critic **Marit Stiles** agreed with the call. "Absolutely teachers should be one of the priority groups," she told *QP Briefing*. "Education workers are essential workers in this moment," she noted, adding that the numbers emerging from schools are "very disturbing."

According to the province's latest numbers, 913 or 18.9 per cent of schools in Ontario have active cases of COVID-19. Forty-eight additional staff members, 270 more students and one unidentified person have tested positive — a total of 319 new cases — although these numbers reflect three days from Friday at 2 p.m. to Monday at 2 p.m.