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June 1, 2017

Dear Members of the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety:

Let us start by expressing our gratitude for your hard work and commitment to promoting a positive culture of health and safety in Ontario's publicly funded education system. Our schools must be safe, inclusive and welcoming places — not only for students and their families, but for the entire school community.

We share your view that Ontario's teachers, education professionals and staff are entitled to a safe working environment. This is an urgent and high priority for our government that we are committed to getting right with your help. That is, in part, why our government continues to make significant investments in additional staffing and other important classroom supports. A recent example is the agreement to create a new \$219 million fund to support a range of local priorities, including more staff to support students with special needs and other students at risk.

This new Local Priorities Fund is only one piece of what needs to be a multi-faceted approach to addressing a real and complex challenge for front-line workers. Other pieces include continuing to reduce average class sizes, improving youth mental health supports, building strong relationships with service providers and community organizations and ensuring teachers and education workers have the tools and training that they need.

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Meaningful progress is being made on these fronts and important work continues by government, school boards, labour partners and community groups across the province. As you know, some of this work stems from commitments made through the collective bargaining process, including the Crown's commitment to fund the development or purchase of a training program on the prevention of violence for employees whose core duties require them to work directly with students who may pose a safety risk. In addition, the Ministry of Education has begun work on a new training resource for effective planning and responsive programming for students — including students with special education needs, and those with high risk behaviours — to support positive learning environments. The first module is scheduled for release in January 2018.

We know, however, that there is more to do. And so we are thankful that the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety was established with a mandate to “strive to facilitate health and safety excellence”. Over the past year and a half, the Working Group has served as a forum for hard work and collaboration among partners, all focused on the common goal of ensuring our schools are safe places to learn and to work. One tangible example of that hard work and collaboration is the Working Group's roadmap for workplace violence reporting procedures in school boards.

We commend the members of the Working Group for their demonstrated commitment to working together and to sharing their various perspectives in an open and constructive way. While we appreciate that the Working Group already has many important issues on its agenda, we are writing today to ask you to work with us on three priority items that our government is committed to addressing immediately.

1. Ministry of Labour Guidance Material

For the 2017-18 school year, the Ministry of Labour (MOL) will be conducting an enhanced initiative on workplace violence in schools. This will involve all district school boards in Ontario being visited by an enforcement team that may include a manager, regional program co-ordinator and an inspector to review school boards' obligations under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA). Prior to this initiative, MOL inspectors will receive refresher training on the OHSA requirements as they apply to school boards.

To better inform inspectors and workplace parties on compliance with the OHSA as it relates to workplace violence, MOL will be issuing guidance documents. To help facilitate the development of these documents, MOL will work closely with the Working Group. As you may know, sector-specific MOL guidance materials already exist in certain other sectors; they are intended to assist all parties in understanding the requirements under the OHSA as they may apply in a particular setting or context and have proved to be a valuable resource to inspectors and workplace parties. The guidance documents developed will have the same force and effect as those that are produced by committees established under section 21 of the OHSA.

To allow for effective engagement and feedback on this issue and others, MOL will become a member of the Working Group. With the support and input of all parties, we expect that MOL's guidance material for Ontario's public funded schools will be finalized and published during the 2017-2018 school year. In the meantime, the Working Group will function as a roundtable to assist MOL in the development of related tools and resources. This work will be supported by a secretariat led by MOL and by the Public Services Health and Safety Association.

2. Information Sharing

The second item relates to the importance of information being shared with board employees pertaining to student behaviour that may present a risk of harm. We are aware that practices vary in schools across the province when it comes to sharing this type of pertinent information, some of which may be housed in a particular student's Ontario Student Record (OSR). And we know that these practices, though they may vary across the province, are guided by, among other things, provisions in the OHSA and *Education Act*, PPM 145 ("Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour") and the *OSR Guideline, 2000*.

Having met with education workers from across the province, it is clear to us that information sharing is critical. Keeping in mind that there is highly sensitive and privileged information that may be contained in an OSR, we must ensure that every teacher and education worker has access to the information they need to protect themselves and to maintain a safe and inclusive classroom for students and other staff. We are asking for the Working Group's advice on this issue by January 2018. Your experience and expertise will inform next steps to expand access to this important information by spring 2018.

3. Reporting Requirements

Finally, we will be looking to the Working Group for guidance on what we can do to clarify and streamline Ontario's existing reporting requirements for incidents of violence in our schools. The Working Group's draft roadmap provides an excellent overview of the existing reporting requirements. In our view, however, it also illustrates the complexity of the current approach and the need for a clearer and more accessible process.

We have heard from some teachers and education workers that the process for reporting a violent incident can be difficult to navigate, and that in some instances they feel they are being discouraged from reporting. A process that is simpler and more standardized, including a common reporting tool that can be accessed online will help to address this concern and, in turn, allow for the collection of more accurate data that will help us all to better understand this serious issue. Moving towards a more streamlined process will involve a collective review of existing reporting policies under the OHSA and the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), as well as PPM 120 ("Reporting Violent Incidents to the Ministry of Education") and PPM 145 ("Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Behaviour"). We are asking for the Working Group's advice on this issue by January 2018 to inform implementation of next steps by spring 2018.

In closing, we would like to thank you again for helping to build and maintain a culture of health and safety in our publicly funded education system. The three items identified in this letter will require a considerable amount of thought and deliberation by all parties. In order to meet these important timelines, we expect the Working Group to meet more frequently and/or establish sub-working groups to address specific issues in more depth. We firmly believe that each of these three items is fundamental to fulfilling our collective responsibility to ensure our schools are beacons of safety and inclusion.

The Working Group's next meeting on June 9, 2017 will be an opportunity to discuss the issues raised in this letter and to begin work on next steps. We look forward to personally joining future meetings of the Working Group to hear directly from you on the steps we can take together to ensure our schools are safe and welcoming places for all.

Your advice and expertise will be critical as we move forward.

Sincerely,



The Honourable Mitzie Hunter, MBA
Minister of Education



The Honourable Kevin Flynn
Minister of Labour