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OPINION

The focus should be when and how, not whether school should resume



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“Nattering nabobs of negativism” is the skewering descriptor speechwriter William Safire famously pinned on members of the media. But the legendary wordsmith would need to crank the rhetoric to describe Ontario’s hapless back-to-school planners.

Negativism doesn’t begin to describe. Nattering in lieu of action is the norm. The buck-passing, excuse-making, the foot-dragging are endless.

In the process, school attendance has been made to appear far more dangerous than it is, filling parents with fright, guilt and rage.

Getting kids back to school safely is important for their development and for the resumption of economic activity.

It’s also a question of equity. Not everyone has the luxury of being able to use remote learning. Delaying the resumption of school harms the marginalized and those with more child-care duties than usual, namely working moms.

Let's dispense with the question of whether school will resume and focus on the when and the how. It's pretty clear what's needed: small classes to enable physical distancing; bubbles or

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CHORUS OF "IT CAN'T BE DONE."

We can't have smaller class sizes. We can't hire more teachers. We can't seat students two metres apart. We can't improve ventilation. We can't change the curriculum.

The province blames the school boards, the school boards blame the teachers' unions, the unions blame the province, and round and round it goes pointlessly.

Can we please dispense with the "can't do" attitude?

We can find infinite ways to fail. Leadership means setting a goal, rallying people to your cause and then achieving it.

The worries of parents, teachers and unions about safety are legitimate. So are the economic or political concerns of government. Yet, in these extraordinary times, everyone needs to put a little water in their wine, and a little less volume in their whining.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford is the worst of the lot. "If it was up to all of us, we'd have five kids in a classroom," he said at a press briefing last week.

Who exactly is it up to?

If you want five kids per classroom – although the consensus is that 15 to 20 is probably a practical, doable target – sit down, cost it out and do it.

Instead of throwing up our arms in surrender, let's innovate.

There aren't enough classrooms for classes of 15? Then let's have some elsewhere, such as in community centres. Let's stagger the school day and create two "shifts."

Not enough teachers? Maybe the chemistry teacher can do four classes at once by livestreaming to several rooms. Teachers' aides can help, or substitutes can work full-time.

Scheduling, we're told, is a logistical nightmare, particularly for high school. But the curriculum is not carved into tablets of stone. Modify it, at least temporarily.

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Ontario currently has fewer than one case of COVID-19 per 100,000 population.

It's about as safe as it's ever going to be to send kids to school during a pandemic – at least until there is a vaccine.

There will almost certainly be infected children at school, just as there are in the community. Some will spread it to their loved ones, just as they do now.

That's why we need some Plan Bs.

If a class has a COVID-19 case, do you quarantine that class or the school?

If COVID-19 cases climb again, at what point do we shut down schools? Is that two cases per 100,000 population, or five? Whatever the cutoff, make it clear.

Let's not waste this opportunity to have children learn, and live a bit again. But let's not rush it either.

Done right must trump done quickly.

Last week, Mr. Ford said, "Let's give it a shot," and "pray to God that everyone's safe."

We don't need prayers, we need a good plan. Ideally, one reached by consensus.

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