

Rejected info request raises questions about government's claims for school and student safety

TORONTO, ON – Ontario's Ministry of Education has flatly refused to give a school board-by-school board breakdown of the number of education workers hired with COVID-related funds, prompting the union that made the inquiry to cast further doubt on the Ford government and its claims that it is doing everything possible to protect students in schools.

In early December, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) made a freedom-of-information request as part of its investigation into conflicting reports: from the provincial government, which boasts about its "unprecedented investments" in safe schools during the pandemic; and from CUPE education workers, who say that they have seen little to no extra staffing to support the measures needed to protect students, staff and families from the spread of COVID-19 in schools.

CUPE's request asked for the numbers of education workers that individual schools boards have hired since the pandemic, but this week the Ministry denied the request, citing Cabinet secrecy.

"At every opportunity, Minister of Education Stephen Lecce touts big numbers of additional workers who are helping to deal with the fallout of COVID in schools. For instance, at a news conference this week, he told us 1,300 more school custodians had been hired, with another 400 targeted for hire in the winter and spring to assist with more rigorous cleaning protocols," said Laura Walton, president of CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions, which represents 55,000 education workers.

"CUPE simply wants to know where these workers are, because CUPE members are telling us that they don't see them. If workers haven't in fact been hired in the numbers the Minister claims, then he is putting the long-term health of students and staff at risk."

CUPE will appeal the Ministry's denial of its request for information, but Walton noted that the rejection "leaves us wondering if the Minister has something to hide."

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