

Students return to online learning following April Break

Ontario students will return to online learning following April Break.

Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced Monday that schools across the Province will be closed to in-person learning effective this Monday, April 19, amid a rise of COVID-19 cases attributed to variants of concern.

The move follows measures taken by public health units in Peel Region and the City of Toronto which, in the lead-up to the April Break, took proactive measures to close their respective schools to in-person classes.

"No one wants our kids in school more than I do, that's where they belong, but with COVID-19 spreading like wildfire, with these deadly variants taking hold in Ontario, we simply can't be too cautious right now. We have to be proactive and when it comes to keeping our kids safe, I will never take unnecessary risk," said Premier Ford. "We're moving school online only after the April Break. We will keep a constant eye on the data on case numbers, hospital capacity and ICU admissions, to determine when we can get kids back in classrooms. I want nothing more than to be able to open the schools up again as soon as possible, but we all need to work together right now to get the community spread under control. That is how we get the schools open."

The Province, he added, will continue to ensure childcare options are in place as the shift back to remote learning will be "very, very hard on working families."

"This was not an easy decision, but it was the right decision. Child care for non-school-age children will remain open but before and after school programs will be closed. We will also provide free emergency child care for school aged children of healthcare and frontline workers, and we're working on a robust child care plan for many workers who may not work from home.

"We will continue to prioritize the vaccination of education workers who support students with special education needs right across our Province and all education workers in select hotspot areas. Moving students to remote learning will allow more time to deliver these vaccines and we're making tremendous progress every single day."

On his part, Minister Lecce said the Provincial government recognizes "the critical importance" of in-person learning, citing its integral relationship to mental health, wellbeing and long-term success.

"That is why throughout this pandemic we have worked hard to keep schools safe and to keep them open," he said. "We have been successful in this regard and prior to the April break, more than 99 per cent of students and staff did not have an active case of COVID-19. Medical experts, including our Province's Chief Medical Officer of Health have been clear that with appropriate measures in place, our schools are safe and in-school transmission of COVID-19 has remained low. This is in large part due to the extensive measures we have put in place to protect kids and despite these efforts we recognize the threat posted by rising numbers of COVID-19 cases, increasing hospitalizations and the pressure our health care system is experiencing as a result. This trend will leave us in an impossible situation if we don't act immediately.

"School boards will be directed to provide continued in-person support for students with special education needs who cannot learn remotely. Once elementary students have moved to remote learning, child care for non-school age children will remain open and free emergency child care for the school age children of health care and frontline workers will be provided. Our government will continue to listen to the advice of public health experts and we will update parents once a safe return to in-person learning is recommended."

Premier Ford also continued to insist that transmission rates within schools remain low, but rising cases of community transmission could be a game-changer in the classroom.

"The situation is changing quickly and we need to respond," said Premier Ford. Right now, I am extremely concerned about the new

variants: the South African variant, the UK Variant spreading in India, and the Brazilian variant that is spreading rampantly in BC right now. Here at home, we have taken decisive action to get the spread in our communities down. With a stay-at-home order announced last week. We need some time for the actions we have taken so far to start having the affect we need. Our best defence right now is staying home, limiting mobility, and staying the course when it comes to health and science., but the next few weeks will be critical. Right now, we need to do everything possible to get ahead of these variants and unfortunately that means looking at our schools. I know this is not what many of you want to hear.

?The problem is not in our schools; it is in our community and bringing our kids in to a congregate setting in school after a week off in the community is a risk that I won't take because we know that the more COVID spreads in our communities, the more likely it is to get into the schools and that will create massive problems for all of us down the road.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter