

## Students set to return to classrooms in September

Students at publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools across Ontario will be hitting the books in classrooms once again this September, the Province announced Thursday.

Last week, Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce outlined new measures to keep students safe this fall while resuming classes.

The plan, developed in consultation with medical experts, including Toronto's SickKids Hospital will see elementary schools open across Ontario with in-class instruction five days a week.

The reopening of secondary schools, however, will be markedly different. High schools with lower risk will re-open with a normal daily schedule five days a week, but most of Ontario's secondary schools will take a more phased-in approach.

This involves part-time attendance with class cohorts of 15 students alternating between in-person classes and online learning programs.

Students from Grades 4 ? 12, along with school staff, will also be required to wear masks for in-class instruction.

?During this pandemic, keeping our kids healthy and safe has been my top priority,? said Premier Ford at a press conference held July 30. ?We were the first province that made the difficult but necessary decision to close schools back in March. This decision put strain on families, but now looking back, I know that we made the right choice. Since then, our most senior health officials, our best experts, the top doctors in Ontario and Canada, including world-class experts at Sick Kids Hospital, have been working around the clock on a plan that will ensure a return to classrooms this fall in the safest way possible. When it comes to keeping our kids safe, I won't take any unnecessary risks, and that is why the plan we're announcing today is backed by the latest science and the best health advice available to us.

?As Sick Kids has pointed out, we need to weigh the risks of COVID-19 against the harm of school closures. We need to consider the toll it is taking on the physical and mental health and personal development of our kids. We know isolation is being extremely hard on them, not being able to see or play with their friends. We also know our children, especially the younger ones and those with special needs, need the benefit, guidance and routine of in-class instruction from their teachers. The fact is we know more about this virus than we did when we first closed our schools and we know what to do to stop the spread.?

In this new normal, parents will have the option to enroll their kids in remote learning programs which the Province says will ?Respect their fundamental role in making the final determination of whether they feel safe with their children returning to school.?

Getting kids back into classrooms safely, however, comes at a cost, and last Thursday's announcement came with over \$300 million-worth of new measures, including \$60 million for medical and cloth masks for students and staff, and \$30 million for more teacher staffing to support supervision and to ?keep class sizes small.?

A further \$50 million is allocated for the hiring of up to 500 more ?school-focused nurses in public health units to provide rapid response support to schools and boards in facilitating public health and preventative measures, including screening, testing, tracing and mitigation strategies.?

Increasing testing capacity at schools will run \$23 million, while \$75 million is earmarked for the hiring of more than 900 more school custodians and to purchase associated cleaning supplies.

?This plan was developed by the top health experts in Ontario and it is a plan that will ensure students get the best education possible,? said the Premier. ?Teachers, we're looking out for you as well. We'll make sure you have the masks, supplies and

protocols you need to teach safely and protect your students.

?We're taking every step and every precaution [to prepare] for September. While we're facing an unprecedented situation, we're prepared for anything ? armed with the best medical advice available ? to protect your child at school. With these measures in place, our classrooms will be as safe as we can make them, because when it comes down to it, our children belong in school.?

Added Minister Lecce: ?We know the last few months have not been easy for everyone, but I want to take a moment to acknowledge [the impact on children]. We have heard loud and clear from pediatric experts that COVID-19 has had profound mental health impacts on our kids and now more than ever reopening schools is crucial to the social and emotional development of Ontario students. It is also crucial to allow parents to return to work and support Ontario's economic recovery.

?We're being cautious. We're taking extra health and safety measures. We're putting in the necessary dollars and we're supporting parents through this process, because the Premier, the Deputy Premier and I have said all along we will do whatever it takes to keep your child and our staff safe in this province. I know it is important for parents to know what the child's school and class will look like once they return.

?We have pulled out all the stops for the 2 million students in this Province. Our students deserve nothing less. Our plan will evolve based on the evolution of COVID-19 and the risk to communities across the Province.?

**By Brock Weir**