

Students to learn remotely through at least January 11

It will be back to remote learning for area students through January 11, as the balance of Ontario is set to join York Region, Peel and Toronto in lockdown effective Boxing Day.

The new Province-wide lockdown will impact Southern Ontario for at least 28 days, while communities in Northern Ontario will be impacted for at least 14 days.

Under the new rules introduced December 21, all publicly-funded and private elementary and secondary schools will move to teacher-led remote learning at the end of winter break on January 4. At press time, parents can plan to see their elementary school students return to in-person learning on January 11, while secondary school classes will resume in-person learning until January 25.

Until then, secondary school students will continue remote learning.

Before- and after-school programs will also be closed, but emergency child care will be provided for health care and frontline workers.

"I want to be clear: Schools are not part of the problem of COVID in our communities, but out of an abundance of caution, school closures over the winter break will be extended," said Premier Ford. "Asking students and staff to stay home a little longer will help ensure we do what is needed to control the spread."

Under the Province-wide lockdown, indoor organized public events and social gatherings, except with members of the same household (the people you live with) will be prohibited, while "individuals who live alone may consider having exclusive close contact with one other household."

Big box retailers will be limited to 25 per cent capacity for in-store shopping, while pharmacies, supermarkets, grocery stores, and other stores that sell food will operate at a 50 per cent capacity.

Indoor and outdoor restaurant dining is also prohibited, and restaurants, bars and other food and drink establishments will be permitted to operate take-out, drive-thru and delivery.

Monday's announcement was a "difficult" one, said Premier Ford, but necessary as COVID-19 numbers "continue accelerating at an alarming rate." An additional concern, he noted, was people travelling from places already in Grey (Lockdown) Zones like York Region into places with fewer cases of the virus and, therefore, looser public health restrictions.

"COVID is spreading rapidly from high outbreak areas to areas with fewer cases," said Ford. "As it does, our hospitals are filling up more each day. We have seen a 70 per cent increase in hospitalizations and 80 per cent increase in ICU admissions in the past few weeks. Remember, 75 per cent of our intensive care unit beds at any given time are taken up by people who have had car accidents, or heart attacks, or other emergencies. Above all, we need to preserve capacity in our ICUs and our hospitals. But, because of increased cases of COVID-19 filling up our hospitals, we're on the verge of cancelling more elective surgeries and we already have thousands and thousands of backlogged surgeries."

"The vaccine has started to trickle in but due to limits in supply, it will be months before we have mass immunization. In the meantime, we need to do everything in our power to protect our hospitals and our most vulnerable. We need a runway for the vaccine to roll out."

As the lockdown will be a challenging time for many businesses, the Province has announced the launch of a new Ontario Small Business Support Grant which will see a minimum of \$10,000 and up to \$20,000 for eligible small businesses to help them through this difficult time.

Further support was also announced by Health Minister ? and Newmarket-Aurora MPP ? Christine Elliott for York, Peel, Toronto, Durham and Ottawa: a \$42 million investment to deliver three ?key interventions? including ?tailored community outreach and engagement so that people are aware of the services and supports available; increased access to testing, including more locations tailored to the unique needs of Ontario's many and varied communities, transportation assistance and the use of rapid testing; and wraparound supports using a case management approach that will allow individuals to isolate safely?whether that is at home or an isolation facility.?

?These measures will help to contain the virus in our high-risk communities,? said Ms. Elliott. ?Issuing a Province-wide shut down was not an easy decision, especially right before the holidays, but we have reached a tipping point. While the Province-wide shut-down is in effect, the Chief Medical Officer will assess and apply lessons learned thus far to the COVID-19 response framework to ensure appropriate and effective measures are in place to help protect the health of Ontarians and enable economic recovery after the shut-down ends. With the arrival of a vaccine, the light at the end of the tunnel grows brighter every day but we must remain vigilant.?

By Monday, December 21, Aurora had seen 476 cases of COVID-19, 426 of which are now marked as recovered. 32 cases remain active and there have been 18 fatalities. Active outbreaks remain at Chartwell Park Place and Chartwell Hollandview Trail.

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