

YRDSB won't hold distanced graduation gatherings following extended school closure

Ontario students won't finish off the 2020-2021 academic year in classrooms.

The Province announced last Wednesday that remote learning will continue Ontario-wide for the remainder of the school year.

In making their decision, the Government cited the prevalence of the B.1.617.2 COVID-19 variant to keep schools shuttered for a few more months, and efforts to "support a safer summer and return to in-person learning in September."

"At a time when our top priority is putting the third wave behind us so that we can safely enter Step One of our Roadmap to Reopen, we can't risk increased cases and potential downstream impacts on hospitals and ICUs," said Premier Doug Ford in a statement. "Making this tough decision now will allow kids to safely enjoy camps and outdoor activities this summer, and a safe return to school in September."

Data presented by the Province indicated that if schools re-opened now, Ontario could see an increase of "six to 11 per cent" in the number of new daily COVID-19 cases, and going forward with a re-opening would "threaten Ontarians' hard-fought progress in beating the third wave and could delay the safe return to many summer activities for kids, including day and overnight camps, sports leagues and public pools."

"While this decision was not made lightly, it has been done with one aim: protect the summer for families and deliver a stable and safe September for students," said Minister of Education Stephen Lecce. "We are looking forward and taking action by getting all education workers and students vaccinated with both doses ahead of September, while investing an additional \$2 billion to ensure students and staff are safe."

It wasn't all bad news last week for students hoping for a return to the classroom.

The Government announced it will allow school boards to invite graduating classes to small outdoor celebrations to celebrate their achievements, but this idea was nixed Monday by the York Region District School Board.

"With the safety of our students and our staff as our number one priority, we have planned for virtual graduations this year in June," said the Board in a letter to families. "This decision was based on the need to make decisions in a timely manner and the guidance of York Region Public Health regarding the predicted conditions and the stay-at-home order. While we recognize that virtual ceremonies do not fully replace the face-to-face graduation celebrations, we want to assure you that schools are working hard to ensure that virtual graduation ceremonies will be special and honour each of our graduates and their achievements.

"Following the provincial announcement, we appreciate that there are many questions now about face-to-face celebrations. The Ministry of Education has indicated that they will be sharing further direction with school boards shortly. Once we have received that direction, we will review it carefully, taking into account that any on-site, face-to-face recognition of our graduates will need to consider a number of factors. This will include engaging with York Region Public Health for their direction as we must ensure that we continue to prioritize the safety of our students, families, staff and communities.

"We understand the challenges the pandemic has presented for our students, and it is our hope that our virtual graduation ceremonies will still provide our graduating students with an opportunity to celebrate their achievements."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter