

In-class learning set to resume February 16

Students in the COVID-19 hotspots of York, Peel and Toronto are set to return to class this Tuesday, February 16.

The decision to open classes once again following the Winter Break was made by Education Minister Stephen Lecce last week.

On February 3, Minister Lecce announced that most students in the Province would resume in-class learning this Monday, February 8. But families living in the three noted regions would have to cool their heels until after the Family Day long weekend.

"We said it had to be safe and while this has not been easy on Ontario parents and students and on our education staff, I want to be clear that safety is what has and what will drive our decisions every step of the way," said Minister Lecce. "We will not put your child and your family at risk. We were the first to close schools in this country last March and today we're the only province that decided to cautiously and gradually reopen our schools. Our Premier has been unequivocal: he will not put our families at risk.

"We know how critical getting kids back to school is for the mental health and development of our children. But, perhaps most importantly, while kids stayed home to learn remotely and with the introduction of tough measures and the stay-at-home orders for all Ontarians, we have seen a consistent decline in community transmission. With the full support of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, and with unanimous support of all local medical officers of health, Ontario is ready to reopen schools because it is safe."

To support student safety, the Province has introduced new measures to protect students and staff against COVID-19 in the classroom.

These include Province-wide access, in consultation with local Public Health Units, to targeted asymptomatic testing for students and staff; mandatory masking requirements for students in Grades 1 to 3, along with masking requirements for Grade 1 to 12 students outdoors when physical distancing can't be maintained; providing 3.5 million cloth masks to schools as a back-up supply for students in Grades 1 through 12; guidance discouraging students from congregating before and after school; and temporary certification of eligible teacher candidates who are set to graduate in 2021 to stabilize staffing levels.

"Reducing the transmission of COVID-19 is fundamental to keeping our communities and schools safe," said Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health for the Province of Ontario. "Our collective efforts, like strictly adhering to all public health measures, in addition to the enhanced safety measures in schools, will help keep communities healthy and students learning alongside their peers in their classrooms."

The return-to-school plan also received the support from Dr. Karim Kurji, York Region's Chief Medical Officer of Health.

"In our efforts to keep children with the variants out of school, as it were, in our previous periods we have always found the danger was students acquiring COVID-19 in the community and bringing it in rather than the transmission within the schools," he said at a special meeting of Regional Council last Thursday. "Generally speaking, our schools have been very safe. There have been a few instances of transmission within school settings but the vast majority have come in from outside the school.

"If we all work together and keep the COVID-19 cases going down, which we have been successfully doing, we should be reducing the risk of children bringing it into schools

"The other area we have been strengthening our hand in is the testing strategy and there are multiple points we would be testing. One of the ones we're exploring very actively [testing] individuals who may have one symptom. These individuals, if they are found to be positive, would normally be expected to go home and isolate for 10 days from the onset of the symptoms. Assuming they have no symptoms, they could return to school."

Tests, he said, would need to be taken 24 and 48 hours apart and, if negative, providing symptoms are gone, students would be

permitted to come back to school within days.

?That would reduce the time students will be out of school for and would reduce the pressures on parents to spend time looking after students at home,? said Dr. Kurji. ?We are working with all our partners in the school boards, the Ministry of Education, the lab partners and, of course, our own corporate folks in the Regional Municipality of York.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter