

Ontario takes extraordinary steps to reopen schools safely

As students, teachers and staff return to school, the Ontario government is providing up to \$1.3 billion in critical supports and has delivered more than 37 million pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE) to safely reopen classrooms across the province. These investments are part of Ontario's comprehensive back to school plan which was developed in consultation with medical experts, school boards, and educators. "Our entire team has been working around the clock over the last few weeks to make sure all of the public health measures are in place to safely welcome back our students and staff," said Premier Ford. "This school year will be unlike any we have ever seen, but by working together, we can all play a part to keep our children, teachers and education workers safe and ensure our students continue to thrive and be inspired to learn during these extraordinary times." The government has taken the following steps to make schools as safe as possible: Providing more funding than any jurisdiction in the country to implement physical distancing measures, support hiring of up to 1,300 custodians and adopt enhanced cleaning protocols in schools and on school buses, and hire more teachers to reduce class sizes. Hiring up to 625 school-focused nurses to provide rapid-response support to schools and boards, and facilitate public health measures, including screening, surveillance testing, tracing and mitigation strategies. Working in collaboration with the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services to ensure that sufficient PPE has been delivered to all 72 school boards and 10 education authorities, including more than 19.5 million masks, 16 million gloves, 317,000 face shields, 320,000 bottles of hand sanitizer, and 218,000 containers of disinfectant, among other critical supplies; and, Providing students and families with clear and transparent standards for those that choose fully remote virtual learning, which is teacher-led, timetabled, live, synchronous, and on a regular daily schedule. "Our plan is the most cautious, safe and comprehensive in the country, fully funded and fully informed by leading medical leaders to ensure we reduce the risk, support positive mental health, and improve the safety of all students and staff," said Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education. "I remain inspired by our students, and we owe it to them to continue to do our part to stop the spread in our communities to ensure schools can remain safe and positive learning spaces." The following public health protocols and procedures will be implemented to help protect students, teachers, staff and visitors: Parents must screen their children and all staff must self-screen every day before attending school. Students and staff who are unwell must stay home from school. Schools must immediately report any suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 within the school to the local public health unit. Every day, school boards must report any staff or student absences due to confirmed cases of COVID-19 to the ministry. Students in Grades 4-12 will be required to wear face coverings (non-medical or cloth masks) indoors in school, including in hallways, entrances and during classes. Face coverings are not required but are encouraged for students up to Grade 3. The province is funding each school board to provide PPE to teachers and other school-based staff, including medical masks and eye protection (for example, face shields). Schools will teach and remind students about appropriate hand hygiene and provide breaks in schedules to allow students to wash their hands. Teachers and staff are also receiving additional health and safety training. Each student will be kept with the same group of children and teachers as much as possible throughout the school day. Schools will significantly limit visitors, including parents. Schools will keep rigorous daily class attendance records, seating charts, lists of bussed students, and approved daily visitors (e.g. supply and occasional teachers, custodians) for contact-tracing purposes. "With the new school year beginning, the health and safety of students, teachers and staff is our government's top priority," said Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health. "We have been working closely with our public health experts and making the necessary investments to ensure safety measures and protocols are in place for returning to the classroom."