

York to welcome back students Feb. 16

By Mark PavilonisEditorLocal Journalism Initiative

York Region schools will re-open to students Feb. 16. Education Minister, and King-Vaughan MPP Stephen Lecce announced last week Ontario is ready to open schools. "Safety is paramount," and getting kids back in school is critical. The downward trend in COVID-19 cases, combined with new, tougher measures, ensure schools will be safe. Lecce also pointed out that 8 out of 10 schools had no active cases in December. The ingredients are all in place for safety, including smaller classes (high schools capped at 15), hiring more teachers and support staff and comprehensive actions for everything from filtration systems to bus schedules. Lecce also told the public to be assured that testing capacity is ready. Screening protocols have been enhanced for staff and students. Masks will be mandatory outside as well. The minister said he also wants to expedite vaccinations for education workers. Dr. David Williams, Ontario's chief medical officer, said the measures are aimed at not only opening schools, but keeping them open. "Following the best medical advice, with the clear support of both Ontario's and the local medical officers of health, we are reopening schools across the province knowing that we have taken additional steps and made additional investments to better protect our students and staff," said Minister Lecce. "Nothing is more important than returning kids to school safely because it is crucial for their development, mental health, and future success. To support the safe return of in-person learning, Ontario has introduced new measures to continue to protect students and staff against COVID-19 in the classroom. These measures include: Province-wide access, in consultation with the local PHU, to targeted asymptomatic testing for students and staff. Mandatory masking requirement for students in Grades 1-3, and masking requirement for Grades 1-12 outdoors where physical distancing cannot be maintained. Providing 3.5 million high quality cloth masks to schools as back-up supply for Grade 1-12 students. Enhanced screening for secondary students and staff. Guidance discouraging students from congregating before and after school. Temporary certification of eligible teacher candidates who are set to graduate in 2021 to stabilize staffing levels, following high levels of absenteeism. Reducing the transmission of COVID-19 is fundamental to keeping our communities and schools safe," said Dr. David Williams. "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. To further promote health and safety for students and staff, Ontario recently made an additional \$381 million in funding available for schools. Provided under the federal Safe Return to Class Fund, this funding will be used to improve air quality and ventilation in schools, support online learning, promote student mental health and hire additional staff. In total, Ontario has provided schools with more than \$1.6 billion to protect against COVID-19. PHUs continue to reserve the authority to close schools to in-person learning based on local circumstances. OPSEU/SEFPO President Warren (Smokey) Thomas said consulting front-line education workers on how to reopen schools safely is the best way to reduce the spread of COVID and save lives. "We want to see our kids back to school, but we must do everything we can to keep our students and education workers safe," said Thomas. "That should include speaking with all the different kinds of educational workers on the front lines, and their bargaining agents like OPSEU/SEFPO, about what they need. Who'd know better how to make our schools safe than the people who've been working in them throughout the entire pandemic? I know the Premier realizes the value in tapping into the expertise of the front lines, I look forward to discussing it with him."