

Schools move to remote learning following break

By Mark PavilonEditorLocal Journalism Initiative

Despite a stance to keep schools open, the provincial government Monday made the decision to move elementary and secondary schools to remote learning following the April break. This action is being taken in support of the government's broader efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19. Data will be assessed on an ongoing basis and health officials will be consulted to determine when it will be safe to resume in-person learning. Child care for non-school aged children will remain open, before and after school programs will be closed and free emergency child care for the school-aged children of eligible health care and frontline workers will be provided. To protect the most vulnerable, boards will make provisions for continued in-person support for students with special education needs who require additional support that cannot be accommodated through remote learning. "This was not a decision we made lightly, as we know how critical schools are to Ontario students. Our priority has always been to keep schools open, however sharply rising community transmission can put our schools and Ontario families at risk," said Education Minister Stephen Lecce. "While Ontario's plan has kept schools safe, as confirmed by the Chief Medical Officer of Health, we are taking decisive and preventative action today to ensure students can safely return to learning in our schools." Case rates, hospitalizations, and ICU occupancy are increasing rapidly, threatening to overwhelm the health care system. The number of COVID-19 hospitalizations in the province have increased by 22.1 per cent between the period of April 4 and 10, 2021. In addition, during this same period of time, Ontario has seen the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care increase from 494 to 605. Since April 8, the province has been under a province-wide Stay-at-Home order, requiring everyone to remain at home except for essential purposes, such as going to the grocery store or pharmacy, accessing health care services (including getting vaccinated), for outdoor exercise with your household in your home community, or for work that cannot be done remotely. As Ontario's health care capacity is threatened, the Stay-at-Home order, and other new and existing public health and workplace safety measures, will work to preserve public health system capacity, safeguard vulnerable populations, allow for progress to be made with vaccinations and save lives. With students moving to remote learning, vaccine prioritization of education workers who provide direct support to students with special education needs across the province, and all education workers in select hot spot areas, starting with Peel and Toronto, will continue. Special education workers across the province and education workers in Peel and Toronto hot spots are eligible to register for vaccination by calling the provincial vaccine booking line at 1-833-943-3900. More information is available at [Ontario.ca/covidvaccine](https://ontario.ca/covidvaccine). It is critically important that as Ontarians receive the vaccine, everyone continues to wear a mask, maintain physical distancing when outside of their immediate household and frequently wash their hands. As well, continue to monitor for symptoms of COVID-19 and get tested if symptoms are present. "As we continue to see rapid growth in community transmission across the province, it is necessary to take extra precautions and measures to ensure the continued health and safety of students, teachers and their families," said Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health. "As the fight against this third wave of the pandemic continues, everyone must continue following all public health and workplace safety measures and stay at home to prevent further transmission of the virus, so we can once again resume in person learning in our schools." "The rapid and increasing spread of COVID-19 and the variants of concern pose significant threats to our health care system and the well-being of Ontarians, requiring immediate and decisive action," said Solicitor General Sylvia Jones. "The declaration of a third provincial emergency is necessary to provide the government with the tools needed to help protect the public, reduce the spread of the virus and save lives." As part of Phase Two of its COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan, people living in regions with the highest rates of transmission will be prioritized to receive a vaccine, starting with the most at-risk in the Peel and Toronto public health regions. This initiative will be expanded to additional 'hot spot' regions based on established patterns of transmission, severe illness, and mortality. To support this expanded vaccination effort, mobile teams are being organized to administer vaccines in high-risk congregate settings, residential buildings, faith-based locations, and locations occupied by large employers in hot spot neighbourhoods to individuals aged 18 or over. Pop-up clinics will also be set-up in highly impacted neighborhoods, including at faith-based locations and community centres in those hot spots, in collaboration with public health units and community organizations within those communities. The province will provide additional resources to support these mobile and pop-up clinics in the hardest-hit neighbourhoods.