

Sick Kids experts say students should attend school every day, smaller classes ‘a priority’ in updated report

Kristin Rushowy

Ontario students should return to school full-time in smaller classes, with elementary students spaced one metre apart and high schoolers separated two metres, says a group of experts providing advice to the provincial government on how to safely restart in the fall.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce is expected to announce the province’s plans on Thursday, drawing heavily from the report by experts at Sick Kids, Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario, Holland Bloorview rehab hospital and some educators and parents, among others.

“Smaller class sizes should be a priority strategy as it will aid in physical distancing and reduce potential spread” of [COVID-19](#), their report says.

While they note that other systems have implemented caps of 10 to 15 children, “there is limited evidence on which to base a pre-specified class size. Decisions should take into account the available classroom space in addition to the number of exposures that would occur should a student or staff test positive.”

While they don’t recommend face masks for younger children, they say teens should wear them when physical distancing isn’t possible.

The report, released Wednesday, [updates one from earlier this month](#) that proved controversial among parents and educators, who felt their voices needed to be heard and that more stringent protocols were needed.

However, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, the country’s largest teachers’ union, blasted the new recommendations, saying all students should have to wear masks.

“If a region has declared masks mandatory for indoor spaces, then we expect masks to be mandatory in elementary schools in that region regardless of age,” president Sam Hammond said. “The risks are too high. We need to keep students and educators safe and we certainly don’t want schools contributing to a second wave of the pandemic.”

Hammond also said the one-metre distancing is “extremely concerning. Smaller classes that allow for two-metre physical distancing must be part of school reopening plans.”

However, Dr. Charles Hui of Ottawa’s CHEO told reporters that while “two metres is optimal, the transmission at one metre is not significantly different” for younger kids.

Several other provinces have announced they too will fully open schools in September, including British Columbia, which released its plans on Wednesday for

kids to return five days a week, with “cohorts” or groupings of kids and \$46 million for cleaning and personal protective equipment (though masks are not mandatory).

Nova Scotia, which is also reopening with full-time classes, is asking teens to wear face masks when in the hallways between classes and on buses.

The Sick Kids report said that of the experts involved, there was some division over the issues of elementary children wearing face masks.

The different physical distancing suggestions were also based on research suggesting that children do not transmit COVID at the same rates as teens and adults.

The report says local authorities should be involved in any decision on masking, but that anyone who wants to wear one should be allowed.

It also recommends: hand hygiene/sanitizing when entering and exiting classrooms, before and after lunch, staggered breaks/lunch times or eating lunch in classrooms/outdoors, outdoor lessons where possible, more frequent cleaning, improved ventilation in schools, and self-screening before entering the building.

“Our recommendation from an overall health perspective is that children and youth return to a daily school model with risk mitigation strategies in place,” the report says, emphasizing that children’s mental health and development have been negatively impacted by the shutdown, which saw learning move online after the March Break.

“Educators must be consulted to provide input on each model from a learning impact lens. It is important to acknowledge that there is not one specific measure that will prevent infections from occurring in schools, but rather a bundle of infection prevention and control measures.”

While it warns that “there may be an increase in cases of [COVID-19](#) and other seasonal respiratory viral infections with similar symptoms upon the resumption of school,” the report says appropriate measures should be “proactively put in place to mitigate the effects of such an increase.”

The Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association has also [said it would like face masks to be mandatory](#) for staff and students.

Lecce has said additional resources will be put in place for boards’ COVID-related costs, on top of funding already pledged to address mental health issues, technology and cleaning needs.

Alexandra Adamo, a spokesperson for Lecce, said “we have greatly appreciated” the “guidance, expertise and advice” of medical experts, the Hospital for Sick Children as well as teachers and families.

“We will continue to ensure the health and safety of all Ontario students and education staff remain our top priority.”

NDP education critic Marit Stiles said the government continues to send “confusing messages to school boards with just weeks left” before schools open.

“If we don’t see a fully costed, fully funded plan (on Thursday) for the return to school, with many more smaller classes ... I think it’s going to be a disappointment for

parents across the province. The clock is really ticking now.”

She said her “greatest fear is that they are going to download all the responsibility and all of the accountability to school boards.”

On Wednesday, Premier Doug Ford said with reopening schools, people “don’t know what exactly is going to happen. Is everyone nervous? Are parents? Sure they’re nervous, I’m nervous, everyone’s nervous when you’re dealing with kids.”

He said it’s “going to be a tough challenge. But we’ll get through it, we’ll work together.”

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