

Face masks mandatory for Ontario students starting in Grade 4

Kristin Rushowy

Ontario will be the first province to mandate that students, starting in Grade 4, wear face masks all day when they return to school this fall — with younger kids also encouraged to do so.

Kids in all elementary grades will return full-time, as will secondary students in some smaller boards. But teens in large urban boards — including all public and Catholic boards in Greater Toronto — will be in school half-time and learning online from home the rest of the time, Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced Thursday.

The recommendations are based on [advice from experts](#) — and actually go even further than the experts by requiring masks for older kids — who say that research shows younger children don't transmit the [COVID-19](#) virus as easily as teens and adults.

The province, however, is not implementing any physical distancing requirements, and says classes in elementary will resume as is, with 20 students from Grades 1 to 3, and an average of 24-25 students in Grades 4 to 8 — though averages mean some classes are much larger than that.

High school students, however, will be in cohorts of 15 when they are in school on alternate-day or otherwise modified schedules.

(The Toronto public board has proposed “[quadesters](#),” where students take two classes at a time for just over two months, attending each day for half a day.)

A full-time return to school for elementary students is seen as key to helping parents return to work as the economy reopens, and a number of boards had urged the province to drop a “hybrid” model because that would leave families scrambling for child care.

A number of Canadian provinces have already revealed their plans to reopen full time, with Nova Scotia requiring teens to wear masks in the hallways and on buses.

In Ontario, students from Grades 4 to 12 will be required to wear non-medical/cloth masks at all times in school. The province's youngest students, in kindergarten to Grade 3, will be urged to, but not forced to. Some experts have said that younger kids might struggle to put on, or keep on masks, increasing their risk of infection.

Teacher unions had been urging that all students be masked while in school.

Personal protective equipment will be provided for teachers and staff.

Families have the option of keeping their children home to learn online.

Sports and extracurriculars will be allowed to resume as long as physical distancing can be maintained.

The province will spend \$309 million for the fall reopening, including: \$60 for PPE, \$80 million for additional staffing (teachers, caretakers), \$25 million for cleaning supplies.

It is unclear if the funding will be sufficient. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents 55,000 support staff in Ontario schools, estimated the province needs to spend [\\$272 million alone](#) to hire one additional caretaker per school to ensure proper cleaning, as well as about \$70 million for hand sanitizer stations and sanitizer.

The Ontario Liberals had [estimated \\$3.2 billion in one-time spending](#) for teachers, caretakers and additional space for classes of 15.

More to come

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