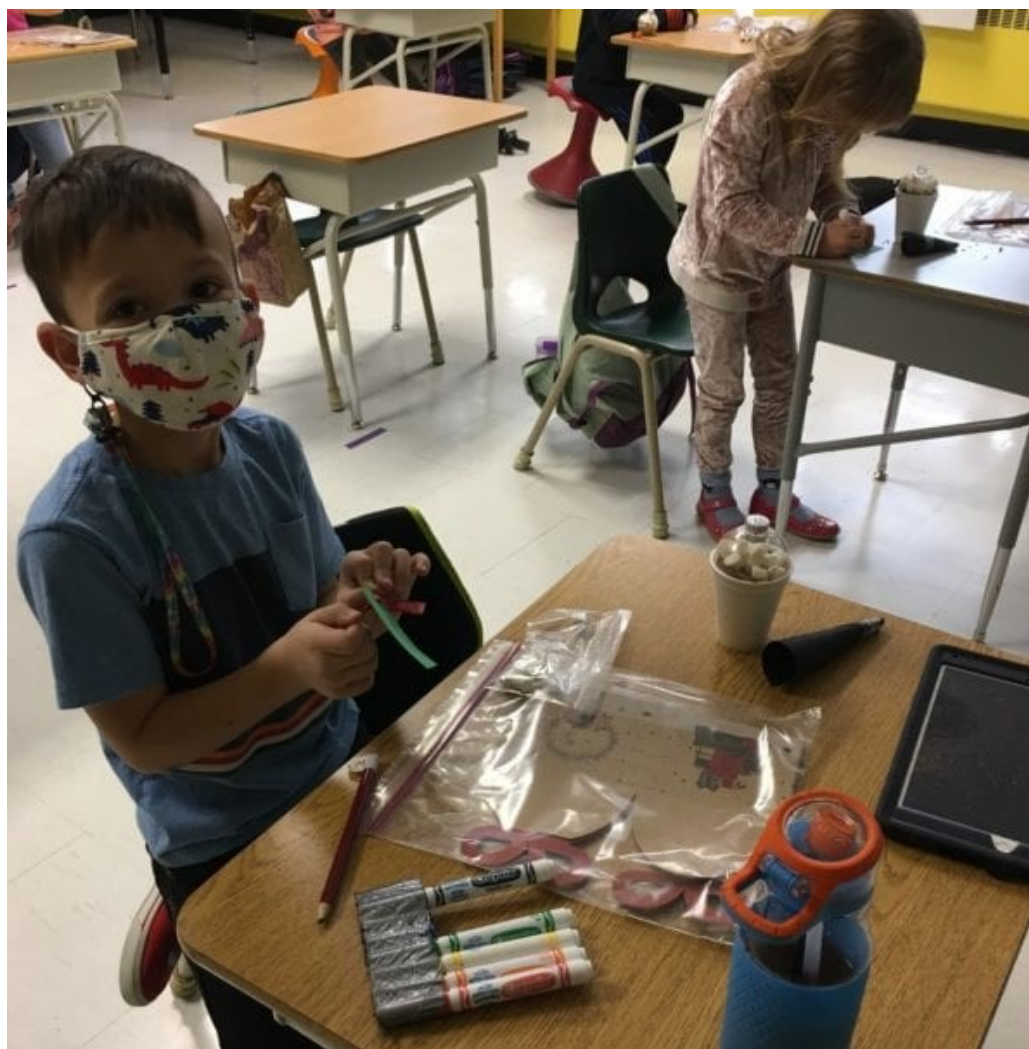


Ontario Announces An Extension Of Online Learning As Positivity Rates In Kids Jumps Dramatically

By Pamela Vanmeer - January 7, 2021



Courtesy Trillium Lakelands District School Board

KAWARTHA LAKES-Elementary students will not be going back to the classroom on Monday.

The Ontario government, in consultation with the Chief Medical Officer of Health and other health experts, is extending teacher-led online learning until January 25, 2021 for elementary school students in the 27 Southern Ontario public health unit regions and extending the shutdown in Northern Ontario for another 14 days, aligning with the shutdown period in Southern Ontario.

Officials say these time-limited measures are being taken to help “ensure that all Ontarians stay at home as much as possible to minimize transmission of the virus and prevent hospitals from becoming overwhelmed”, while at the same time being responsive to the fact that Northern Ontario students are not able to learn at home as effectively due to limited access to reliable Internet service.

“With the public health trends where they are across the province, our priority remains keeping students, teachers, school staff, and all Ontarians safe,” said Premier Ford. “That’s why we’re extending the remote learning period for students in Southern Ontario and the shutdown period for Northern Ontario, while continuing to provide financial relief for parents through the Support

for Learners program as well as electricity rate relief for all time-of-use customers. We have to get the numbers down and today's measures will help us continue to stop the spread of this deadly virus."

Targeted testing done among students and staff in December 2020 confirmed that schools are not a significant source of transmission according to the province.

However, with students having been at home for several weeks and with reports of some not following the rules over the holidays, the positivity rate among school-aged children has increased sharply said the government. Most troubling, the positivity rate for kids aged 12-13 years old increased from 5.44 per cent in late November, early December to nearly 20 per cent in early January according to officials with the province.

In response to increasing community transmission, in-person learning will be deferred to January 25, 2021 in Southern Ontario, which aligns with the planned return of in-person learning for secondary school students in these regions. Elementary students and secondary students in the seven Northern Ontario public health unit regions will proceed with returning to in-person learning on January 11, 2021.

"I have and remain firmly committed to getting students back into class as soon as possible – there is nothing more important. However, the best medical and scientific experts have been clear: while schools have been safe places for kids, the sharp rise in community transmission puts that progress and Ontario families at risk," said Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education. "During this time, students will remain engaged in live teacher-led online learning with access to enhanced mental health and technology supports."

In the nearly two weeks since Ontario was moved into a **Provincewide Shutdown**, trends in key public health indicators have continued to worsen in both Northern and Southern Ontario, including concerning trends in health system capacity, most notably in hospitals. Trends show increasing transmission in many Northern Ontario public health regions, with only one region showing a sustained low level of transmission. In addition, with the increased risk of transmission due to the confirmed presence of the COVID-19 UK variant in the province, the seven public health unit regions in Northern Ontario will remain in the shutdown until at least January 23, 2021. The impacts of these time-limited measures throughout the province will be evaluated after 14 days to determine if it is safe to lift any restrictions or if they need to be extended.

"In the last two weeks, we have seen concerning trends at home and abroad, as well as increased community transmission during the holidays, indicating that it is not yet the time to begin easing public health and workplace safety measures," said Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health. "While extending the shutdown in Northern Ontario is not the news many wanted to hear, we must work together to stop the spread of COVID-19, protect hospital capacity, and save lives."

The Chief Medical Officer of Health will continue to consult with experts, review data, and provide advice to government on the appropriate and effective measures that are needed to protect the health of Ontarians. This will include an assessment of how and when it is safe to exit the Provincewide Shutdown and move public health unit regions back into the *COVID-19 Response Framework: Keeping Ontario Safe and Open*, including how a revised approach for the safe reopening of retail may be operationalized.

"As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it is crucial that all Ontarians continue to follow all public health and workplace safety measures," said Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health.

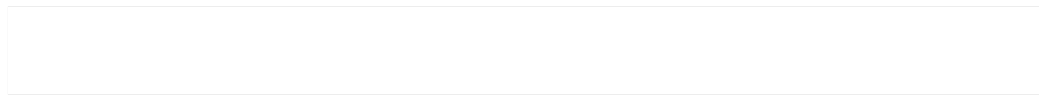
“To help stop the spread of COVID-19 and safeguard health system capacity, Ontarians are strongly urged to stay at home, limit trips outside of their households for essential reasons only and must not gather with individuals outside of the people they live with.”

To support families during this extended school closure, child care centres, and home-based child care services will remain open. Ontario is also expanding eligibility for the Ministry of Education’s targeted emergency child care program for a broader number of frontline health and safety workers. There is no measures for single parents who have to work and have no help.

In order to continue to support remote learning, the ministry has recommended that a portion of the second half of federal funding, an additional \$80 million investment, will be provided for additional technological devices, such as laptops and tablets, to support school boards in procuring about 160,000 additional devices province-wide.

A very limited financial support is also available for families during this temporary remote learning period through the [Support for Learners](#) program. Starting on January 11, 2021, an expanded Support for Learners program is providing \$200 for each child or youth up to Grade 12 and \$250 for each child or youth up to age 21 with special needs. Applications will be open until February 8, 2021. This money was already announced earlier.

For those requiring additional support during this challenging period, Ontario is providing an additional \$10 million in support of student mental health, including funding for Kids Help Phone to support children and youth across the province. School Mental Health Ontario will be providing mental health resources and strategies to support students during this period.



Pamela Vanmeer

Pamela VanMeer is a two time winner of the prestigious Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) Award. Her investigative reports on abuse in Long Term Care Homes garnered international attention for the issue and won the Ron Laidlaw Award. She is a former reporter and anchor at CHEX News, now Global Peterborough and helped launch the New CHEX Daily, a daily half hour talk show. While at CHCH News in Hamilton she covered some of the biggest news stories of the day.