



NEWS

Ontario postpones March break as third wave of COVID-19 looms

By [Kristin Rushowy](#) Queen's Park Bureau

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Ontario is moving March break into April to curb travel and the spread of COVID-19 — but as parts of the province get set to reopen, the government's own health advisers warn a third wave could soon hit unless stay-at-home orders are extended, vaccinations increased and transmission rates shrunk.

“The best bet we can offer from the science is this: If we're able to push the impact of COVID-19 down further by sticking to public health measures and aggressive vaccination, we can avoid a third wave and hope for late spring and summer that's

much safer and more open,” Steini Brown, dean of the Dalla Lana School of Public Health and the co-chair of the science table, said Thursday.

The startling forecast fuelled by the more contagious nature of new variants came shortly after Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced the March 15 school break week is being delayed to April 12.

Lecce put off the tradition over objections from teacher unions and school boards, which had urged no changes be made to [school schedules](#) to give stressed-out staff and students a breather.

He said he is also expecting that private schools co-operate and also change their spring break dates.

Public health officials are worried about gatherings or family travel and the impact that could have on COVID-19 numbers as the province deals with variants that Brown said pose “a real threat” to control of the pandemic.

“I recognize this is one more change in a year that has been challenging for so many students and our education staff,” Lecce said. “But it is one made on the best advice of public health officials to keep them safe and to keep our schools open in this province.”

It is “of the utmost importance that we do not travel at this time, especially as we head into the month of March,” he also said, a lesson learned after cases spiked following the holiday break last year.

“This postponement also limits any further disruption to students, as they could return to in-person learning during a time that has been challenging.”

Brown’s caution that daily new cases could begin rising again in late February was detailed at a briefing on the latest COVID-19 with Ontario’s chief medical officer Dr. David Williams – who said he is sticking with plans to reveal more details Friday on which of 28 public health units, mostly outside the GTA, could emerge from stay-at-home orders to enjoy lower levels of restrictions next Tuesday.

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He maintained “there is not much change” if regions move to lockdown or the red stage of a five-level framework, in which more stores can open — including hair salons and barber shops in the red zone — but said it is imperative that people continue wearing masks and avoid as much person-to-person contact as possible.

“Casualness is not on,” Williams said. “Everybody has to do their part.”

Given that easing restrictions has previously led COVID-fatigued Ontarians to let down their guard, New Democrat Leader Andrea Horwath told reporters it was “quite shocking” to hear that Williams and Premier Doug Ford do not appear to be following Brown’s advice.

Brown’s call for aggressive vaccination comes with doses in short supply and his target for a lower viral transmission rate of 0.7, one that he said has “rarely” been reached in the province since the virus began hitting hard last March. The lower transmission rate is needed to keep cases under control because the variants are about 50 per cent more contagious.

“We’re literally on the brink of an explosion,” Horwath said, calling on Ford “to make sure COVID-19 is stopped in its tracks.”

On the delayed March break, she added that Brown’s computer modelling suggests “the prognosis doesn’t look so good there, either.”

Regulations under the Education Act specify a 194-day school year, but will need to be altered for the new March break date.

Dr. Anna Banerji, a professor at the University of Toronto’s Dalla Lana School of Public Health, said putting off spring break “seems reasonable ... kids have been away most of the time anyway, so getting them back to school (in person), they’ll probably need a break — they might need a break more in April than March.”

As to speculation that the new April break could come amid rising cases, she said nobody can know for sure what will happen, and “I’m hopeful with the weather getting warmer, if kids are outside more, then it’s probably safer.”

Students in northern Ontario resumed in-person classes Jan. 11, with other public health regions following. Students in Toronto, Peel and York are the final group to return, after Family Day.

And while boards would have preferred the original date for the holiday, “we recognize what’s happening now with the pandemic, and we need to follow public health and we need to get this under control,” said Cathy Abraham, president of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association.

“It could have been worse — it could have been the end of June, so putting it off for one month is perhaps the best we could hope for,” she said. “But we do need a break — our students, our staff, our teachers, moms and dads, everybody just needs a break from being in front of a screen or in school under those circumstances.”

Some schools will have to reschedule exams, “but boards have gotten quite good at figuring things out quickly” given all the changes to education during the pandemic, she added.

All four teacher unions and CUPE, which represents support staff at a number of boards, said there is no clear reason to move March break and that the real issue is “this government’s ongoing failure to prevent the spread of COVID-19.”

But Harvey Bischof, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, said if kids congregating is a huge concern, shouldn’t large class sizes in schools also be a concern.

And, he added “kids are going to congregate. They don’t need a March break.”

New Democrat MPP Marit Stiles, her party’s education critic, said this is just “more upheaval in the lives of families that haven’t had the structure, support and predictability they need.”

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