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PROVINCIAL POLITICS

In about-face, Ford closes Ontario schools and bans indoor dining due to Omicron 'tsunami'

The moves come just four days after Dr. Kieran Moore, the chief medical officer of health, assured Ontarians schools would reopen for in-class learning this Wednesday.

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In an about-face triggered by the Omicron "tsunami," Premier Doug Ford has ordered schools to do virtual learning for at least the next two weeks.

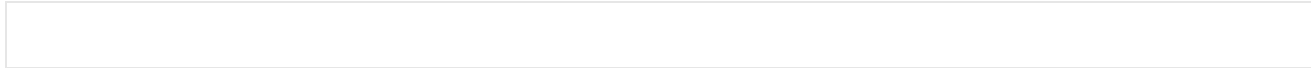
Ford also imposed other COVID-19 restrictions starting Wednesday, including a temporary 21-day ban on indoor restaurant dining and the postponement of scheduled surgeries.

"Omicron case counts are rising exponentially across the province. We face a tsunami of new cases in the days and weeks ahead," a grim-faced premier told reporters Monday at Queen's Park.

"It can't be stopped — look to other countries, other provinces, it's too contagious to stop completely," he said, stressing the measures are designed to allow Ontario's booster shot program to take hold.

The moves come just four days after Dr. Kieran Moore, the chief medical officer of health, assured Ontarians schools would reopen for in-class learning this Wednesday.

Instead, students will be in virtual learning until at least Jan. 17.



Moore warned Monday that hospitalization rates "will ascend fairly rapidly over the coming weeks" before Omicron subsides, as has been seen in other jurisdictions.

"We anticipate that it'll reach its maximum by the end of January and then start to descend. So we anticipate a very short, quick and rapid approach to this epidemic and impact on the health-care system," he said.

"That is why these measures are timely, they're proportionate to the risk."

Cathy Abraham, president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, said the switch to online learning "is not what we'd hoped for — we had hoped that we would get to Jan. 5 and that we would be able to keep schools open for kids. Clearly, it is not safe to do so, and it's not prudent to do so right now."

However, she added, "we've got two weeks to do something. We are hoping the government will take those two weeks and not

spare a penny” — as Ford promised Monday. Abraham also called for N95 respirators in schools for all staff and teachers to be included in the now-limited PCR testing, and for the COVID vaccine added to the list of mandatory shots for students.

“We want kids to go back to school, but safer — we need to make sure things are safer so we don’t keep doing this on and off again, on and off again” with kids ping-ponging between online and in-person classes, added Dr. Anna Banerji, a pediatrician and University of Toronto professor.

Beginning Wednesday — and continuing until Jan. 26 — Ontario will be plunged into a modified Step 2 of the “roadmap to reopen.”

That means a prohibition on indoor gyms, dining inside at restaurants and bars, and reducing social gathering limits to five people indoors and 10 people outdoors.

Outdoor dining, takeout, and delivery from restaurants will be permitted.

Shops, including malls, will be allowed to operate at half capacity as will most personal care services, such as barbershops and hair salons.

Museums, galleries, zoos, science centres, landmarks, historic sites and other attractions will be closed.

Child-care centres located in schools will remain open and emergency daycare services for front-line workers will be available.

But “all non-emergent and non-urgent surgeries and procedures” will be postponed in hospitals to preserve capacity.

There are now 1,232 people hospitalized with COVID-19 in the province, though as many as half of them are believed to have been admitted for other ailments and happened to test positive while in hospital. Of the total, 248 are in Ontario intensive care units.

In all, the province has a capacity of about 2,300 ICU beds — on Monday some 700 fully staffed beds were sitting empty. Meanwhile, hospitals are scrambling to address staff absences due to illness.

But it is feared there could be 400 to 500 people classified as COVID-19 patients in ICUs by the end of this week.

Ford said the new restrictions “will be targeted and they will be time-limited.”

Dr. Peter Jüni, scientific director of the province’s COVID-19 science table, said the government restrictions announced Monday “are appropriate” and should help the government’s goal to “blunt the wave” of Omicron cases.

“The highest-risk categories, those higher risk than schools, are all closed — restaurants, bars, clubs, gyms” and also cinemas and theatres, Jüni said.

With capacity limits, retail is “much less of an issue” and unlike schools, people don’t gather there for prolonged periods in groups.

“It’s absolutely justified now,” he added. “Is it ideal? No, absolutely not — nothing is ideal with Omicron. Could one have decided differently? Yes, but there is no clear right or wrong decision. I feel there is really a true commitment to open schools up again as soon as possible, and the sequence I see from an epidemiological perspective was the right sequence.”

There were 13,578 additional COVID-19 cases reported Monday, though the actual number is likely far higher due to new limits on the availability of PCR tests.

Sources, speaking confidentially in order to discuss internal deliberations, say there is mounting frustration at the highest levels of the government with Moore, the science table and other public health officials.

That’s because last June — before the Omicron variant had been detected — Ford requested a fall pandemic plan that included a booster shot rollout, expanded rapid antigen testing, anti-viral medications and antibody testing, sources said.

But insiders say there was resistance from some in the medical community, who did not want Ontario hoarding vaccines that could be shared with developing nations and who doubted the efficacy of rapid tests and widespread testing for antibodies.

Jüni said there was no such resistance, and that there is no tension between the science table and the government.

“This is very challenging for elected decision-makers, and I’m glad they made the right decision,” he said.

Last Thursday, Moore announced that he “absolutely” endorsed opening schools on Jan. 5 after the holiday break, two days later than most boards in the province had scheduled, a move supported by experts at the Hospital for Sick Children and CHEO children’s hospital in Ottawa, as well as the science table.

Ontario students have been out of class and learning online more than any others in the country, at 26 weeks since the pandemic

began.

Most other provinces have delayed the start of school by a week, to Jan. 10.

“The No. 1 priority is to make sure that the kids have an opportunity to learn online, that’s absolutely critical,” Ford said of the delay in reopening schools to in-person learning.

“But we have to protect the overall system. When I talk about the system, I’m talking, again, the hospitalizations, the schools, the economy, the businesses, that’s who we have to protect.”

Ontario data – echoing findings in the U.S., South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Denmark – has shown the risk of hospitalization or death from Omicron is 54 per cent lower than the more virulent Delta variant.

With an Ontario election set for June 2, there is massive political pressure on Ford’s Progressive Conservatives.

In a bid to underscore that his government is taking the pandemic seriously, the premier was joined at the podium – emblazoned with “Boost Up” – on Monday by Moore, Health Minister Christine Elliott and Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy.

But Ford’s critics have consistently accused him of being too slow to react since the pandemic began in March 2020.

“We can’t keep doing this. Two weeks to flatten the curve for the health-care system is quickly turning into two years for small businesses affected by lockdowns and other restrictions,” the Canadian Federation of Independent Business said in a statement.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said, “parents are horrified – another school shutdown is a massive blow to kids’ well-being.”

“Doug Ford knew exactly what was coming, but didn’t prepare schools or hospitals, and didn’t take any precautions to prevent a lockdown,” she said.



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