

Quebec elementary schools, daycares to reopen starting May 11; high schools to stay closed until fall ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

MONTREAL -- Quebec will begin reopening its elementary schools and daycares on May 11, Quebec Premier Francois Legault announced Monday, but only if the state of COVID-19 in the province's hospitals continues to remain stable.

Schools and daycares outside the Montreal region will open on May 11; elementary schools in the Montreal region will follow suit eight days later, opening on May 19.

Class sizes will be limited to 15 students in order to make it easier to respect social distancing directives in schools, Legault said.

Daycare workers will be asked to wear masks when those institutions reopen, the premier added.

High schools, CEGEPS and universities in the province will not reopen until September, Legault said, noting that older students use public transit more frequently and could contribute to overcrowding on buses and metros.

Legault reiterated that parents can choose whether or not to send their children back to schools when they are open.

Children with health problems, or whose parents have health problems, should stay home, Legault said.

The premier said he is reopening elementary schools because COVID-19 infections in the province's hospitals are "under control" and the virus is not dangerous to young children. Long-term care homes continue to be severely affected by the virus, however.

"Will we monitor the situation," Legault said of the health-care system's ability to manage COVID-19 infections. "If the situation gets worse, or isn't as expected, then we will adjust. The important words are 'gradual' and 'prudence.' "

Legault and the province's director of public health, Dr. Horacio Arruda, had been pushing the idea of so-called "herd immunity" or natural immunity, as a rationale for reopening schools. That strategy involves exposing children to the novel coronavirus in a measured, gradual way to help them develop a natural immunity.

That plan was criticized on the weekend by Canada's chief public health officer, Theresa Tam, who said despite evidence that the virus is particularly dangerous to older people and those with underlying health conditions, younger people are still at risk.

On Monday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said there is no conclusive evidence that people who have recovered from the virus have antibodies that protect them from getting infected again.

But Legault said Monday his decision to reopen schools was not based on a strategy of developing natural immunity.

He said his reasons are that special needs children need to be followed closely by the teachers; the risk to young people from COVID-19 is limited; COVID-19 admissions in hospitals are under control; and public health has agreed the schools should open.

The final reason is that "life needs to continue," Legault said.

"It's good for kids to see their friends, their teachers," he told reporters in Quebec City. "We don't expect a vaccine before 12 to 18 months. So we can't keep kids at home for 12 to 18 months."

At a later press conference in Quebec City, Education Minister Jean-Francois Roberge said the province would also be providing new and improved online learning options for students who do not return to schools when they reopen.

Virtual learning will also resume or continue for CEGEP and university students until they can physically return to their institutions in the fall, Roberge said.

Roberge urged all students with learning difficulties to return to class when their schools reopen, if their health permits.

While it's up to parents to decide whether or not to have their children go back to school, Roberge asked parents to inform their children's

school of their intentions a week before the school's reopening date.

School buses will run at half the usual capacity, Roberge added, and glass will be installed to protect drivers from the virus.

Daycares will operate at a smaller capacity than usual, said families minister Mathieu Lacombe, who accompanied Roberge at the late-afternoon press conference.

Parents who decide not to send their children back to the province's daycares, or CPEs, will not lose their spots until at least September, Lacombe added.

Quebec is expected to announce its plans to restart its economy at a press conference on Tuesday.

There are now 1,599 people who have died of COVID-19 in Quebec, health authorities announced Monday, as confirmed cases in the province reached 24,982.

That's up 84 from the 1,515 deaths reported Sunday; COVID-19 cases in Quebec rose 875 from the 24,107 announced a day earlier.

There are 1,541 people being treated for COVID-19 in Quebec hospitals as of Monday, up 23 from the 1,518 reported Sunday. Of those in a hospital, 210 are in intensive care, down five from the 215 reported 24 hours earlier.

There are 2,830 people waiting for COVID-19 test results in Quebec as of Monday.

The number of people in Quebec who have recovered from COVID-19 as of Monday was 5,517, up 175 from the 5,342 recoveries reported a day earlier.

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