

Ontario to keep all schools closed through the end of June^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ontario schools will remain closed to in-class instruction this academic year even as the government moves to restart parts of the economy, with plans to open daycares and day camps later in the summer.

Premier Doug Ford said on Tuesday he did not want to take an “unnecessary risk” of reopening the province’s schools to two million children, following in the footsteps of several others, including Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. British Columbia and Quebec, meanwhile, have either laid out plans to reopen schools or recently reopened them with just more than a month left in the academic year.

“One thing I will never do is take unnecessary risks when it comes to our children,” Mr. Ford told reporters. “That’s why after careful consideration, after consulting with health experts, it is clear that we cannot open schools at this time. I’m just not going to risk it.”

Provincial governments and public-health officials have wrestled with the reopening of schools because the impact of COVID-19 on children is unclear. Children tend not to get very ill, but public-health officials are still trying to understand how children affect transmission. Ontario recently updated its case definition of COVID-19 to include multisystem inflammatory vasculitis, a rare but serious inflammatory illness that appears to be similar to Kawasaki disease, as an atypical presentation in children.

Schools in Ontario have been closed to in-class instruction since March break to prevent the spread of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. **Daycares will remain closed for the time being and will be gradually reopened as part of the government’s Stage 2 plan, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said on Tuesday.**

In Ontario’s framework for reopening the economy, the provincial Chief Medical Officer of Health will assess each phase after two to four weeks. There needs to be a consistent decrease in cases for the province to begin the next stage in its reopening plan, **meaning daycares could only open on June 2 at the earliest.**

Late last week, British Columbia said it would reopen schools across the province in June for optional, part-time classes. Quebec, too, reopened its elementary schools and daycares last week outside of the Montreal area. Premier François Legault said that schools in Montreal and area – the hot spot for coronavirus infections in the country – would remain closed until the fall, but daycares will open in Montreal on June 1.

In Ontario, Mr. Lecce said at-home learning would continue through the spring and summer. He said the province will have to “reimagine” the way schools operate when they reopen in the fall, adding that details will be shared in June.

The government introduced teacher-led learning plans in late March, which set out student expectations for different grades. On Tuesday, Mr. Lecce said the government will scale up its summer learning plan, which would be optional for students. Among the changes, high-school students would be able to upgrade their mark in a course they passed in half the time it would have taken them previously.

Mr. Lecce said if emergency measures are lifted, there will be an opportunity for in-class instruction for high-school students in July and August “with strong protocols” in place, and a virtual component for those who don’t want to attend in person.

The government also said that it would allow summer day camps to open in July and August under strict guidelines that would be developed in partnership with local public health. Overnight camps will not be permitted.

Kim Smith, owner and director of Camp Tanamakoon in Algonquin Park, an overnight camp for girls, said he had undergone extensive planning for the summer but was not satisfied he could open his camp safely. He is also executive director of Camp Maple Leaf, a charitable overnight camp for families of military veterans and children with challenges, which is set on a private island in the Kawartha Lakes. In total, he said, the camps serve 2,500 children each summer.

“Most of all, I’m sad for the thousands and thousands of children and young adults, campers and staff, who for the first time since probably World War II will not be at summer camp,” he said. “That’s the sadness.”

But he said he believes the camps will be back next summer. “I think we’ll have some challenges but I think we’ll be able to carry that

through,” he said.

Several day camps, including those run by the City of Toronto and the University of Toronto, had already informed parents they would not be operating over the summer. The university said on Tuesday it did not know if it would reverse its decision.

Owen Charters, head of the non-profit Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, said his organization’s day camps are a big part of its operation. Roughly 26,000 children attend summer camps. Although Mr. Charters is pleased the government may allow camps to operate, he said the announcement has also caused a lot of anxiety among camp directors, “who are trying to figure out how we will manage camps given the social-distance requirements.”

The government made its announcement around schools and summer camps as Ontario began to reopen parts of its economy on Tuesday, resuming all construction, restarting scheduled surgeries and allowing retail stores outside of malls to open with physical-distancing guidelines.

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