

# Ontario elementary students will return to school full time, while some high schoolers will attend part-time <sup>[1]</sup>

Parents will still have the option of choosing online schooling at home if they are uncomfortable with sending their children back to class, according to the school reopening plan.

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Ontario students from kindergarten to Grade 8 can return to school five days a week in September, while high school students in Ottawa and some other boards will attend part-time, the provincial government announced Thursday.

Students in Grades 4 to 12 will be required to wear cloth masks indoors at school and younger children will be encouraged to do so. All staff at the province's 4,800 schools will be required to wear medical masks, which will be provided to them.

Parents will still have the option of choosing online schooling at home if they are uncomfortable with sending their children back to class, according to the school reopening plan.

The government pledged to spend \$309 million to help make schools safe, with the largest amounts for about 1,000 additional custodians, personal protective equipment and masks, and 500 public health nurses.

The plan was panned by unions representing education workers, opposition parties at Queen's Park and a parent group that co-organized a campaign to pressure the government to provide significant funding. The Ontario Liberal Party had called for the government to spend \$3.2 billion.

The province is reopening schools "on the cheap," said Laura Walton, president of the branch of CUPE that represents 55,000 education workers, including custodians.

Schools need about 4,800 more custodians to clean high-touch surfaces twice a day as recommended, along with more educational assistants, clerks, secretaries, social workers and other professionals, Walton said.

NDP Education Critic Marit Stiles said the government plan "stacks kids in overcrowded classrooms while forcing many high school students to get half their education alone at home."

An official with the union representing English Catholic teachers tweeted a photograph of a portable classroom, asking how 25 physically distanced students could be crammed into it.

The province says enhanced health and safety measures will be in place for students returning to class in September, nearly six months after COVID-19 closed schools. They include physical distancing, grouping of students into "cohorts" that stay together as much as possible, requiring students and staff to self-screen for signs of illness, limiting visitors at schools and emphasizing hand hygiene.

Physical distancing at schools will be enforced "as much as possible" through measures such as spacing desks apart and removing unnecessary furniture from classrooms, spreading children into areas such as gyms and cafeterias, staggering lunches and recess, teaching outside and limiting the number of students in hallways and bathrooms at any one time.

The Ministry of Education's direction to school boards does not include specific requirements for how far apart students and staff should remain from each other. During a media conference, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said schools would aim for one-metre distancing.

A report from Toronto's SickKids hospital released Wednesday recommended physical distancing of one metre at elementary schools and two metres at high schools. Experts who contributed to the report did not agree on the use of masks, although the report noted the disadvantages of masks outweighed the benefits for elementary students, who are less likely to wear or dispose of them properly.

Class sizes set by the province for elementary schools will not be reduced.

Some critics had called on the government to limit classes to 15 students by hiring thousands of teachers and finding spaces in community centres and other buildings for classes.

Lecce said classes were already capped at 20 students in Grades 1 to 3. In Grades 4 to 8, where the average class is 24.5 students, students will wear masks for another layer of protection, he said.

Ministry officials said the entire bundle of health measures worked together, with heavy emphasis on creating cohorts to reduce the number of people that students and staff mix with and to make it easier to track close contacts if someone contracts the virus.

The plan calls for elementary students to spend the day with classmates in their cohort, including recess and lunch.

High schools are divided into two categories, with 24 boards that generally have larger schools shifting to part-time classes. In this adapted model, classes would be limited to about 15 students who would attend in-person classes half the time: on alternate days, for instance.

The rest of the time they would learn remotely at home, mainly online.

High schools in this category would move to full-time classes as soon as it was safe to do so. In areas where students lack reliable internet service, making it difficult for them to learn online at home, schools can set up “study halls” with physical distancing in place.

All four school boards in the Ottawa area will have part-time high school classes: the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, the Ottawa Catholic School Board, Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est and Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario.

The decision to designate a board for part-time classes was based on the size of the board, the number and size of schools, how many students were in each grade and whether the board was in an urban area.

At non-designated boards, high schools will open five days a week.

That includes the Upper Canada District School Board, the Renfrew County District School Board, the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board, and the Conseil scolaire de district catholique de l'Est ontarien.

All high schools will be encouraged to adopt timetabling that allows students to belong to no more than two cohorts. That could mean a “quadmester” system with students taking two courses at a time during a school year of four semesters. Currently at most high schools students take four courses in each of two semesters.

Both elementary and secondary schools will operate differently to prevent the spread of the virus.

Schools will be able to offer clubs and sports as long as physical distancing is maintained and equipment is cleaned and disinfected between use.

Physical education classes will be held outside if possible. Gyms can only be used if physical distancing is in place, with limited sharing of equipment.

Field trips are not allowed. Assemblies and other large gatherings “should be avoided.”

Busing students to school will be challenging. Physical distancing will be enforced, although it's not clear how much. Initially the plan was one child per seat, unless they were siblings, but school boards may have to increase that, the ministry says. Students will have assigned seats to make contact tracing easier.

Parents will be encouraged to have their children walk to school or to drive them.

To help keep COVID-19 out of schools, the plan calls for a “school health monitoring system” that includes hiring 500 nurses based at public health units, with each of them responsible for a group of schools. The nurses will help teach younger kids how to properly use masks and help with screening, tracing contacts and testing.

The government had been under pressure to reopen schools full-time. Parents, pediatricians and public health authorities have warned that keeping children out of school hurts their mental health and social development and sets them back academically.

Allowing parents to get back to work is also key to reopening the economy.

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