

Ontario doctors want kids, teachers for study about how COVID-19 spreads in a classroom ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A group of Ontario doctors is asking for dozens of student and teacher volunteers to study how a virus like COVID-19 could spread in a classroom – with or without masks – just days ahead of the start of the school year in the province.

The team of epidemiologists is looking to host two mock days of class in Toronto on Aug. 19 and Aug. 20, with enough kids and teachers to fill two classrooms.

In one class will be a full complement of kids and a teacher wearing masks.

In the other, students will only wear masks when physical distancing cannot be maintained.

In both classrooms, researchers say that during a simulated school day, "a harmless liquid that lights up when exposed to a special light will be applied to the hands and noses of a small group of students."

"This is meant to simulate the spread of infection," researchers wrote in a webpage dedicated to the study.

Researchers will film the students and teacher in each class throughout the day and track how the GloGerm liquid spreads in each class.

They will also look to see "whether use of masks could potentially lead to behaviours that have been associated with increased risk of infection."

Teachers in the study will also be asked to test other personal protective equipment such as face shields.

All classrooms used in the study will be properly physically distanced, something Ontario's Ministry of Education cannot yet guarantee in all classrooms that resume operation in September.

All participants will be tested for COVID-19 in the days before participation, with those testing positive excluded from the study.

"During the simulation exercise, we cannot completely eliminate the chance that participants may be exposed to an individual with COVID-19 and develop infection," researchers write about the study.

Students who volunteer for the study will receive volunteer hours and a \$50 gift card. Teachers will receive "a token of appreciation."

The study is being conducted by doctors Michelle Science and Clyde Matava of SickKids Hospital, along with Unity Health Toronto, Toronto Public Health, Sinai Health System, Hamilton Health Sciences Centre and a group of private high schools in Toronto.

Plans for the study come after significant debate in the pediatric and epidemiologic communities across Ontario about whether young children will benefit from mask use in schools, or if using them in lower grades actually increases risk.

Thirty-six epidemiologists consulted by Sick Kids were split 2:1 over whether masks were effective at the elementary level, with two-thirds saying they should not be made mandatory for that age group, while the other third said they should be used in situations where physical distancing cannot be maintained.

The Ford government's \$309 million plan to safely reopen Ontario schools has come under fire for not ensuring minimum physical distance between pupils at the elementary level.

Ontario's epidemiologists along with Toronto Public Health have urged classrooms to contain only enough students to maintain physical distance.

In a guidance document prepared by epidemiologists last month, a minimum spacing of one metre was suggested, but two metres was preferred.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce has said the plan to reopen schools is "flexible" and more can be done to safeguard kids if necessary.

A petition demanding public elementary school class sizes be kept to 15 pupils each now has close to 200,000 signatures.

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