

Editorial: Ontario needs a plan to keep schools open and safe during the COVID surge ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With all the terrible COVID-19 news — cases are surging in hot spots, more restrictions are coming, possibly even lockdowns — it must be said that Ontario's schools are doing remarkably well.

They haven't turned into the cesspools of transmission that some people feared and, by and large, the measures put in place to reduce the risk of so many students going back to school do seem to be working.

The spread of the virus in schools is, in fact, far lower than it is in the community, which backs the Ford government's contention that the safest place for kids right now is in their classrooms.

But there's a real risk of losing that good news story over the Christmas holidays if people behave as people are expected to behave — and that's just a little less than perfectly.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce must figure out how best to deal with this danger and he needs to do it now — not wait until the holiday break or, worse still, after the break when returning students and teachers could bring the virus into schools in record numbers.

While everyone should do the right thing over the holidays — wear masks, stay distanced and not socialize outside the home — based on past experience, that's unlikely to happen consistently enough to bet the future of education on it.

Case counts in Ontario surged after Mother's Day and Thanksgiving gatherings and it's not a stretch to assume the same will happen with Christmas and other celebrations, especially considering how much more rampant community spread of the virus is now.

Ontario needs a plan to make sure schools in that post-holiday period don't become the superspreaders that they've so far successfully avoided being.

Unfortunately, this week has not been much of a confidence booster on that front.

On Tuesday, Lecce floated the possibility of an extended winter break and promised details "in the next week or two."

Then Premier Doug Ford poured cold water on the idea and — poof — a week or two of study turned into 24 hours.

"An extended winter holiday is not necessary at this time, given Ontario's strong safety protocols, low levels of transmission and safety within our schools," Lecce said on Wednesday.

Setting aside the wiggle-room that "at this time" provides, this sudden decision feels more political than health-based. And it seems out of step with what's going on elsewhere.

Quebec is still busy talking about an extra week or two of winter break to ride out the expected post-holiday rise in cases. New York, with just half the positivity rate of Toronto, shut its entire school system down on Thursday.

So, Minister Lecce, what's Ontario's plan?

If not an extended winter break, is it comprehensive rapid testing in schools? Is it looking at the New Democrats' call for a cap of 15 students per class and less crowding on school buses? Something else?

All Lecce and Ford have done so far is point to the government's existing system of cohorting students and requiring masks, and stating how well schools are doing. "So far, knock on wood, it's working fairly well," says the premier.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: school system ^[4]

health and safety guidelines ^[5]

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