

# Ontario daycares are still open but some say a shutdown may only be a matter of time <sup>[1]</sup>

25% of all daycare closures due to COVID-19 have occurred within the past 2 weeks

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## EXCERPTS

Keeping Ontario's child-care centres open during the worsening third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic will require significant safety enhancements, including priority vaccine access for childhood educators, say workers and advocates in the sector.

The provincial government announced on Monday that schools will close for in-person learning indefinitely after spring break due to what Ontario called the recent "rapid increase" in COVID-19 cases.

Despite grim warnings about rampant community spread of the novel coronavirus, child-care centres for infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers will stay open while schools are closed, the province confirmed on Monday.

People who work in child care suspect the eventual closure of daycares is inevitable, particularly in cities where the virus is spreading most dangerously.

"They will eventually have to close child-care centres at the rate that the variants are growing," predicted Amy O'Neil, the director of the Treetop Children's Centre in midtown Toronto.

O'Neil's daycare was recently ordered closed by Toronto Public Health due to an outbreak. The centre has decided to remain closed at least until schools reopen and staff at the centre can be vaccinated.

"I wish the government would slow down, for just a moment, to consider just how enormous the ask is for child-care workers here in Toronto and then look closely at the support they are giving us," added Leigh Anne Jacques, co-owner of Toronto's Beaches Montessori School.

## Closures, cases increasing in child-care centres

Ontario's child-care centres were allowed to reopen in June 2020 after they were ordered closed during the early months of the pandemic.

There have been closures at 510 facilities since then.

According to provincial figures, about 25 per cent of those closures have occurred within the past 14 days.

Colin Furness, an infection control epidemiologist at the University of Toronto, said the rise in cases is likely due to variants of concern, which are understood to be more transmissible, including among children.

"When kids give it to each other they tend not to get very sick, but then each child goes home, and who is at home, be it a grandparent or someone immuno-compromised," Furness said.

Ontario's schools still have a much higher proportion of cases than child-care centres. There are 1,300 schools with a current reported case of COVID-19, which accounts for 26.93 per cent of all schools. There are 420 child-care centres with a current COVID-19 case, which represents 7.95 per cent of those facilities.

## Vaccines for childhood educators the top priority

Among the numerous requests for safety enhancements within child care, calls for priority vaccine access for early childhood educators are the loudest. They are included among the essential workers eligible in Phase 2 of Ontario's vaccination plan.

Those plans were altered to give teachers and special education workers in hot-spot neighbourhoods priority access to vaccines during spring break, but early childhood educators were not included.

Toronto's Board of Health voted on Monday to urge the province to ensure child-care workers in hot-spot neighbourhoods are made

eligible for vaccines starting this week.

"I think that decision is inequitable. It's unjust," said Abigail Doris, executive coordinator of the Toronto Community for Better Child Care.

"Having some education professionals being vaccinated and others not creates a divide in how we're truly creating safe spaces for children."

In an email to CBC Toronto, Education Minister Stephen Lecce noted that child-care workers in hot-spot neighbourhoods will have access to vaccination during April break, though the province previously said that only school-based educators and special education workers would be eligible. Lecce also suggested that child-care workers not currently eligible could be bumped up the queue when more supply arrives.

"Recognizing that the majority of our staff are younger, I have been working around the clock to advocate that once more vaccine arrives, we will get them in the arms of these workers," Lecce said.

The Ministry of Education did not say if additional safety measures will be introduced at child-care centres.

### **The dilemma of possible daycare closures**

While some in the sector anticipate that child-care centres will eventually be forced to close, Doris said there may still be an opportunity to keep them open safely if further changes are made.

In addition to vaccinations for staff, she pointed to reduced cohort sizes and the implementation of paid sick leave as measures that could prevent damaging and disruptive closures.

"That leaves families in a really complex situation," she said of possible closures.

"Instead, we need heightened precautions to be put in place."

Furness offered a gloomier assessment of the pandemic in Ontario. He said the province's current trajectory could mean that widespread closures of child care and other services are now a realistic possibility.

"We may be at the point in Toronto, in the GTA, in many parts of Ontario, where everything has to close," he said.

"I'm not saying that's inevitable, but we're on a track now for uncontrolled growth and a collapse of our health-care system."

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** COVID-19 <sup>[4]</sup>

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