

In-class learning slated to resume February 16 with new measures

By **BROCK WEIR**

Students in the COVID-19 hotspots of Peel, York and Toronto are set to return to class this Tuesday, February 16.

As the Citizen reported last week, the decision to open classes once again following the Winter Break was made by Education Minister Stephen Lecce on February 3.

Last Wednesday, Minister Lecce announced that most students in the Province would resume in-class learning this Monday, February 8. But families living in the three noted regions would have to cool their heels until after the Family Day long weekend.

"We said it had to be safe and while this has not been easy on Ontario parents and students and on our education staff, I want to be clear that safety is what has and what will drive our decisions every step of the way," said Minister Lecce. "We will not put your child and your family at risk. We were the first to close schools in this country last March and today we're the only province that decided to cautiously and gradually reopen our schools. Our Premier has been unequivocal: he will not put our families at risk.

"We know how critical getting kids back to school is for the mental health and development of our children. But, perhaps most importantly, while kids stayed home to learn remotely and with the introduction of tough measures and the stay-at-home orders for all Ontarians, we have seen a consistent decline in community transmission. With the full support of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, and with unanimous support of all local medical officers of health, Ontario is ready to reopen schools because it is safe."

To support student safety, the Province has introduced new measures to protect students and staff against COVID-19 in the classroom.

These include Province-wide access, in consultation with local Public Health Units, to targeted asymptomatic testing for students and staff; mandatory masking requirements for students in Grades 1 to 3, along with masking requirements for Grade 1 to 12 students outdoors when physical distancing can't be maintained; providing 3.5 million cloth masks to schools as a back-up supply for students in Grades 1 through 12; guidance discouraging students from congregating before and after school; and temporary certification of eligible teacher candidates who are set to graduate in 2021 to stabilize staffing levels.

"Reducing the transmission of COVID-19 is fundamental to keeping our communities and schools safe," said Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health for the Province of Ontario. "Our collective efforts, like strictly adhering to all public health measures, in addition to the enhanced safety measures in schools, will help keep communities healthy and students learning alongside their peers in their classrooms."