

March Break delayed due to COVID-19: Ministry

By Brock Weir

Peel Region students were due to head back to school this week after their expected return on Tuesday was thwarted by snow. Now, they and their families will have to wait a little bit longer for the start of March Break.

Last Thursday, Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced that March Break would be postponed to April 12 ? 16 following advice from Dr. Dave Williams, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health.

?It is critical we follow public health advice to protect schools and avoid a repeat of the concerning spike in youth-related cases over the winter break, when students and staff were out of schools for a prolonged period of time,? said Minister Lecce in a statement. ?We are taking this precaution based on advice from health experts, including the province's Science Table and the Chief Medical Officer of Health, to help protect against the emerging COVID-19 variants of concern.

?We appreciate the hard work of students and staff in the education sector and I want to be clear: March break is being postponed, not cancelled. To keep schools open, we must keep them free of COVID-19. The actions announced today serve to limit opportunities for congregation - while reaffirming the evidence that schools are safe for students. By continuing to follow public health advice, and by introducing additional safety measures and more testing, we are supporting our collective efforts to keep COVID-19 from entering our schools.?

Last week's delay was also a chance for the Provincial Government to underscore its position on international travel, noting that this is still inadvisable due to present health concerns.

?Ontarians should refrain from travelling, particularly given the increase in new variants that pose a direct risk to our country,? said Lecce. ?Please stay home as much as possible and continue following the direction of public health officials so that we can keep schools open and protect our seniors, frontline health workers, and all families.?

But the decision to postpone March Break received a swift response from stakeholders, including the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), who said keeping break plans in place would have been a ?much needed? respite for students, teachers, education workers and families alike ?who have been under tremendous pressure? throughout the pandemic.

?The government's decision to postpone March Break does not take into consideration the mental health and well-being of those involved,? said the ETFO in a statement. ?The postponement of March break shows, yet again, the inadequacies of the Progressive Conservative government's planning. If there are concerns related to travel and gatherings during March Break, these should be addressed by the government through other means. Why did Premier Doug Ford reopen the economy when it is clear risks remain? Is he concerned that his stay-at-home orders are ineffective? If so, he should address the real issue: this government's ongoing failure to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

?Their decision to postpone, despite unanimous opposition from unions representing educators and other stakeholders in the sector, including all school board associations and the Ontario Principals' Council, is another example of this government ignoring experts and making decisions that are reckless and baseless. The pattern the government has shown in making decisions while ignoring experts and the front-line workers that are most affected has only served to compound challenges.

?This decision demonstrates their lack of understanding about the stress and pressures of learning and working in a pandemic. Teachers and education workers have gone to extraordinary lengths to teach and support students every day since the start of the school year, whether in person or online. Their efforts should be applauded not diminished.?