

Ontario announces return to school plan

By Rob Paul

As Ontario releases its 2021 return to school plan, Peel has seen a total of 111,990 total cases of COVID-19 with 186 new cases over the last week.

There have also been 21 new deaths in the Region to bring the total to 845.

In Caledon, there were 14 new cases of COVID-19 in the last week, taking the Town's total case count to 4,459. There were no new deaths with the total sitting at 20.

Peel Medical Officer of Health Dr. Lawrence Loh recently said all of the 81 COVID-19-related hospitalizations between June 1 and June 9 had not been fully vaccinated, with two thirds of the hospitalizations being residents who were completely unvaccinated.

Loh is asking residents to do everything they can to complete their immunization because the data shows the severity of the delta variant on those who are only partially vaccinated or unvaccinated.

As it stands, 2,167,890 doses of the vaccine have been administered with 74,073 doses in the last seven-day cycle (July 23 to 29). 1,216,276 Peel residents have at least one dose and 951,614 have completed the vaccination process.

Currently, 70.2 per cent of all residents in the Region have initiated vaccination with 57.9 per cent completed. 81.3 per cent of adults (18-plus) have one dose and 67.8 per cent are fully vaccinated.

As school prepares for a return this fall, 80.7 per cent age 12 and over in Peel have one dose and 66.5 per cent have completed vaccination. The increased focus on vaccination for those under 18 comes with elementary and secondary school students returning full-time in September.

The Ministry of Education announced its plan August 3 to guide schools and staff with a 26-page plan outlining how schools will return in a safe manner.

"I really don't see our schools closing going into the fall and winter and spring," Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Kieran Moore said. "I believe that's the same stance of all of our medical officers. We will do our utmost to keep schools open for all students and families. That will take a multifaceted approach of masking, hand hygiene, distancing, screening on a daily basis, testing, and improvements in ventilation. All of those measures that we're recommending, I think will keep our schools safe."

Under the plan, staff and teachers aren't required to be vaccinated, students (Grade 1 to 12) are required to wear masks indoors, staff and students must screen themselves each day using the provincial screening tool. Students can eat together in cafeteria with a capacity limit to ensure a distance of two metres can be kept between cohorts. Sports, field trips, extracurricular activities, recess, and assemblies will also be permitted.

The guide also asks schools to prepare contingency plans in case of outbreaks that lead to closures and a potential pivot to remote learning.

"I really can't envision or see any closure of any schools in Ontario, or colleges or universities. We must maintain them open going forward," said Moore. "I think we have to normalize COVID-19 for the schools and have an approach that's prudent and that's cautious but recognizes that yes we're going to have a rise in cases, but we are going to adhere to the best practices to minimize the spread and to keep our communities safe."

Cohorts will continue to be utilized to limit interactions between students during the school day but there are exceptions.

Students may be placed into small groups with students from other cohorts, the document says. Members of different cohorts can interact outside with distancing encouraged or inside with distancing and masking.

Moore compared the potential uptick in cases as the weather gets colder to the seasonal flus impact on schools but is hopeful that with more vaccination coverage the potential increase in COVID cases down the line will be manageable.

If I had to compare it to other viruses like influenza, with influenza we always anticipate a rise in cases over the winter months, Moore said. Sometimes we'll have 10, 15 per cent of students away because they've come down with the virus, but they recover, they resolve, and they're back in the classroom.

To help with ventilation, schools with existing mechanical ventilation systems will have to use the highest-grade filters possible and operate the systems two hours or more both before and after the school days begins, schools without mechanical ventilation systems will be required to place standalone high efficiency particulate air filter units in all classrooms.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) put out a critical statement in response to the Ministries plan for returning to the classroom.

It's clear that Premier Ford and Minister Lecce are relying on vaccinations alone to provide a safe school reopening and a return to extracurriculars, said Sam Hammond, ETFO President. What they seem to have forgotten is that Ontarians remain at risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19, and most elementary children are ineligible for vaccines.

To book a COVID-19 vaccination appointment through the Provincial website (covid-19.ontario.ca/book-vaccine/), at any of Peel's pop-up clinics (peelregion.ca/coronavirus/vaccine/book-appointment/#popup), or participating pharmacies (peelregion.ca/coronavirus/vaccine/book-appointment/#pharm).