

Ontario schools to stay closed until at least September, says Lecce

Written By MARK PAVILONS

Students in Ontario will not be returning to the classroom to finish off the school year.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced Tuesday that keeping schools closed for the rest of this school year will help protect the health and safety of students. This decision was based on advice from the Chief Medical Officer of Health, health officials on the COVID-19 Command Table, and medical experts at The Hospital for Sick Children.

At the same time, the government is planning for the reopening of schools for the 2020-21 school year, the gradual reopening of child care and the opening of summer day camps.

"We will never waver from our commitment to keep your child safe, while learning at home," said Minister Lecce. "Our plan will ensure students receive the best educational experience, both inside and outside the classroom during this difficult time. That is why we are strengthening summer learning opportunities, reopening summer day-camps, and it is why we will continue to make the case for synchronous, live, and dynamic learning."

"Nothing is more important than protecting our kids in this province, bar none over anything," said Premier Ford. "(The) announcement gives parents certainty, knowing that their children can continue to learn safely at home and that we have a plan for child care as we work to gradually reopen more of our economy, when it is safe to do so."

"We know children belong at school with their peers for their physical and mental well-being. As I have discussed with Minister Lecce, taking the time to ensure the appropriate infection prevention and control measures are in place, along with thoughtful screening and testing protocols, is a prudent step forward as we work to facilitate a safe return to school in the fall," said Dr. Ronald Cohn, president and CEO of The Hospital for Sick Children.

All students who were on track to graduate from secondary school before the initial school closure order was made in March will be able to graduate, and all students will receive report cards.

Before the summer, the government will announce a plan to strengthen learning and safety protocols to enable students and staff to return to in-class instruction for the 2020-2021 school year. That plan will be bolstered by an enhanced province-wide virtual learning program that will allow all students learn, regardless of the challenges that may transpire in the coming months.

Private schools, licensed child care centres and EarlyON programs will also remain closed for the safety and protection of children and families and staff through Stage 1 of the Framework for Reopening the Province. Emergency child care will continue to operate and provide support for health care and other frontline workers. A gradual reopening of child care is expected to begin as part of Stage 2, which will use robust safety protocols for the safety of Ontario's youngest learners and their staff.

Assuming trends in key public health indicators continue to improve, summer day camps, both indoor and outdoor, may be permitted in July and August of this year with strict health and safety guidelines to be developed in partnership with local public health, the Ministry of Labour, and municipalities. Overnight camps will not be permitted to operate in the summer of 2020.

The Province also unveiled an expanded seven-point summer learning plan for Ontario students to ensure students have every opportunity to continue their learning through the summer months. Summer learning programs are being expanded to reach the most students in Ontario history, to ensure they remain on track to start the 2020-21 school year with the confidence and knowledge required to succeed.

To support at-home learning the government is leveraging all tools, resources, technologies, and services to assist school boards

deliver equitable and effective learning through access to technology and Internet connectivity, especially for students in rural and remote parts of Ontario. To help improve access to remote learning, Ontario is partnering with 34 organizations and private businesses, along with school boards, to address key needs among educators, students and their families during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Students, Lecce said, have been able to make the "pivot" to e-learning he credits them, their teachers, teaching assistants and parents with embracing the technology. Everyone involved deserves credit for keeping students engaged and involved.

Lecce noted Ontario is the most efficient by far of any province in the country in terms of online and virtual leaning. He said it's a "powerful tool to bring people together."

He said e-learning is a strong "back-stop" to traditional education, not a replacement. It's proven to be an effective tool to complement education in these times of crisis.

Lecce said the provincial government has been pushing technology and online learning opportunities before the pandemic. This type of forum creates more course diversity.

At this point, classes in September are still questionable and Lecce said we need to be ready for enhanced online learning should it be required for the new school year.

Lecce's duties as Education Minister have consumed his time, but he's adamant about being a local representative, first and foremost.

Lecce said he's never lost sight of why he got into politics "to fight for community and assist the next generation.

"I'm forever motivated to serve this community and fight for common values," he said, adding he will always put his constituents above his ministerial duties.