

Peel's Schools shuttered for at least a month as COVID variant cases rise

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On the heels of Ontario Premier Doug Ford announcing the entire province will be in lockdown for at least the next month, schools in the Peel Region have been closed and are moving to remote learning due to the increase in COVID-19 cases in the area, specifically involving variants.

The shift of all K-12 schools in Caledon, Brampton, and Mississauga to remote learning began April 6 and will continue through April 18. Spring break is slated for April 12 to 16. Licensed childcare programs will remain open for children under six years old who are not attending school.

Peel Region Medical Officer of Health Dr. Lawrence Loh made the decision to exercise his ability to order for school closures through the Health Protection and Promotion Act, under Section 22.

"This closure is a necessary step to protect staff and students in Peel Region," said Loh. "With increasing case counts and the presence of variant of concern, we need to break chains of transmission and keep our schools safe. I know this will be challenging for parents to navigate and we appreciate all the sacrifices parents continue to make as we continue to fight COVID-19 in our community."

With the increased risk of variants and their more severe impacts on younger people, Dr. Loh and the Region of Peel felt something needed to be done before further damage was done.

"Late last week and through the weekend, Peel saw significant increases in case counts and the spread of variants in the community. This closure will allow students and staff at least two weeks out of school to break any chains of transmission and protect from exposure," said Region of Peel in a statement.

Last week, Loh spoke the Caledon Town Council about the dangers of the variant despite the protocols in schools being strong. He mentioned that with the variants accelerated ability to spread, it could lead to more dramatic outbreaks even if schools are following all health and safety protocol.

"Peel Public Health continues to work closely with our school board partners to prioritize the health and safety of staff and students," said the Region of Peel in a statement. "Schools in Peel already have strong measures in place to prevent transmission in their settings. This opportunity will keep the rising spread of variants across Peel from entering school settings from the community. Further decision on extending the second order will be based on the disease picture in Peel."

Peel District School Board Director of Education Colleen Russell-Rawlins fully backs the decision by Dr. Loh to temporarily return to remote learning with the variants now in play.

"The Peel District School Board respects the decision made by Peel Public Health today to move schools in Peel Region to online learning for all students K-12, beginning Tuesday, April 6, 2021," said Russell-Rawlins. "Spring Break will carry forward as planned the week of April 12 to 16, 2021. We remain grateful to staff, students, and families who have taken extraordinary efforts to change their routines and carry out collective actions to limit the spread of COVID-19 and keep our school communities safe. The health and safety of students and staff in schools, along with a strong commitment to student learning, continue to be our main focus."

Having been updated by Dr. Loh last week, Mayor Allan Thompson understands the severity of the situation with the variants in the

Peel Region and supports closing schools for the time being to help keep students healthy.

?The decision by Peel Public Health to close our schools across Peel was necessary to protect the community from the spread of very concerning variants of COVID-19,? said Mayor Thompson. ?One thing that troubles me is how more and more young people are contracting COVID-19, and the cases continue to accelerate across the Region. I understand this decision is hard for us, the health and safety of our communities continues to be our number one priority.?

For more information on the COVID-19 situation in the Region of Peel, visit their website www.peelregion.ca.