

Ministry of Education

Minister

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April 11, 2021

Dear Ontario Parents:

As our province's fight against COVID-19 continues and April break begins, I want to take this opportunity to update you on the Ontario government's efforts to keep schools safe and open. I also want to express my heartfelt thanks for the incredible strength and resilience shown by our students, education staff, and your families during this challenging period.

During the [provincial emergency brake](#) and the provincial stay-at-home order, all publicly funded and private elementary and secondary schools will remain open for in-person learning with strict health and safety measures in place, except in those regions where local public health units have directed schools in their areas to pivot to remote learning.

As Premier Ford has said many times, our priority remains keeping schools safe and open for in-class instruction because learning is critical to the continued development and mental health of our children.

With appropriate public health and safety measures in place, Dr. David Williams, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health, has been clear that schools remain safe. In fact, Ontario has one of the lowest case rates for young people under 19 years old in Canada. This is due to Ontario parents leading by example by following the rules, as well as a comprehensive safety plan that has ensured that more than 99 per cent of students and staff do not have an active case of COVID-19. In fact, since September, 99.2 per cent of students and 98.7 per cent of staff never reported an active case.

With that said, we are not taking anything for granted. To ensure a safe return from April break, we are adding additional layers of protection, including:

- On-site confirmation of screening of all students and staff;
- Enhanced cleaning and disinfecting during the April break;
- Province-wide asymptomatic testing expansion;
- Voluntary health and safety refresher training upon return from April break; and
- Outdoor learning whenever possible.

Under the Ontario government's plan, **expanded access to asymptomatic testing** is available for students and staff at pharmacies that offer testing and in 180 assessment centres across the province for the week of April 12 to 18, 2021. Children attending child care, and child care staff, will also be eligible to access this testing.

To best protect education staff and students, we are **accelerating access to the vaccine**. While supply remains a challenge, as of April 12, 2021, eligible education workers who provide direct support to students with special education needs across the province, and all education workers in [select hot spot areas](#), starting in Toronto and Peel, will be eligible to register for vaccination.

I want to reiterate, that as you and people you know receive the vaccine, it is important that everyone continue to wear a mask and maintain physical distancing when outside of their immediate household. Additionally, I encourage you to continue monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19 and get tested if symptoms are present. Ontario's Ministry of Health has created a [fact sheet](#) with more advice on staying safe after you have been vaccinated.

I am appealing to every one of you – recognizing the fatigue many have after more than a year of sacrifice – to remain vigilant. The trends are worrisome and the case numbers are rising. We cannot be complacent, because if we let our guard down, school safety can be compromised. I am therefore asking you all to **continue to lead by example by strictly following the rules**, including taking a zero-tolerance approach to congregating with those outside your household.

We are **supporting student mental health** in many ways, including by more than doubling funding to hire more psychologists, psychotherapists and mental health workers in schools. Those supports continue to be available to students at this critical time, both in-person and remotely. School Mental Health Ontario has developed a variety of online [mental health resources](#) for parents and families that can help support your child. We also recognize parents have faced hardship. We continue to meet regularly with our Parent Involvement Committee Chairs and board leads responsible for parent engagement to hear of successes, challenges, and anticipated needs. Our government will work to ensure our schools are safe for in-person learning, while **increasing financial support to families** during this global pandemic. For that reason, I'm pleased to confirm to parents that our government is again providing direct payments to parents, as part of the expanded Ontario COVID-19 Child Benefit.

The new \$980-million program doubles the direct one-time funding to parents to \$400 per child up to Grade 12, and \$500 for a child or youth with special needs. Starting April 26, these payments will be provided automatically to parents who received previous Support for Learners payments. Parents who did not apply for or did not receive the Support for Learners payment are encouraged to apply for the Ontario COVID-19 Child Benefit during the period of May 3 to 17.

As more and more people get vaccinated, I am confident that Ontario will defeat this pandemic, so long as we remain united in our resolve to listen to public health advice, follow safety protocols and support each other. **Your children are Ontario's greatest strength and source of inspiration.** It is for them that we must continue to work together to save lives, to protect our communities, and ensure students can return to class, where they belong.

Please stay safe and positive,



Hon. Stephen Lecce
Minister