

Schools closed to in-person learning as COVID-19 cases hit all-time high

By Nate Smelle

In response to the arrival of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the massive rise in new cases it has delivered Ontario, last Wednesday the Ford government declared a third provincial emergency. On Sunday, April 11, Ontario set a new record, registering an all-time high daily case count of 4,456; while adding another 21 names to the provincial death toll. On this same day, Hastings and Prince Edward Public Health confirmed another 15 new active cases throughout the region.

With another 4,401 new cases and 15 deaths added to the provincial tally on Monday, April 12, Ontario has now seen 7,567 people lose their lives to COVID-19; and, a total of 391,009 people become infected.

Acknowledging that Ontario's rapidly increasing case rates, hospitalizations, and ICU occupancy are "threatening to overwhelm the health care system," the provincial government announced that as of 12:01 a.m. on April 8 a province-wide Stay-at-Home order would take effect. Under this order, all Ontarians are required to remain at home except for essential purposes, such as going to the grocery store or pharmacy, accessing health care services (including getting vaccinated), for outdoor exercise, or for work that cannot be done remotely.

"The COVID-19 situation is at a critical stage and we must act quickly and decisively to stay ahead of these deadly new variants," said Premier Doug Ford in a statement released April 7. "By imposing these strict new measures we will keep people safe while allowing our vaccination program to reach more people, starting with our high risk population and identified hot spots. Although this is difficult, I urge everyone to follow these public health measures and together we will defeat this deadly virus."

By means of this order most non-essential retailers are required to shut down in-person shopping. The enhanced public health measures also mean that discount and big box stores will not be permitted to offer in-person shopping, with the exception of retail sales of grocery items, pet care supplies, household cleaning supplies, pharmaceutical items, health care items, and personal care items only.

According to the Government of Ontario's website, some stores will be allowed to offer in-person retail by appointment only and subject to a 25 per cent capacity limit. These services can only be provided between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. with the delivery of goods to patrons permitted between 6 a.m. and 9 p.m. The list of businesses permitted to operate under these conditions include:

? Safety supply stores? Businesses that primarily sell, rent or repair assistive devices, aids or supplies, mobility devices, aids or supplies or medical devices, aids or supplies? Rental and leasing services including automobile, commercial and light industrial machinery and equipment rental? Optical stores that sell prescription eyewear to the public? Businesses that sell motor vehicles, boats and other watercraft? Vehicle and equipment repair and essential maintenance and vehicle and equipment rental services? Retail stores operated by a telecommunications provider or service, which may only permit members of the public to enter the premises to purchase a cellphone or for repairs or technical support? Outdoor garden centres and plant nurseries, as well as indoor greenhouses that engage in sales to the public, are also permitted to operate with a 25 per cent capacity limit and a restriction on hours of operation to between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. As long as the Stay-at-Home order is in place, restaurants and bars will be closed to in-person dining, however, they will be permitted to open for take out, drive-thru, and delivery. The province-wide Stay-at-Home order will remain in place for at least 28 days - tentatively coming to an end on May 6. However, the Ontario government may choose to extend the order at this time if it is deemed necessary.

Ontarians found out on the afternoon of Monday, April 12 that students throughout the province would not be returning to the classroom following the spring break.

The announcement by the Ford government comes in the wake of a rapidly increasing number of COVID-19 cases, a heightened level of risk to the public due to the new COVID-19 variants, and the "massive" spike in hospital admissions. Attesting to the

severity of the risk is the fact that between April 4 and April 10, COVID-19 hospitalizations in the province increased by 22.1 per cent. During this brief period of time, the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care also increased from 494 to 605.

"We are seeing a rapidly deteriorating situation with a record number of COVID-19 cases and hospital admissions threatening to overwhelm our health care system," said Premier Doug Ford. "As I have always said we will do whatever it takes to ensure everyone stays safe. By keeping kids home longer after spring break we will limit community transmission, take pressure off our hospitals and allow more time to rollout our COVID-19 vaccine plan."

"This was not a decision we made lightly, as we know how critical schools are to Ontario students. Our priority has always been to keep schools open, however sharply rising community transmission can put our schools and Ontario families at risk," added Minister of Education Stephen Lecce.

In light of the rapidly rising rate of community spread, and the threat it poses to the health and safety of school communities, all publicly-funded and private elementary and secondary schools in the province will move to teacher-led remote learning when students return from the spring break on April 19. Moving forward, the province will assess data on an ongoing basis, while consulting with health officials to determine when and if it is safe to resume in-person learning.

"As we continue to see rapid growth in community transmission across the province, it is necessary to take extra precautions and measures to ensure the continued health and safety of students, teachers and their families," said Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. David Williams. "As the fight against this third wave of the pandemic continues, everyone must continue following all public health and workplace safety measures and stay at home to prevent further transmission of the virus, so we can once again resume in person learning in our schools."

Before and after school programs will also remain closed, however, free emergency child care for school-aged children of eligible health care and frontline workers will still be provided. School boards have been directed to make provisions for continued in-person support for students with special education needs who require additional support that cannot be accommodated through remote learning. Although in-person learning has been put on hold, the province indicated that child care for non-school aged children will remain open.