

Ministry of Education

Minister

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Ministère de l'Éducation

Ministre

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January 2, 2021

Dear Ontario Parents,

It has been a trying year for all Ontarians. Yet, through the greatest challenges we faced, our province — most especially inspired by our students, parents & education staff — came together. Unified in our effort to stop the spread and save lives.

Thank you for your dedication. We believe so strongly that schools are essential to the well-being, mental health and development of a child, and therefore, must be safeguarded at all costs to ensure they can remain open for safe in-class instruction.

Protecting What Matters Most

As we face rising case numbers, the Government announced a Provincewide Shutdown that put in place time-limited public health and workplace safety measures to help ensure our schools remain safe, to stop the spread of COVID-19 transmission in communities, and to save lives.

Now, while leading medical experts have been clear that schools are not a source of rising community transmission, we can and will be an important part of the solution to save lives from COVID-19.

That is why we are following the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health by taking proactive and preventative action to protect schools following the holiday break.

As part of these new restrictions, elementary and secondary school students across the province will learn remotely for the first week of January, as everyone can play a part in staying home and stopping the spread of COVID-19.

Recognizing the importance of in-person learning, students will return to class across the province in January:

- Elementary school students enrolled in in-person learning will return to class on January 11, 2021;
- Secondary school students enrolled in in-person learning in northern Public Health Units will also return to class on January 11, 2021;
- Remaining secondary school students enrolled in in-person learning across the remainder of Public Health Units will return to class on January 25, 2021.

Elementary and secondary students currently enrolled in remote learning will continue to learn remotely throughout January.

Supporting Quality Online Learning

Our Government has made every effort to prepare for schools transitioning temporarily to remote learning. We have directed that a minimum standard for Grades 1-12 of 75% of your child's 300 minutes of daily instruction is to be delivered by live "Zoom-style" (i.e. synchronous learning). To ensure a better learning experience, every teacher in this province received mandatory training on remote learning, before the school year began.

Ontario stands alone in creating a comprehensive online learning management system that ensures teachers can engage students in live-synchronous learning, send and receive assignments, and participate in discussions in a secure environment.

We have also prepared for this by supporting the purchase of over 150,000 new devices for students to support remote learning, and over 8,000 connectivity devices for students unable to access internet at home.

We know some students with special education needs cannot be supported through remote learning. That is why I have directed school boards to provide for in-person learning for these exceptional cases, ensuring these children receive consistency and full supports through this difficult period. We are committed to their safety and success.

Financial Relief for Parents

Learning from home means extra costs for many families. We will continue to deliver support to families during this pandemic. In fact, we are on track to deliver nearly \$800 million in direct financial relief to parents and guardians – where it belongs, to be quite frank. That is why we launched the Support for Learners program in the first place — to support families with children aged 0 to 12 with \$200 per child and \$250 per child up to age 21 with special education needs. If you haven't already applied, you can still apply for this one-time financial support up to the extended deadline of February 8, 2021.

We are also expanding this program to include financial supports for high school students, recognizing added costs from technology to internet for these parents while their kids stay home for a longer period. Starting on January 11, 2021, families with students aged 13 to grade 12 can apply for a one-time payment for their children up until February 8, 2021. The expanded program will now cover:

- \$200 for each child up to grade 12, including students in secondary school who are over 18;
- \$250 if the child or youth is 21 years or under with special needs.

Enhancing Child Care Safety

While child care will remain open for the duration of these time-limited public health actions, we are enhancing the already strict screening requirements and safety protocols to ensure they remain safe places for your children. This includes child care offered in licensed child care centres, in licensed home child care, in extended day programs, and by authorized recreational and skill-building providers.

In response to the needs of frontline health and emergency workers who have school-aged children and may require support during this period, we are implementing a targeted emergency child care program, at no cost to eligible parents, from January 4-8, 2021.

Keeping Schools Safe into 2021

I want to reassure parents that according to the province's leading doctors, our schools are safe, with eight out of ten schools in this province having no cases of COVID-19 and based on board reporting, 99.64% of students have not reported a case of COVID-19. The province has experienced a safe reopening because we developed a comprehensive, nation-leading plan in partnership with experts in the medical community.

Our strength through this pandemic has been the resilience of our students, hard work of our staff, collaboration with parents, and commitment of Government to step up our response every step of the way. To ensure our schools remain safe in January 2021 and beyond, we will continue and enhance testing in schools and allocate a new and significant investment in school safety, including in enhanced air quality, more PPE, and additional staffing and cleaning. We will do whatever it takes to ensure our kids can continue to learn.

This pandemic has impacted every corner of our province. When I say that the health and safety of our kids is my top priority, I am also thinking of their mental health. This has been a uniquely challenging period – it has been accompanied by feelings of anxiety, isolation, and anguish.

That is why we have nearly doubled mental health investments this year to unprecedented levels in the province's history, for our students and staff, to ensure they know we are here for them. Those services will continue while students learn from home. The priority right now remains the health of your child, which is why we want to make clear the expanded mental health supports are available.

To access these mental health resources, please visit www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-support-students-and-parents#section-5.

Let's Remain Hopeful

I remain optimistic that 2021 will be a better year with the vaccine coming online. Students are looking to all of us - parents, educators, school boards and government - to instill confidence in their hearts. To demonstrate a collective resolve to win this battle against this invisible global threat. And I assure you — we will continue to work together and work around the clock to protect your child, their learning experience, and safety. Nothing matters more.

By sticking together and by following Public Health directives, we will overcome this difficulty with hope, unity, and optimism.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Lecce', written in a cursive style.

The Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education