



Dear Premier Ford, Hon. Elliott, Hon. Lecce,

As a resident of Ward 19 of Toronto, I thank you for your continued leadership in working with our City through the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. However, I feel that over the next few months, Ontario's top priority needs to be to ensure a safe, full-time, in-person school reopening in the Fall.

We are a two-income family with two children at the K-12 level in Toronto schools; a safe reopening is deeply important to me, for our family but also for the health of the educators who dedicate their lives to teach our children. Full-time in-person school reopening is the most logistically simple and equitable option, improving children's well-being, increasing family incomes, and strengthening Ontario's economy. Two-thirds of Toronto families are likely to send their children to school in the Fall, so there is will (TDSB survey; <https://tinyurl.com/y2zjya6o>). However, school re-opening requires creative solutions and society-wide support to avoid outbreaks. A strong system will also reassure our educators of their own safety; less than half of TDSB staff reported feeling comfortable returning to their workplace (survey above).

My requests for a safe school reopening borrow ideas from the "hierarchy of hazard control" used to limit infections in hospitals (please see: <https://tinyurl.com/y66e9dxw>), and other evidence to date. Here are my requests:

- 1. Move bars outdoors, limit indoor gatherings:** We need to trade-off non-essential activities such as indoor bars, with school re-openings, to balance our "transmission budget". Bars are a documented source of COVID-19 outbreaks and pose a concern echoed by the Ontario Medical Association (<https://tinyurl.com/y67ltpae>) and by Mayor Tory's request for additional restrictions. Ontario should instead invest in outdoor options such as designated beer gardens and heated patios for colder weather. This change needs to start now (end of July) - September will be too late - and persist till next Spring, when we can be outdoors again. We must learn from the mistakes that led to school closures in Israel and Hongkong, and work to keep infection rates low.
- 2. Require protective measures for staff and students:** School boards should be required to protect staff and students with appropriate PPE and protection. Mandate: face masks for staff and students without medical exemptions (kindergarten and older); face shields for staff as extra protection; hand sanitizers at school entrances/washrooms/in classrooms; barriers where distancing is not possible (e.g. cafeteria); daily temperature scans before entering school (or school bus).
- 3. Create dedicated COVID-19 testing/surveillance for schools:** Test all teachers and all students from high prevalence neighbourhoods just before school year begins. To control outbreaks, create dedicated surveillance systems for schools, for rapid testing and contact tracing.



- 4. Mandate seasonal flu vaccination:** There is overlap between flu and COVID-19 symptoms (e.g. fever). Mandating flu vaccines in schools will reduce the chance that flu outbreaks end up burdening COVID-19 surveillance resources.
- 5. Staff should work only at limited, pre-decided schools:** This is a lesson Ontario learnt from the LTC COVID-19 crisis, where part-time staff travelled between homes, spreading infections.

Safe schools provide the bedrock for economic recovery in Ontario. A poor reopening can lead to outbreaks among vulnerable students, staff and families, creating a tragedy similar to that resulting from our inadequate response for our LTC homes. As our economy starts to reopen, now is the time to put these measures in place for a Fall and Winter, balancing economic recovery and peace of mind for our families and school staff.

Sincerely,

Shraddha Pai, PhD  
Post-doctoral Fellow  
The Donnelly Centre for Cellular and Biomolecular Research  
University of Toronto

The opinions in this letter are my own and do not reflect those of my employer.