



May 28, 2021

The Honourable Doug Ford  
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To Premier Doug Ford,

Thank you to you and your team for your hard work in collecting information to guide difficult decisions during the pandemic, and now specifically with regards to school reopening. Masks4Canada is a grassroots volunteer group of physicians, media, data scientists, marketing specialists, technologists, lawyers, engineers, students, teachers, and other professionals. We provide expertise and time in advocating for effective public health measures in response to COVID-19, and our work is grounded in scientific research and the knowledge of healthcare professionals, engineers, and other relevant experts in our group.

We are writing in response to your request for answers to the questions surrounding school reopening as the cases decrease during the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. **We recognize that school is a critical part of the lives of our children, and that a safe return to the educational environment is absolutely critical to their health and well-being.**

**We would like to emphasize the following main points:**

- Schools were very clearly a driver of infections in the last wave, and it was no coincidence that cases began dropping 3 weeks after schools were closed in Ontario<sup>1</sup>.
- Critical and easy-to-implement improvements in each classroom would increase the safety of the learning environment. This includes placing portable HEPA air cleaners in classrooms, opening windows, reducing class size where possible, and conducting meals and other activities outdoors.
- Given the rapid spread of the B.1.617.2 variant in the UK, and the documented decreased effectiveness of a single dose of vaccine, we need to ensure that educators who are working in-person have been fully vaccinated and have had at least 14 days from their second dose before they are placed at risk for exposure in classrooms.

**Please see below for detailed answers to your 7 questions.**

**1. Is the reopening of schools for in person learning safe for students?**

While reopening schools for the remaining 2-3 weeks may allow students to socialize with their peers and resume a resemblance of "covid-normal", the risks of increased infection and transmission outweigh these short and temporary advantages. It is difficult to gauge how a mere 2-3 weeks of in-person classes may

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/DGBassani/status/1377327778081746946>



mitigate or erase the mental health harms of the pandemic. Instead, reopening school for only 2-3 weeks will add to the uncertainty, frustration, and fear that comes with sudden changes to routine. A child died before the lockdown, and it is unlikely that students have forgotten this. Students need normalcy but reopening now will not be pre-2020 normal.

Not all students aged 12 and above will be vaccinated, and students aged below 12 will definitely not be vaccinated. The situation will not change for these students, who could become infected and transmit the virus. Ventilation and physical distance measures have been inadequate in the past year, as observed by the increased case rates in schools<sup>2</sup>. With a low temperature difference between indoors and outdoors during the season, there will be less air movement through open windows in calm conditions, which is concerning for schools that rely on natural ventilation. The focus should thus be on ensuring safe school reopening for September 2021. Focus during these upcoming weeks and throughout the summer should be on prioritizing vaccination for teachers, education staff, and students aged 12 and above.

**2. Is the reopening of schools for in person learning safe for teachers and all education staff?**

Please see response to question 1. Additionally, not all teachers and education staff will be vaccinated by June 2021, which would only exacerbate infection and transmission risks. The Ontario Regional Office of the Canadian Union of Public Employees also recently expressed concerns of workplace health and safety in response to potential school reopening from your government<sup>3</sup>.

**3. There are a growing number of cases in Ontario of the variant first identified in India (B.1.617). Does this mutation pose an increased risk to students and education workers?**

Given the current rise of the B.1.617 variant in our communities, it is likely that reopening schools will exacerbate this increase and pose further risk to students, teachers, and staff, as well as risk of transmission to their families who are likely to also be only partially immunized. It is clear that a single dose of vaccine confers less protection for this variant than for the B.1.17 variant.

**4. The modeling from the Ontario Science Table has suggested that reopening schools will lead to an increase in cases in the province of Ontario, is this acceptable and safe?**

This is not acceptable since modeling suggests that increased death and hospitalizations would be the outcome. Increased case rates from school reopening would only delay the promised reopening planned for July 2021, as they could push the province back into another wave of COVID-19 and necessitate quarantines and the closing of non-essential businesses again. The Ontario Science Table has consistently provided credible information and its modelling must be taken seriously.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/epi/2020/12/covid-19-school-outbreaks-cases-epi-summary.pdf?la=en>

<sup>3</sup> [https://osbcu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Letter\\_CUPE-OSBCU\\_reply\\_to\\_Premier\\_consultation\\_school\\_reopening\\_2021\\_05\\_28.pdf](https://osbcu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Letter_CUPE-OSBCU_reply_to_Premier_consultation_school_reopening_2021_05_28.pdf)



**5. Other countries are warning mutations including the B.1.617 variant are putting children at much greater risk and are shutting schools down. Is this concern not shared by medical experts in Ontario?**

This concern is shared by medical experts in Ontario. Other countries are serving as examples right now, and we should learn from them.

**6. Should teachers be fully vaccinated before resuming in class lessons, and if not, is one dose sufficient?**

Ideally, teachers and education staff should be fully vaccinated (2 doses) before resuming in class lessons. One dose is not sufficient for full protection, although the risk for COVID-19 infection and transmission would be lower than no dose at all. Given the short timeline of a June school reopening, it is unreasonable to assume that all teachers and education staff would be fully vaccinated and maximally protected. As the CBC reported, as per your government's data, only 41% of teachers have had the first dose<sup>4</sup>. Reopening now would pose greater risks for everyone involved, including to the communities in which teachers and education staff reside.

However, should particular regions of Ontario have low community spread, properly ventilated schools, adequate CO2 detectors and air cleaners, as well as improved masks (i.e., N95 masks), then it may be reasonable to reopen schools in those specific regions.

**7. Under Ontario's reopening plan, indoor gatherings won't commence until July. Should indoor school instruction resume before then?**

School reopening also constitutes indoor gatherings at prolonged periods of time, and should not be exempt from this policy. We will again emphasize that children aged below 12 – who are not vaccinated – sitting in non air-conditioned rooms without proper ventilation, would only serve to create opportunity for virus infection and transmission.

The high risk of harm to the health of students, teachers, education staff, and our overall communities outweighs the short and questionable advantages of school reopening. Our recommendation is therefore that schools should not be reopened for a mere 2-3 weeks this June 2021. We recommend instead that efforts and time be focused on ensuring a safe return to school for September 2021, including prioritizing vaccinations for teachers, education staff, and children aged 12 and above, and ensuring effective ventilation systems, small class sizes, and continued masking and physical distancing. These recommendations remain the same even if the province ultimately decides against all this scientific evidence and reopens schools. However, it should be acknowledged that not reopening schools during this time will make it possible to put more time and resources towards a safer and more permanent school reopening in September 2021. Our province is nearing the end of this grueling marathon, but we cannot risk tripping before the finish line by reopening schools now.

Sincerely,

Masks4Canada

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/covid-19-ontario-may-27-2021-update-1.6042352>