

OSSTF calls on premier to do more to protect students and staff during the pandemic

By Nate Smelle

With the more transmissible Omicron variant of COVID-19 smashing the record for the number of daily cases in Ontario over the holidays, Premier Doug Ford held a press conference on Monday, Jan. 3 to announce a series of additional restrictions and public health measures aimed at getting the pandemic under control.

In response to the rapidly increasing number of cases and COVID-19 hospitalizations throughout the province, the Ford government, informed the public that it was temporarily moving Ontario back into Step-2 of its Roadmap to Reopen Ontario. Starting on Jan. 5, students in Ontario switched back to remote learning with free emergency child care planned for school-aged children of health care and other eligible frontline workers. This means schools will remain closed to in-class learning until at least Jan. 17.

Children will continue to receive live virtual learning during this period, led by their teacher, with full access to school-based academic and mental health supports, said Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education. We will continue to work closely with the Chief Medical Officer of Health to keep our communities safe and ensure that Ontario students get back to in-person learning as soon as possible.

Under the government's new measures, school buildings would be permitted to open for child care operations, including emergency child care, to provide in-person instruction for students with special education needs who cannot be accommodated remotely and for staff who are unable to deliver quality instruction from home. During this period of remote learning, free emergency child care will be provided for school-aged children of health care and other eligible frontline workers.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation responded to the government's announcement shortly after the press conference wrapped up on Monday. Despite the fact that they consider the new restrictions and measures as being necessary to help address the Omicron variant's impact on our health care system, the OSSTF said the Ford government has once again, failed to recognize all that is needed to keep schools safe. Highlighting how the provincial government has known about the virulence of this Omicron variant for over a month, the union said the premier failed to acknowledge its impact and implement a meaningful plan for schools.

While Ford told Ontarians that everyone needs to brace for impact the OSSTF said his government has failed to fortify the public school system to keep communities safe. Noting that the government's announcement on Monday does not go nearly far enough, the OSSTF said that without increasing access to COVID-19 testing, providing full access to enhanced PPE, guaranteeing priority access to booster vaccines for educators, ensuring HEPA filters are in place in schools, and reducing class sizes to allow for physical distancing, the Premier cannot say he is doing everything he can to protect students, staff, and communities.

With the extended pause of in-person learning, the union said the government has additional time to finally step up and protect students, staff, and communities. When students return to in-person learning, hopefully in the coming weeks, the OSSTF pointed out that they are still returning to large classes with limited ability to physically distance, varying access to PPE, inconsistent ventilation, and a lack of pro-active rapid testing and reporting.

According to the union, the government has failed Ontario's schools by: Cancelling contact tracing; Reducing access to PCR testing; Ending transparent reporting of case counts in schools; Excluding schools from occupancy caps similar to those for households and businesses; Failing to reduce class sizes to ensure REAL cohorting and physical distancing can be established and maintained; Failing to have N95 masks ready for deployment; Leaving education workers and teachers without priority access to vaccinations and boosters.

If the Ford government had implemented these protocols months ago, the OSSTF said the government would not be in this position.

OSSTF District 29 president Scott Marshall shares the union's concerns. He said one thing that has become abundantly clear throughout the pandemic is the value of in-person education opposed to e-learning.

"Through this pandemic we have definitely seen the value of in person learning, and the inequities and problems associated with virtual learning," Marshall said. "While we want to be back in the schools with the students in-person, the teaching and learning environment needs to be safe" which the Ford government doesn't seem interested in committing to."

Additional measures and restrictions imposed by the Ford government on Monday that will remain in effect until at least Jan. 26, include:

- Reducing social gathering limits to five people indoors and 10 people outdoors.- Limiting capacity at organized public events to five people indoors.- Requiring businesses and organizations to ensure employees work remotely unless the nature of their work requires them to be on-site.- Limiting capacity at indoor weddings, funerals, and religious services, rites and ceremonies to 50 per cent capacity of the particular room. Outdoor services are limited to the number of people that can maintain two metres of physical distance. Social gatherings associated with these services must adhere to the social gathering limits.- Retail settings, including shopping malls, permitted at 50 per cent capacity. For shopping malls physical distancing will be required in line-ups, loitering will not be permitted and food courts will be required to close.- Personal care services permitted at 50 per cent capacity and other restrictions. Saunas, steam rooms, and oxygen bars closed.- Closing indoor meeting and event spaces with limited exceptions but permitting outdoor spaces to remain open with restrictions.- Public libraries limited to 50 per cent capacity.- Closing indoor dining at restaurants, bars and other food or drink establishments. Outdoor dining with restrictions, takeout, drive through and delivery is permitted.- Restricting the sale of alcohol after 10 p.m. and the consumption of alcohol on-premise in businesses or settings after 11 p.m. with delivery and takeout, grocery/convenience stores and other liquor stores exempted.- Closing indoor concert venues, theatres, cinemas, rehearsals and recorded performances permitted with restrictions.- Closing museums, galleries, zoos, science centres, landmarks, historic sites, botanical gardens and similar attractions, amusement parks and waterparks, tour and guide services and fairs, rural exhibitions, and festivals. Outdoor establishments permitted to open with restrictions and with spectator occupancy, where applicable, limited to 50 per cent capacity.- Closing indoor horse racing tracks, car racing tracks and other similar venues. Outdoor establishments permitted to open with restrictions and with spectator occupancy limited to 50 per cent capacity. Boat tours permitted at 50 per cent capacity.- Closing indoor sport and recreational fitness facilities including gyms, except for athletes training for the Olympics and Paralympics and select professional and elite amateur sport leagues. Outdoor facilities are permitted to operate but with the number of spectators not to exceed 50 per cent occupancy and other requirements.