

Update on COVID-19
Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health
February 3, 2021 at 5 p.m.
Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

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- Thank you, Mayor Tory, and good afternoon. First, we'll start off with some of our numbers. Today I am reporting 444 new cases of COVID-19. 352 people are in hospital and 80 are in the ICU. I regret to tell you that we are recording 17 more deaths since yesterday.
 - Yesterday our data reporting was affected as a result of our ongoing technology platform migration to the provincial system.
 - More than 80,000 cases have been transferred and for the most part the work is proceeding as expected.
 - Unfortunately some data was affected in the transfer and there may be some more yet, however we expect the project to be completed this week and to return to full reporting next week.
 - The story today is schools.
 - When it comes to the question of opening schools, I am of the belief there is no perfect answer or solution during a pandemic.
 - To reopen there can only be the rigorous application of best practices.
 - When schools were closed for months in the first part of the pandemic, it was in large part for the same reason almost everything else was closed too: we knew very little about COVID-19, how it spread, who was vulnerable to it, how it could be treated and even if vaccines were possible.
 - Over the past year, the body of knowledge has expanded.
 - On this continent, we learned a lot over the course of last fall about opening and operating schools in a pandemic.

- Now the decision to reopen schools has been made.
- In Toronto, when school returns there are systems in place, provided by the province, the school boards, testing partners and Toronto Public Health.
- Toronto Public Health has increased our school response team capacity above what we had last fall – to almost 200 staff supporting schools, students, staff and families.
- There will be daily screening of staff and students that each school will check each day.
- If a student or staff has even one mild symptom of COVID-19 they cannot attend school and should go for testing.
- There are also screening questions so that if someone is sick at home with COVID-19, or isolating at home because they were a close contact of someone with COVID-19, or, if someone recently travelled, a student or staff in that home does not attend school.
- These changes are especially important because of the variants of concern.
- These are enhanced screening questions to reduce the chance of anyone entering the school with COVID-19.
- If someone in a school develops COVID-19, investigators do an assessment to determine where the person might have gotten the infection and to whom they could have spread it.
- We work with many testing partners and assessment centres in the City to provide access to testing of cohorts, and sometimes whole schools, based on the findings of the investigation.
- If someone in a cohort tests positive for COVID-19, principals will dismiss the cohort.

- School principals and vice-principals will continue to have weekly webinars with Toronto Public Health to get the most up-to-date information.
- Toronto Public Health's COVID-19 Guidance for reopening schools was revised on January 26th and runs to 21-pages.
- The protocols for schools are based around mask use by all, active symptom screening, distancing, cohorting, ventilation, cleaning surfaces and hand hygiene.
- One update is that masking is now required outdoors, where physical distancing cannot be maintained.
- The guidance is comprehensive and represents the care and attention that is being applied to school operations, with parameters for the information required when reporting cases to Toronto Public Health, to personal protective equipment protocols for staff, even to a recommendation that school pictures not be taken during these circumstances.
- The guidance is updated regularly and communicated to schools so they know how they can best protect their staff and students from COVID-19.
- The arguments in favour of in-class learning have been made at length but I think where there is debate it centres on the safety of reopening.
- At schools, protocols are in place.
- Awareness and vigilance are high and are key: at school and at home.
- I would say the majority of the public health community and many leading institutions and experts believe schools can return to in-class learning if comprehensive safety protocols are followed.

Public Health

- The Hospital for Sick Children published Guidance for School Operation during the Pandemic on January 21st and stated clearly – and I’m quoting – it is “our strong opinion that an in-person school model, with robust application of the recommended risk mitigation interventions is the best option from an overall health and learning perspective for children of all ages.”
- The CDC says – and quoting again – “accumulating data now suggest a path forward to maintain or return primarily or fully to in-person instructional delivery. Actions include taking steps to reduce community transmission and limiting school-related activities such as indoor sports practice or competition that could increase transmission risk.”
- Even the famous Dr. Fauci said in the last week “it's less likely for a child to get infected in the school setting than if they were just in the community.”
- None of these are endorsements of any specific plan – but an endorsement of the principle that open schools and in-class learning are achievable with the right controls in place and dedication to supporting them.
- But if we’ve learned one thing in the last year it’s that none of our actions now take place in isolation – and I want to return to a point in the CDC paper with which I agree wholeheartedly, that “actions include taking steps to reduce community transmission.”
- Wherever children are best suited to learn, reopening schools poses a question to us all: what are we willing to do to support the opening and operations of schools for the children and staff who are inside?
- Exposure risk is driven in large measure by what we do.
- If we, as a community, are acting in ways to reduce community transmission, we are supporting conditions for our children to learn in safety.
- So when schools are open, our obligation is to act to reduce transmission – that's our part to play – keeping apart as much as possible and spending as much of our time as possible at home, only with the people we live with.

- This means that students go to school and straight home or to before or after care. Which means no play dates, no time in the playground with friends, no parents congregating and catching up.
- All of those out of school encounters can increase the spread of the virus.
- Efforts at distance and all the steps for self-protection – like masking – work.
- We’ve seen Toronto taking up the challenge in supporting public health efforts that create distance to diminish spread.
- This has the benefit of making the city safer for those who have no choice but to leave home for their work, work which many of us rely on in daily life.
- It’s that easy and it’s that difficult because it involves yet another choice and more sacrifice, even if in aid of a good cause.
- Just as there is no perfect solution for almost anything involving COVID-19, in a pandemic, no action occurs in isolation.
- Every action must be considered in the context of how it affects the people around us and, with opened schools, what we can do to support learning.

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