

Ontario reopens all schools, delays March break ignoring warnings of a third COVID-19 wave

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19 February 2021

Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce delivered a tirade of lies at a press conference last week to cover over the deadly implications of the province's school reopening policy.

His remarks came in the run-up to Tuesday's return to in-class learning in the only remaining parts of the province with predominantly online instruction—Metro Toronto and the neighbouring Peel and York regions. All three areas continue to be hotspots for the spread of COVID-19.

The press briefing was called to announce a delay of the annual week-long March Break until April 12 for all public and publicly-funded Catholic schools throughout the province.

With the spread of more infectious and lethal strains of the virus, the province is encountering increased resistance from teachers to its phased return to in-person learning.

Last year, schools were closed due to the pandemic for the first time immediately following March Break, when the seven-day rolling average of daily new COVID-19 cases was still in the hundreds. Now, it is in the thousands. However, the government, opposition parties, and trade union bureaucrats are all demanding that schools not only remain open, but are never closed again.

Lecce made this clear at the press conference, declaring that the government was “following the advice of the medical community and the chief officer of health to delay March break [...] with one aim, to keep these schools open.”

The decision to delay March break has triggered a furious response from teachers and families. Educators have worked tirelessly in recent months to provide learning to their students, while receiving virtually no support from the government. They have been shunted back and forth between distance learning, hybrid models, and full in-person classes. Many of them justifiably believe that they deserve a break. Numerous families, concerned about their children being exposed to the deadly virus in overcrowded classrooms and public transit, would prefer to keep them at

home, even though this means substantial financial hardship due to the totally inadequate assistance provided by all levels of government in Canada.

Lecce claimed the province's concern was over community spread due to travel and holiday congregations. He asserted that requiring all students down to Grade 1 to wear masks would keep everyone safe, and that suspending March break was a necessary decision to protect kids' mental health.

This is a hypocritical fraud. The vast majority of teachers, parents and working people recognize that travelling under pandemic conditions poses a severe threat, and have no intention of doing so. The most conspicuous travellers in recent months have been members of the political establishment and super-rich, including Lecce's former colleague, the ex-Ontario Finance Minister Rod Phillips, who was forced to resign after jetting off to a private Caribbean resort as thousands died across Ontario in December.

While the Ford government claims to be protecting the health and well-being of education staff and students from the community transmission that may result from a small minority of travellers during March break, its policy of reopening schools is preparing the way for a much more catastrophic spread of COVID-19, including its more infectious variants. Multiple scientific studies have confirmed the central role that open schools played in triggering the pandemic's devastating second wave.

With the support of the federal Liberal government, Ontario's Conservative government and its provincial counterparts across Canada are preparing the way for a deadly third wave of the pandemic, a fact that is openly acknowledged by numerous medical experts. Commenting on the Ford government's recent announcements concerning the reopening of schools and the economy, Dr. Michael Warner, the Director of Critical Care at Toronto's Michael Garron Hospital, said, “The hope that I had that we would

have a little bit of light has been vanquished by this announcement by the government. It doesn't make any sense! I have not been able to encounter one scientist, an epidemiologist or infections doctor, who thinks this plan makes sense.”

The supposed safety measures put in place by the Ontario government to accompany the reopening of schools cannot even be described as a Band-Aid. In a school system with around 2 million students, Lecce boasted that the government will make available a mere 50,000 tests per week to test for asymptomatic cases. At that pace, it would take the best part of a year to test every student in Ontario just once! Moreover, given the government's previous bungled efforts at mass testing and the rollout of vaccines, it is extremely doubtful that even its inadequate 50,000 target will be met.

The provincial government knows very well that schools are a major vector of transmission, yet it is doubling down on the lie that schools are safe. According to the Feb. 12 update on the Ontario government website responsible for tracking school outbreaks, 5,264 students, 1130 staff and 1125 unidentified individuals have been infected with COVID-19 since September. There are active outbreaks at 112 schools, four of which have been closed, with 167 cases reported in the previous 14 days. There have also been 2431 cases at licensed child care facilities, including 134 with active cases. 17 have closed their doors. Overall, the province has reported over 295,000 cases and 6,775 deaths since March.

The increased danger posed by virus mutations was highlighted by reports of two teachers in Brampton testing positive for the more infectious UK variant, and a student in Waterloo who likely also has a case of the same variant.

These developments underscore that it is impossible to safely organize in-person learning amid a raging pandemic. However, this will not stop the political elite from trying to force teachers, students, and their relatives to risk their lives on a daily basis, because the reopening of schools is seen as essential to boosting corporate profits. From the standpoint of the ruling class, children must return to in-person learning so that schools can function as holding pens, freeing up parents to fully participate in the “labour force,” churning out profits for big business.

Opposition among teachers and families to this homicidal course has been rising for weeks. Since November, educators at three Toronto-area schools have walked out to protest dangerous working conditions due to COVID-19 outbreaks. In the most recent example of this, 22 educational assistants and support staff walked off the job at Beverly Public School in late January. These determined struggles have been systematically sabotaged by the education unions,

who insist that teachers and education assistants confine their protests to the reactionary anti-worker labour relations system, which is designed to impose the dictates of the government and big business.

Nine schools in northern Ontario, where schools reopened on January 11, had already reported cases by January 28. In response, Shannon Senior, an educational assistant and single mother with two school-aged children living in Sudbury wrote an open letter to Ontario Premier Doug Ford denouncing the province's school reopening. “None of our kids should be sick today. The schools should have been closed. This could have been prevented. It feels like we are a smaller community, so we have been overlooked,” she told the *Sudbury Star*. “One of the things that stood out to me a few weeks ago during Ford's announcement was when he said that he doesn't take the health and safety of our children lightly. I almost felt like saying you're clearly not taking it lightly for your children, but what about ours?”

As the deadly threat posed to working people by the reopening of schools becomes ever clearer to larger numbers of workers, the opposition to the ruling elite's reckless agenda must find political expression. The *World Socialist Web Site* is fighting to establish a cross-Canada educator's rank-and-file committee, independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions. This committee will fight for an end to all in-person learning until the pandemic is brought under control, the closure of all nonessential businesses, and the provision of full wages to all workers and parents so they can shelter at home. The resources for such a program exist in abundance, but they must be expropriated from the super-rich through a political struggle waged by the working class. We encourage all educators and their supporters who agree with these demands to contact us today to participate in this struggle.



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