

Canada's schools remain high risk for COVID-19 as governments scrap public health measures

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Provincial governments across Canada are accelerating their drive to declare the COVID-19 pandemic over and dismantle all remaining public health measures. Governments of all political stripes, from John Horgan's New Democrats in British Columbia to Jason Kenney's United Conservatives in Alberta and Doug Ford's Tories in Ontario, are enforcing the homicidal policy of letting the virus run rampant that was demanded by the far-right "Freedom Convoy" occupiers in Ottawa.

A particular focus for all provincial governments is the elimination of measures to prevent the spread of the virus in schools. Throughout most of the pandemic, Canada's ruling elite has insisted on keeping schools open, confining students and teachers to cramped and poorly ventilated classrooms so that parents were freed from child care responsibilities and could go to work producing profits for big business. Now, with governments at all levels having embraced the homicidal "live with the virus" mantra, even the most limited protections, such as mask mandates, are being scrapped.

When Quebec schools return from March break next week, students and staff will no longer be required to wear masks in class. Teachers have pointed out to the media that the decision was taken unilaterally by the government without any consultation, and in spite of the fact that children will have had more contacts than usual after a holiday week.

During Quebec's devastating fifth Omicron-driven wave, close to 3 million people were infected by the virus. At its peak in late January, around 50,000 students were absent from school due to COVID-19, together with over 2,000 teachers. Studies suggest that 10 to 30 percent of COVID-19 infections result in Long COVID, which means hundreds of thousands of Quebecers, including thousands of school children, are likely to suffer

debilitating symptoms for months and years to come.

In British Columbia, health authorities have severely curtailed testing, making it virtually impossible for all but the most vulnerable, elderly and unvaccinated to access a reliable PCR test. Despite this blatant attempt to suppress case counts, daily cases and positivity rates remain close to the peak of last summer and fall's Delta wave.

With the province's decision to limit testing, combined with its "exposure" policy, which only notifies immediate contacts of an infected person, it has become increasingly difficult to ascertain the true extent of infections among students and educational workers. School-wide notifications when multiple infections occur have also been scrapped.

Nonetheless, the limited information that remains publicly available, as well as the data collected by various citizen initiatives, reveals that the Omicron variant is still circulating at high levels in educational institutions.

BC Covid Tracker, a private initiative run by two parents, reports 20-50 daily exposures throughout the province. While cases reported to them in schools are now largely unconfirmed, they certainly still represent an undercount, as the group does not have contacts in every school throughout the province. Their findings closely mirror those of Exposure Watch, a site maintained by parent Gabriel Bauman, which reported 94 separate cases in BC schools in the seven days up to February 25.

Despite their best efforts to downplay and hide the impact on children and workers, the province's own data continues to paint a bleak picture. In the first five weeks of this year, 98 children aged 0-10 were hospitalized, with 10 ending up in the ICU. Another 74 children aged 10-19 were hospitalized, with three needing ICU care. WorksafeBC reports accepting almost 500 educational workplace COVID-19 claims, the second most of any

workplace sector.

BC continues to provide only the bare minimum of mitigation protections in schools, offering two rapid tests for every staff member. Many teachers have complained on Twitter that despite this pledge, they have yet to see any tests in their schools.

Meanwhile, BC's public health officer Bonnie Henry continues to refuse to issue standard N95 masks to education workers. Her stance is no doubt motivated by her staunch refusal to recognize the airborne nature of the virus, which has provoked international criticism. A private manufacturer, Burnaby-based Vitacore, responded to Henry's refusal by donating 100,000 N95s to be distributed to all schools throughout the province.

The BA.2 subvariant, which has been steadily increasing in terms of percentage of genomic sequences, currently accounts for around 10 percent of cases province-wide. However, this official figure is likely an undercount, as the Vancouver Coastal Health region, led by the notorious Great Barrington Declaration advocate Patricia Daly, has not reported any positive BA.2 samples. BA.2 may be up to 1.5 times more infectious than the original Omicron variant.

The situation is similar in most jurisdictions across the country, with varying degrees of data blackouts in effect, making it difficult for the public to see and comprehend the true toll the pandemic continues to take.

A campaign by right-wing politicians is under way in Ontario to do away with the mask mandate in schools, which is virtually the only mitigation measure still in place. Brampton Mayor and former Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown has demanded the scrapping of the mask mandate so children can get back to "normal."

Ontario's chief medical officer of health Dr. Kieran Moore told reporters on Thursday that the province's mask mandate could end in just over three weeks, even though the real number of daily infections is currently 10 times higher than the official figures. This means that there were 20,000 new infections on the day that he spoke, rather than the 2,200 reported due to restrictions on PCR testing. Abolition of masking requirements is likely to be announced in all indoor settings at the same time.

The mask mandate in Alberta's schools was scrapped by Kenney's hard-right government as of February 14. The move was part of a comprehensive plan to end all public health measures that coincided with Kenney's vocal support for the far-right Freedom Convoy. Asked what scientific data supported removing the mask

mandate, Health Minister Jason Copping trotted out a lie used by proponents of mass infection throughout the pandemic, commenting, "We need to let kids be kids. We know that COVID impacts kids, that it tends to be less severe, they are less likely to get and transmit it, although with Omicron, it is a higher transmission rate."

The government's decision triggered widespread anger, especially after it emerged that Education Minister Adrienne LaGrange sent a letter to school boards to inform them that they have no legal power to impose mask mandates at the local level in class or on school buses. Student walkouts were held in Calgary and Edmonton February 14 in protest.

In New Brunswick, daily cases appeared to have plateaued, but school cases are rising significantly according to the independent citizen's initiative, Protect Our Province (New Brunswick). The province will end its mask mandate in all indoor settings on March 14.

In Saskatchewan, as of February 1, all reporting of school COVID-19 exposures was halted. In addition, the province has ceased reporting daily case counts, while limiting testing to only the immune-compromised and health care workers. It lifted all COVID restrictions, including mask mandates and mandatory isolation requirements on February 28.

These homicidal policies, which are being pursued from coast to coast, are creating the conditions for yet another surge of infections and death. They must be opposed by educators, students, and all working people.

The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) is an organization of teachers, education staff, students, and supporters fighting for a global strategy to eliminate COVID-19. We encourage everyone to contribute to our regular reports on the impact of COVID-19 in schools and other education institutions. You can follow the CERSC on Twitter or send an email to cersc.csppb@gmail.com.



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