

# Education workers outraged by hard-right Ford government's removal of mask mandate in Ontario's schools

**Ken Lagerfeld**  
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*The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will meet at 1:30 p.m. Sunday, March 27, to discuss how to take forward the struggle for Zero-COVID. Contact cersc.csppb@gmail.com to attend.*

Ontario's mask mandate in schools ended this week following a decision earlier this month by the hard-right Progressive Conservative government led by Premier Doug Ford. The move could hardly come at a worse time, with the more infectious Omicron BA.2 sub-variant of COVID-19 starting to produce yet another surge of infections and deaths around the world.

Incessant claims by Ford and his top medical official, chief medical officer of health Dr. Kieran Moore, that the pandemic is under control and has become endemic are being shattered in Hong Kong, where the fatality rate has risen to the highest in the world due to a BA.2 surge. South Korea and parts of Europe are also experiencing dramatic upticks in infections. In stark contrast to the "let it rip" policy pursued by all governments in North America and Europe, China placed over 30 million people in lockdown last week in its effort to contain the virus.

The lifting of the mask mandate immediately after March break, when many families visit relatives or go on vacation, appears to have been timed to encourage the widest possible spread of the virus. The decision coincides with waning vaccine immunity in the population and the abandonment of virtually all public health measures across the country, setting the stage for the next wave.

Medical experts, including one who has been closely aligned with the government during much of the pandemic, sharply criticized the government's axing of the mask mandate. Dr. Peter Juni, director of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Table, which advises the Ford government and provides it with statistics, told CTV

News Channel prior to March break, "It seems too early to be sure we can safely lift mask mandates. I would like to follow the data."

Dr. Małgorzata Gasperowicz, a developmental biologist and researcher at the University of Calgary, posted on social media, "The next wave has started in Europe. BA2 is worse than BA1. Since two years Europe is a crystal ball. Removing protections now will cause deaths, sickness, and disabilities of many more Canadians. And no, not only 'vulnerable' are at risk. Mask mandates and clean air save lives."

Dr. Andrea Chittle, a family physician based in Guelph, Ontario, launched a petition asking the province to extend mask mandates in schools. It quickly racked up more than 10,000 signatures, speaking to the widespread support for continued public health measures as the pandemic rages. Dr. Chittle expressed concern that "The vaccination rate among children between five and 11 is still relatively low, with just over 55 per cent of kids in that age group having had at least one dose. Meanwhile, children under five aren't yet eligible for vaccination, and COVID-19 is still circulating in the community. To remove those protections when we still have a lot of COVID circulating seems like it's leaving those families and individuals in the lurch."

Despite all the attempts of governments and media around the world to downplay the risks of the BA.2 sub-variant, the normalization of mass death, and the absurd assertion that COVID is now endemic, there is significant skepticism and a growing hostility among education workers and students.

Opposing the politically motivated decision to end mask mandates, Ontario Schools for Covid Safety, a grassroots Ontario student group with over 2,000 followers on Twitter, called for an Ontario-wide walkout of students on

Monday, March 21, to protest the government ending mask mandates. The message posted on the group's Twitter home page read, "Removing mask mandates after March Break made it clear student needs are not being prioritized—let's show them that safety still matters!"

Education workers are also concerned about the return from March break. Michael, a Toronto District School Board caretaker, told the WSWS, "This is the worst time to make such a move as the omicron BA.2 variant tsunami is fast approaching. This is a catastrophic recipe. Caretakers are anxious at the prospect of working next week in schools where some staff and students will show up maskless, allowing Omicron BA.2 to spread faster and infect more people. Caretakers who work at night are worried because COVID is airborne and the aerosol particles hang in the air for several hours. School buildings, especially the older buildings, are poorly ventilated. Many classrooms have at least one HEPA filter, often two, but this is by no means sufficient to clean the air."

The lifting of mask mandates and other COVID protections is a direct capitulation to the demands of the far-right "Freedom Convoy," which was systematically built up and incited by a section of the ruling elite and media to batter down public support for COVID-19 public health measures. Their demands included the repealing of all COVID protections under the cynical slogan of "learning to live with COVID." The far-right convoy, which explicitly advocated political violence to achieve its aims, was given wall-to-wall coverage in the corporate media to create the impression that the handful of participants represented a mass movement calling for the elimination of all public health measures.

For Michael, "It's clear that the school board and even unions in Toronto do not care about the lives of its students and staff. CUPE, who represent support staff like caretakers and secretaries have shown zero interest in protecting the health of their membership. They have made no attempt to mobilize the rank and file in opposition to government policies such as the criminal back to school/back to work policies. In fact, the school boards & the unions are complicit because they have enforced this horrendous back-to-school, no-more-protections policy!"

Educators have also voiced their dissatisfaction on social media. Ashley wrote on Twitter, "Thinking of leaving #onted [Ontario education]. Feel pretty powerless, burnt out, unmotivated to put energy in when I feel completely unsupported in my profession and from my

board wanting to maintain good health. So done with Dr. Moore and @fordnation."

Shannon wrote, "This is the first March Break (in 24 years) that I really haven't been able to let go of school. Things are so abysmal right now where I'm working—I feel almost as though I'm grieving. I do consider teaching my vocation; this is part of the struggle for sure." Another added, "Same. I've nearly had a breakdown this week and am at the lowest I've ever felt. I can't afford to keep emotionally investing myself each day and will be focusing on showing up and doing what I can vs getting caught up in how much of the curriculum is left to teach."

The past two years have taught education workers many lessons that now must be assimilated. The political establishment, beholden to the interests of big business, will never take the necessary steps to end the pandemic. Half-hearted attempts to mitigate COVID have collapsed. Workers are being conditioned to accept a permanent pandemic where all students, teachers and their loved ones will eventually be infected and reinfected in perpetuity. Under the current policy, millions face a bleak future of ill health and reduced life expectancy under the current regime where public health has been turned into personal choice and everyone is on their own.

All of the teacher and education trade unions enforce this policy. No union in any industry or profession in the last two years has mobilized workers in mass opposition to dangerous workplaces. Governments around the world can conjure up billions of dollars for weapons and war, but they refuse to fight the war that must be fought—the war against COVID-19.

Education workers and their supporters should draw the political lessons from these experiences and form rank-and-file safety committees in every school, educational institution, and workplace to fight for a Zero-COVID policy. This requires the shutdown of in-person learning and nonessential production with full pay for all workers impacted as part of a strategy for the global elimination of COVID-19. To join this fight, become a member of the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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