



January 7, 2022

Dear Premier Ford and Minister Lecce,

As representatives of the Canadian Paediatric Society, the Pediatrics Section of the Ontario Medical Association and the Pediatricians Alliance of Ontario, we are writing to express our concern about the Government of Ontario's decision to shut down in-person learning for almost all K-12 students until January 17<sup>th</sup>.

We have witnessed first-hand the effect of the Omicron variant on our health care system in recent weeks, and we understand that governments need to take measures to protect the integrity and viability of our hospitals.

As paediatricians, our life's work is protecting the health and well-being of children and youth. We promote proven interventions—especially widespread vaccination—to keep children and youth safe from COVID-19. Yet over the course of the pandemic, we have learned that certain decisions and measures pose a far greater risk to children and youth than the virus itself.

Adults are suffering from pandemic fatigue, which will eventually pass. Yet for too many children and youth, the effects of the past 22 months will not be transient. Many will be dealing with the fallout from public health measures for years.

Online learning is harmful. Social isolation and prolonged in-person school closures have precipitated increases in unhealthy behaviours—such as excessive screen time, reduced physical activity, and substance use—and prevented children and youth from engaging in protective behaviours, such as connecting with their peers, participating in sports and recreation, and celebrating milestones.

In our hospitals and clinics, we see the results: increased depression and anxiety, suicidality, eating disorders, learning losses, and delayed development. These clinical observations are reflected at the population level and have been documented by researchers across the country. (1,2,3) The deteriorating health and well-being of our children and youth is also a public health emergency.

Just as the devastation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has not been equally distributed, neither have the effects of school closures and remote learning. These measures have disproportionately affected children and youth from racialized communities, those living in single-parent households or in perilous economic circumstances, as well as those with pre-COVID mental health conditions or with disabilities. School is a source of essential programs, services, and therapies. Over the past two years, those supports have been either absent or radically disrupted.

In-person learning is one of the only near-universal measures available to help children and youth. Twenty-two months into the pandemic, given the data we now have on the harms of school closures (4) and the abundance of virus-mitigation resources at our disposal—including full vaccination of all who we are eligible and prioritization of booster doses for education workers, testing, masks and PPE, ventilation and HEPA filters—it is imperative for governments to avoid school closures.

Data suggest closing schools during other waves of the pandemic has been an ineffective strategy. (5) Studies from British Columbia—where schools have been open since May 2020—show that while cases of COVID-19 in schools do indeed reflect the level of virus in the community, there are *few transmissions in school*. (6,7) In addition, teachers were no more likely than others in the community to have COVID-19. (8)

Your government has cited strain on the health care system as the central reason for closing schools and indeed, Omicron has created significant demand and uncertainty. However, relatively high vaccination rates together with manageable hospital admission rates should allow schools to remain open.

Fortunately, COVID-19 does not cause serious illness in most children and youth, nor has there been an unmanageable increase in paediatric hospitalizations due to the virus. But there has been increased strain on paediatric and community hospitals due to mental health admissions. The demands on child and youth health care providers since the start of the pandemic have been relentless.

We urge you to return children and youth to in-person learning no later than January 17<sup>th</sup> and to commit to no further disruptions to the 2021-22 school year.

Sincerely,

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## References

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