

Canadian doctors call for schools to return to in-classroom learning

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A group of more than 100 doctors across Canada are advocating for in-classroom learning through the second wave of the pandemic, just as the Ontario government prepares to release its reopening plans for students in the hardest-hit regions.

In a letter to federal and provincial governments on Tuesday, the physicians wrote that while protecting the public should be a priority, so should recognizing the “unique needs and rights” of children, who are generally not at risk for serious outcomes if they contract COVID-19.

“Current responses to the pandemic continue to include measures that infringe on these rights. More concerning, these interventions, chief among them school closures, stop our children from reaching their full potential and harm their health (physical and mental) and general wellbeing,” wrote the doctors from various hospitals and universities, including Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children, McMaster University in Hamilton and Montreal Children’s Hospital.

Ontario is the only province that has kept many of its schools closed to in-person learning. Its Education Minister, Stephen Lecce, is expected to announce on Wednesday reopening dates for schools in the hardest-hit areas, including Toronto, Peel and Windsor. Students in 18 out of 35 public-health units in the province have returned to classrooms since the December holiday break, including those in Ottawa and London, who were back on Monday.

There are few more divisive issues in this pandemic than keeping classrooms open. Almost a year in, there is still no conclusive evidence regarding transmission in schools and to what extent children drive the spread of the virus.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggested in a recent paper that outbreaks in schools have been “limited,” but highlighted that in order to keep them open, community transmission must be under control and mitigation strategies, including masks, must be implemented.

Martha Fulford, an associate professor in the division of infectious diseases at McMaster University and one of the signatories on the letter, said that although almost every province has reopened its schools, the letter was a plea from doctors not to shut them. The letter said that classrooms should remain open to in-person learning “unless there is high quality evidence to show that doing otherwise is more dangerous for the overall physical and mental health of children.” It also called for improvements to services that support children who suffer from mental health and academic difficulties.

Data has shown that schools do not amplify transmission of the virus, but rather

reflect what's going on in the community, she said. "When we are planning these measures, children deserve to be considered as a unique population with their unique rights."

Dr. Fulford added: "As we move forward, a fundamental right of children is the right to an education, and an in-person education. This shouldn't be compromised."

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