

September 3, 2021

Dear Ontario Parents,

We hope your summer is going very well. With the return to in-person learning this September, we are excited to see students heading back to class for a more normal learning experience – alongside their friends and teachers. We know that in-person learning is essential for the mental and physical health, academic achievement, and overall well-being of our young people.

Developed in consultation with medical experts, including the province's Chief Medical Officer of Health and in review of the Provincial Science Table report, the measures we are taking are designed to keep students as safe as possible when at school.

In the 2021-22 school year, students across the province will:

Return to in-person learning for the full school day, though synchronous remote learning will remain an option;

Learn in classrooms supported by physical distancing, and enhanced cleaning;

Be able to participate in extracurricular activities, clubs, music, and the arts, as well as a full range of sports within the school and through inter-school sport activities with some modifications; and

Benefit from improved ventilation and other air quality infrastructure upgrades, including HEPA units in all kindergarten classrooms and in all learning spaces that are not connected to mechanical ventilation systems.

More details of the plan are available on the Ministry of Education's website.

In addition, our government is working with public health units and publicly funded school boards to plan and host voluntary vaccination clinics in or nearby schools to continue to fight COVID-19. Clinics are expected to run before school starts and during the first few weeks of school. The program is part of the province's last mile strategy to target those who have yet to receive a first or second dose and will provide accessible and convenient access to voluntary vaccines for eligible students and their families, as well as educators and school staff who are returning to school this fall.

We are dedicating more than \$80 million in funding for student mental health supports. That's more than four times the investments made in 2017-18 under the previous government.

Making Ontario's return to school as safe as possible is supported by significant investments, including more than \$1.6 billion in targeted COVID-19 supports, and \$85.5 million in learning recovery and renewal to help students overcome any learning gaps the pandemic has created.

Improving air quality in schools is critically important for keeping school communities safe from COVID-19. That's why I'm proud to add that our government has invested more than \$600 million to improve school ventilation systems, following emerging scientific advice throughout the pandemic. That's on top of the \$1.4 billion in annual funding we provide to school boards to renew school facilities, including HVAC and windows.

Improvements to ventilation have been made across all schools and all boards in Ontario. In total, we will have provided over 70,000 standalone HEPA filtration units and other ventilation devices to keep classrooms safe.

To improve air quality at schools with mechanical ventilation, we are instructing boards to use the highest-grade filters – MERV-13 where possible – perform more frequent filter changes, operate air systems longer, and calibrate HVAC systems for maximum air flow and fresh air intake. For our youngest learners in junior and senior kindergarten, we are placing a standalone HEPA filter in their classrooms – regardless of whether or not the school has mechanical ventilation – as an added layer of protection. In the interest of transparency, we will provide school boards with a standardized public reporting tool on ventilation improvements.

Our government will continue to work closely with the education sector and medical experts to help ensure that the safety, well-being, and academic success of students remains front and centre. As part of that commitment, the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health has released updated guidance to local public health units on the management of COVID-19 cases, contacts, and outbreaks. The guidance covers key topics associated with the management of COVID-19 in school settings, including guidance for managing symptomatic individuals, probable and confirmed cases, and suspected and confirmed outbreaks.

Our vaccine rollout continues. Vaccines are our best defence against COVID-19 and variants, and will help protect our students, our loved ones, and our communities from illness. And as Ontario's Minister of Education, my top priority will always be the health and safety of the province's students, educators, and parents. I thank all of you for the patience and resilience you have demonstrated through some very challenging times. Let's continue our positive momentum and keep working together to ensure our kids are safe, as they enjoy a well-deserved, more normal school year.

I wish everyone a safe and happy return to school.

Sincerely,

The Honourable Stephen Lecce

Minister of Education