

Directors of Education and Medical Officers of Health from across Northern Ontario stand united to deliver on COVID-safe schools

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Timmins, Ontario — On March 13, 2020, schools across Ontario closed their doors without us knowing when they would reopen. Almost six months later, school doors are beginning to reopen to welcome students back for the 2020-2021 school year. These last 25 weeks have been marked with uncertainty, personal and economic sacrifice... and ultimately, with success in flattening the curve of the first wave of COVID-19 in our area.

With schools reopening, many are experiencing mixed emotions. Families, educators and support staff, and students young and old, may all feel a combination of relief, fear, pride, worry, and excitement. We all share in this experience, and all our varied emotions are valid. We also all share a common aim—our unwavering commitment to protect our students and our entire school community from COVID-19.

As Directors of Education and Medical Officers of Health from across Northern Ontario, we want to share our united commitment and determination to create COVID-safe schools for all. Our respective teams are working tirelessly—public health and education together—to put into action the provincial direction on COVID-19 prevention and management in schools. Although the basic rules are the same for all, parents, guardians, and students will hear tailored messaging from their own schools and school boards and their own local public health units. Everyone will be able to ask questions specific to their own situations.

We are in this together, and we all need to know and follow the basic rules for safe schools. We are learning and adapting together as our journey now takes us to the first ever modern-day school reopening in the midst of a global pandemic.

Top 10 COVID-19 Basic Rules for Safe Schools

1. **The best way to protect schools and support a successful school reopening is to keep COVID-19 out of our communities.** Now, more than ever, we need to recommit to COVID-19 prevention. Follow the guidance set out by your local health unit.
2. **Make COVID-19 symptom screening part of your daily routine.** Just like brushing your teeth every morning, checking for COVID-19 symptoms and using a COVID-19 self-assessment tool (e.g. <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/self-assessment/>), are essential parts of your daily habits.
3. **Have symptoms? Stay home!** Now is not the time to “tough it out” when you are under the weather. No one will thank you for showing up to school sick. When in doubt, wait it out—and let your school know!
4. **Have a “plan B”.** Things can change quickly with COVID-19. You know your “plan A”. Have a back-up plan so you can deal with unexpected changes caused by COVID-19 in your school, like needing to stay home and being prepared to shift from in school learning to distance learning, or a combination of both.
5. **Talk to each other.** Discuss different age-appropriate scenarios and role play them to support kids in how to handle them safely. Examples include situations in the school or classroom related to masks, distancing, touchless greetings, or handwashing, and getting to and from school.

6. **Stay informed.** School boards and public health units post valuable information on their websites and on social media. It's also available by phone. School boards are required to post COVID-19 case information and share any real-time impacts on their schools, such as class dismissals or school closures.
7. **Be prepared.** This year back-to-school supplies include non-medical masks. Follow your school's policies on what to bring and what they will supply.
8. **Get involved.** As we work through this together, we will face unknowns and unexpected situations. Be solution oriented and know that we all have the same aim. Share your observations and your suggestions with your school.
9. **Take care of yourself.** You may feel alone as a student or someone who cares for a student. Unsettling feelings at school re-entry are very normal—and even more so right now with a global pandemic in our midst. You are never as alone as you feel. Whether you need clinical information or mental health supports—reach out for help when you need it.
10. **Be COVID kind. Practise kindness, patience, and gratitude—we are all in this together.**

Back-to-school planning usually involves families getting the needed supplies and readjusting to school routines. This year, it also involves doing things in new ways and preparing students for what to expect at school. Following the simple yet powerful **Top 10 COVID-19 Basic Rules for Safe Schools** will go a long way to getting us through the school year safely together.

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