

## Premature removal of mask mandate in Ontario schools risks further disruption, jeopardizes safety

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TORONTO, ON – Over the past two years, the Ford government repeatedly made ineffective decisions that unnecessarily prolonged the pandemic, and jeopardized the health and safety of students and education workers. Students in Ontario experienced longer disruptions to in-person learning than anywhere else in Canada, and are once again at risk of further disruptions due to the government's decision to prematurely lift the mask mandate in schools on March 21.

"Throughout the pandemic, Ontarians have relied on public health officials to lead with a science- and evidence-based approach. Unfortunately, it appears that a fast-approaching June election is influencing politicians' decisions to lift COVID-19 safety measures," says Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) President Karen Brown. "Lifting the mask mandate too soon may result in further disruption to in-person learning and negative impacts on the health and safety of ETFO members, students, and their families. Ontarians deserve stability and safety, not more chaos."

For two years, ETFO members have been contending with different rules inside classrooms than those that exist in similar high-risk settings outside schools. We have crowded classrooms, air quality concerns, unknown COVID-19 case counts in schools, and only a 55 per cent first-dose vaccination rate among elementary students five to 11. "These children are in Ontario schools right now and they deserve to be protected, as do their families and the school staff who support them," notes Brown.

Based on the advice of paediatric medical professionals, we must move with caution. Recently, Ontario's Children's Health Coalition issued a [statement](#) calling for masking to be maintained in indoor school settings to protect children and their families:

*As leaders in children's health, we know that masking is an important layer of protection to prevent COVID-19 and has prevented widespread transmission in school settings. While there have been recent calls to remove this public health measure, **now is not the time.***

President and Chief Executive Officer of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children Ronald Cohn has said the province should revisit the use of masks in schools about two weeks after students return from March Break. Adds Brown, "Premier Ford and Minister Lecce have consistently said they will follow the advice of the medical community. It's clear they only mean they follow those who are aligned with their political agenda and who will help them get re-elected."

Throughout the pandemic, the provincial government repeatedly failed to make necessary investments to keep schools open to in-person learning, and to ensure the health and safety of students and ETFO members. They simply cannot be trusted to do the right thing.

[ETFO](#) represents approximately 83,000 members, including public elementary teachers, occasional teachers, designated early childhood educators, education support personnel, and professional support personnel. Visit [BuildingBetterSchools.ca](https://www.buildingbetterschools.ca).

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