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First to open, last to close: An empty promise to Ontario students

It's more important for adults to eat on a patio than for you to go to school: That is the message that Premier Doug Ford has sent to Ontario's children and youth.

Despite assuring students and families for months that school doors would be "the first to open and the last to close", the Ontario government has decided to re-open non-essential business while keeping schools shuttered to in-person learning.

The last-minute decision denies yet another cohort of children and youth the chance for meaningful closure to their year, desperately needed connections with their peers and teachers, and an opportunity to start healing from a life-changing experience. Schools are the only universal, barrier-free intervention available to all children and youth.

Last week, Premier Doug Ford asked for [expert opinion into the decision](#), and the [response was unanimous](#)—children and youth are suffering, and even a few weeks back in school could make a significant difference to their mental health. The [Chief Medical Officer of Health](#), the [Science Table](#), [local Medical Officers of Health](#), [paediatric and mental health experts](#) including the [Canadian Paediatric Society](#) and [school boards](#) and [teacher unions](#) all urged Premier Ford to open schools on a regional basis according to the advice of public health experts.

As paediatricians, we have been on the front lines of this wave of suffering for over a year. The pandemic has radically disrupted the environment in which children and youth grow and develop. They have had to sacrifice the things that provide meaning and identity: connections with friends, sports and extra-curricular activities, and relationships with trusted adults like teachers.

We had an opportunity to help prevent further damage to Ontario's children and youth, and we have failed. Other provinces and territories made children and youth a priority, and were able to keep schools open with minimal disruption. How long will Ontario continue to sideline children and youth?

Keeping Ontarians safe—both now and in the long-term—also means protecting the well-being of children and youth.

To that end, we are calling on the government to immediately answer these questions:

- What steps are you taking to ensure that all schools can safely open for the 2021-22 school year **on time, uninterrupted, and completely**—full-day in-person learning for all students kindergarten to Grade 12, with all extra curricular activities and support services restored?
- When will you restore essential community services for children and youth?
- What steps are you taking to ensure that every child and youth who needs it can access appropriate and quality mental support without delay?

Paediatricians remain committed to working collaboratively to ensure that children and youth across Canada have what they need to thrive.

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