

Internal government documents show how Ontario ‘watered down’ its strategies to keep COVID-19 out of classrooms

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Last summer, as Ontario’s schools were preparing to reopen, the Ministry of Education drafted a memo to school officials, highlighting COVID testing as critical to keeping classrooms safe.

Ontario will expand public health capacity to “test, track and support” anyone in the school community who might be COVID positive, and allow for “substantial surveillance testing,” said a draft of the memo, never before seen by the public and obtained by the Star through freedom of information legislation.

“There will be a proportional investment in lab capacity to ensure timely processing of tests,” the memo states.

This is not what happened.

The memo is one of several internal ministry documents related to Ontario’s back-to-school plan that show safety proposals that were either abandoned or dialed back. Taken together with other changes to the ministry’s guidance over the summer months, particularly around class sizes, critics say the province repeatedly moved the goal posts in its schools plan, loosening safety measures at a time when COVID rates in the community were low.

“It looks like, originally, they had a lot of things covered, but what they ended up implementing ... was ‘plan lite.’ You know, let’s take it, but massage it so it’s not as stringent, not as costly,” said Halton District School Board chair Andrea Grebenc. “It’s frustrating to see things watered down.”

The predicted spike in demand for COVID testing — especially from students and teachers — swamped Ontario’s testing system when schools reopened last fall. In September, before the province revised its testing criteria, many families were waiting hours for testing and multiple days for results.

It was not until late November that the province started surveillance testing of asymptomatic individuals in schools — a pilot program that launched in four hard-hit regions. By then, community spread in many parts of southern Ontario was spiraling out of control.

Speaking to reporters at Queen’s Park on Jan. 8, after the province extended the shutdown of elementary schools in southern Ontario, Education Minister Stephen Lecce promised to increase safety measures in classrooms in the face of the “rising level of transmission in the community.”

“We’ve got to continue to scale up our plan as we have since March to the present,” Lecce said.

A spokesperson for Minister Lecce did not directly answer questions about the documents. In a statement, Caitlin Clark said Ontario “(leads) the nation in COVID-19 school reopening funding.”

“By following the Chief Medical Officer of Health’s advice, schools in this province have the strongest and most comprehensive safety protocols that have protected our students and education staff,” she said.

The Star obtained more than 450 pages of briefing notes, memos and reports related to the reopening of schools, that were sent from the deputy minister to Minister Lecce’s office from June to September. The FOI release included early drafts of the ministry’s reopening plans, drafts of a memo that appears to have never been sent and a guidance document marked “confidential.”

Ashleigh Tuite, an epidemiologist from the University of Toronto, reviewed the documents that include proposals for safety measures that did not come to fruition related to testing, symptom screening and class sizes.

“Given where we are right now, it’s hard to look back at that, and think about potential alternate universes where we might have done all of these things that were recommended,” Tuite said. “It’s like we had these branch points and we picked the wrong path to take.”

Ten months into the pandemic, there is still considerable debate about the role schools play in driving community spread, in part because children with COVID often display mild symptoms or show no signs of infection. This debate has intensified amid rising rates of COVID in the community,

and concern about a contagious new variant of the virus, first detected in the U.K.

Dr. Janine McCready, an infectious diseases physician at Michael Garron Hospital, urged the province to implement the more stringent safety measures that were discussed in its plan months ago.

“The encouraging thing is that they’ve already thought about ... the important issues,” she said. “Now, it’s time to dust off the ideas.”

Surveillance testing

The ministry would not confirm whether the memo that discusses surveillance testing in schools was ever sent. Drafted sometime in July, it is addressed to directors of education, board chairs and school authorities, from Lecce and Deputy Minister Nancy Naylor.

Grebenc, the Halton chair, said she did not receive it. She wants to know why the province did not follow through on the proposal envisioned in the memo for “substantial surveillance testing wherever community transmission may pose a risk to school communities.”

“It looks like somebody was thinking back then, and then they were dismissed. For what reason? Was it financial?” she said. “We should have been using the tools that were available to us.”

The experts interviewed for this story said the ministry should have launched a targeted surveillance testing program as soon as schools reopened. The program should have, among other things, focused on classrooms and schools with COVID cases to gauge the extent to which in-school transmission was occurring and determine whether safety measures needed to be ramped up.

The ministry responded that there were testing backlogs in many regions from mid-September until mid-November. Nearly 9,500 tests were administered through the voluntary asymptomatic testing program the province launched in schools in Toronto, York, Peel and Ottawa in late November, the ministry said.

The ministry did not provide a detailed breakdown of the results. Lecce told reporters in early January that there was a positivity rate of roughly two per cent, which, he noted, “is below the provincial average.”

The pilot did not include schools in Windsor-Essex, where the rapid rise in COVID cases prompted the local health unit to shutter schools a week before Christmas break. A mobile testing site at one elementary school, where at least 49 cases were detected in November, was an initiative led not by the province but by the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit.

According to the ministry, Windsor-Essex was excluded from the pilot because when the program was developed, the region, which now has one of the highest COVID rates in Ontario, was not a designated red zone.

Throughout the fall, it appears the vast majority of Ontario schools with COVID cases avoided the nightmare scenario of large outbreaks. However, Amy Greer, Canada Research Chair in population disease modelling and a specialist in infectious disease epidemiology at the University of Guelph, said the lack of surveillance testing has left us flying blind.

“We continue to have a narrative that says transmission in schools doesn’t happen... and that may be true. But it also might not be true,” Greer said. “Had we implemented a very targeted, systematic approach to truly be able to answer that question, we would have a better understanding of how we need to think about escalating in-school (safety) measures...to be able to withstand significantly higher rates of community transmission.”

Symptom screening

In early October, as the province’s testing backlog surpassed 80,000, the province loosened symptom screening guidelines for schools and daycares, allowing kids with runny noses and other short-lived symptoms to return to class without a test.

The move was not in line with the advice in a guidance document labelled “confidential draft” that circulated within the education ministry in June.

“Due to the wide range of symptoms for COVID-19 and evolving understanding of the disease, a low threshold for symptoms is advised,” it states.

Dr. Mustafa Hirji, acting medical officer of health for Niagara Region, said this advice about screening shows the ministry “had the right thinking, internally, that this was really important. Unfortunately, (they) didn’t follow through.”

The ministry did not comment on the June document, which was published that month as an appendix to its “Approach to reopening schools.” The province has previously defended the decision to loosen symptom screening, saying it was based on medical advice.

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The province reversed course on school screening earlier this month, tightening guidelines across Ontario in response to rising COVID rates.

Hirji said he is concerned that cases went undetected in the intervening weeks, adding that screening for symptoms “is one of the simplest, and probably the most effective way” of keeping COVID out of schools.

Testing teachers

Speaking to reporters in May, Premier Doug Ford said he wanted all teachers to be tested for COVID before schools reopened in the fall.

This proposal was discussed internally the next month. A draft of the ministry’s “Approach to reopening schools,” which was released in June, contains the line: “TBD: Premier’s commitment that all teachers get tested before the school year starts-still a requirement?”

There is a red line through this sentence in the subsequent draft. This commitment does not appear in the published version of the guidance document and did not come to fruition.

The ministry told the Star the proposal was abandoned based on advice from public health experts, because of the increased pressure on the testing system at the time, and the fact that results of a COVID test only reflect the moment an individual is swabbed.

Experts like Greer and McCready agree that one-time testing wouldn’t have eliminated the risk; a teacher who tests negative one day could catch COVID the next and go undetected. But Tuite notes there would have been value in establishing “a baseline level at entry,” and that some introductions

of COVID into schools might have been prevented, particularly if testing were repeated throughout the fall.

According to the ministry, Ontario's school boards reported 82 COVID cases among staff in the month of September. Another 133 reported cases were connected to schools, but school boards did not specify whether these were among students or staff. It's impossible to know how many of these infections started before school and would have been detected through such testing.

Alexander Brown, chair of the Toronto District School Board, said not following through on the idea to test all teachers was a mistake.

"That may have been a really good thing to do to make sure our teachers were in good condition," Brown said. "We would have all really glommed onto that one."

Class sizes

Brown also criticized the ministry for backing off its initial recommendation to cap all classes at 15 students.

In the "Approach to reopening schools" document released last June, the ministry said school boards should "maintain a limit of 15 students in a typical classroom at one time." This recommendation was drawn from a key aspect of public health advice to "maintain 2 meters of separation," the ministry said.

While Ontario's back-to-school plan largely adhered to this recommendation in high schools, the ministry did not impose a 15-person cap in elementary schools. The province faced intense criticism from parents, school boards and teachers.

Due to funding constraints, the TDSB was only able to cap classes at 15 in kindergarten and 20 in older grades in designated hotspot neighbourhoods.

Brown said this had an impact. In the northwest corner of the city, which has had some of the highest COVID rates, the virus led to the closure of only one high-risk TDSB elementary school, where class sizes were significantly reduced.

“For me, that’s a clear indication that if you put the resources in there, you’re actually not closing your schools down,” he said.

The ministry did not comment on school closures at the TDSB. Speaking generally, the ministry said high school students in Ontario have experienced higher positivity rates compared to elementary students and reiterated that transmission remains low in Ontario classrooms.

The ministry also said it provided school boards with funding to support smaller class sizes and hire more teachers and noted that there is a shortage of teachers in the province.

The province has extended the school shutdown in Toronto, Peel, York, Hamilton and Windsor-Essex until Feb. 10. Schools in the rest of southern Ontario were slated to reopen Jan. 25, but the province announced on Wednesday that schools in several regions, including Durham and Halton, would remain closed.

Lecce has said the province is “working on a plan” to enhance safety measures.

“Throughout this pandemic, we have followed scientific expert opinion and systematically strengthened our plan to keep schools safe,” Clark, the minister’s spokesperson, said. “That focus will continue as we deliver new province-wide expansion of targeted surveillance testing, continuous improvements to air ventilation, and the additional hiring of thousands of new teachers, custodians, (education assistants) and mental health staff supporting our students.”

Tuite called on the province to heed its own recommendations.

“The things we need to do now are the things we needed to do in June,” she said.

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