

Top doctor indicates support for return to in-person learning

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Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) students have returned to the classroom for the first time since winter break and despite high cases of the Omicron COVID-19 variant, the region's top doctor has said the benefits of reopening schools outweigh the short-term risk.

Dr. Nicola Mercer released a statement last Friday (Jan. 14) ahead of the scheduled return to in-person learning on Jan. 17, noting the importance of in-person learning on children, their families, and the community as a whole.

"When children cannot attend school, there are serious and long-lasting impacts on their mental health, wellbeing, and academic progress," wrote Mercer. "A world-class education delivered in a safe environment by caring teachers and supported by dedicated staff is an important pillar of our region's future."

Schools in the UGDSB were scheduled to reopen for in-person learning on Monday (Jan. 17), but were delayed due to extreme weather.

The return to in-person learning comes at a time when the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph region continues to see high numbers of active and new cases of COVID-19.

According to Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health the region reported over 1,000 active cases, 254 of which were in Dufferin County, the day students returned to the classroom.

Mercer said it will likely take several weeks before the situation begins to improve in the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph region.

"Schools, school boards and their parents across the region have made many changes to make schools as safe as possible, but it will take all of us working together as a community to drive down the levels of COVID-19 locally to make schools safer," said Mercer.

She also addressed how many families rely on in-person learning to support their economic and social wellbeing.

"Many children depend on in-person learning for reasons of food security, safety and many other benefits beyond what is contained in their lesson," said Mercer. "For this reason, I believe that the benefits of reopening in-person learning ultimately outweigh the short-term risks."

With the return to in-person learning the UGDSB has launched a temporary remote learning option for students in elementary schools. The temporary remote learning option is different from the remote options students chose to enroll in at the start of the school year.

The school board said the temporary remote learning option consists of asynchronous resources for students to work on independently while not attending in-person and does not include synchronous or live (online) teaching.

The new option is not intended to be long-term, with families notifying their school of the change and the length of time they expect.