

CONTRIBUTORS

OPINION

Mandatory COVID-19 vaccines a must so our kids lives can be enriched

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Tue., Oct. 26, 2021 | 3 min. read

The pandemic has been hard on Toronto's students. From periodic classroom and school closures, to social and physical isolation, to the challenges of virtual learning, they have lost out in many ways.

But thank goodness it's all getting better now, right? The majority of students are back full time. Case counts are slowly coming down, and vaccines for the 5-11 age group are on the horizon. This is all good news.

Look a little deeper, however, and you'll find that schools are not back to normal. Our students' daily experiences remain limited, constrained by efforts to keep COVID-19 out. Elementary students remain cohorted, even at recess. High-schoolers are on a modified semester, with two abnormally long periods separated by a too-short lunch break.

In addition, the government continues to require school boards offer virtual learning to anyone who wants it. These and other risk mitigation measures have been recommended by Toronto Public Health or directed by the Ministry of Education to ensure our schools stay open.

And yet, the province and the chief medical officer of health refuse to enact the one recommendation that might actually get our schools back to normal: adding COVID-19 to the list of vaccines required to attend school, as per the Immunization of School Pupils Act, 1982.

Toronto District School Board trustees, along with the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, called for this change back in mid-August, as has Toronto's chief medical officer of health.

Contradictions abound: the Ministry of Education recently recognized the added safety of mandatory vaccination by requiring those using school space after hours to be vaccinated. Why ensure safety outside of school hours but avoid the same standard to protect school kids and staff?

In a matter of weeks, the COVID-19 vaccine will likely be approved for those aged 5-11. Yet the province just released a plan to lift restrictions. These measures are hardly likely to convince parents to have their younger children vaccinated — on the contrary, it will undoubtedly make public health efforts to encourage vaccination far more challenging.

If we want to give our kids back the well-rounded experiences they deserve, requiring everyone eligible in our schools to be vaccinated is a proven, science-based strategy. Otherwise, according to Toronto Public Health, until full vaccination coverage reaches 90 per cent, restrictions in schools will remain a necessity.

Should vaccine hesitancy increase, it could take several months, even longer, until we reach 90 per cent vaccination coverage in the under-12 population. While some adults may be able to return to life as if the pandemic never happened, our children will continue to pay a steep price. Some already have: in Saskatchewan, as of last week, 17 children were hospitalized with COVID-19 and three in that province have died.

The risk of COVID-19 spread also has serious implications for learning and extracurriculars. Wouldn't it be nice to consider a time when our kids can go to school without wearing masks? When virtual learners feel safe enough to return? When teachers feel protected enough to coach a team or run an indoor club?

Surely we all want students to resume working closely in groups, to play in the playground wherever and with whomever they want, to see their peers' and their teachers' smiles; to learn and laugh and express themselves in the ways they did before the pandemic, to enjoy maskless lunches and mingle and talk without worry, to play instruments and indoor sports without restriction? Mandatory vaccinations will help us get there much, much faster.

Private schools, as private businesses, have been able to mandate vaccination as a requirement for in-person learning, giving those institutions the flexibility to mix cohorts and run more programming. This divide deepens inequality and undermines public confidence in public education.

At this point in the pandemic, adding the COVID-19 vaccine to the schedule of school-required vaccines should be a no-brainer. The legislation, the procedures and the staff already exist to make it happen. The only thing missing is the political will of our provincial leaders. Without mandatory vaccinations, our students will continue to be deprived of the quality of life and learning they so clearly deserve.

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