

Education funding

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Ontario's students face ongoing budget and service cuts to their school and public education. Despite claims of record spending and public investment, when adjusted for inflation, the truth is, under this government, per-student funding is now the lowest in recent history.

Because of Conservative ideology to defund public education, take over school boards and privatize our schools, 41 out of 72 distinct school boards in Ontario are now facing deficits and service cuts this year.

Unlike the provincial government, school boards are not permitted to carry forward deficits. They'll be forced to balance their budgets by cutting academic and other essential programs.

This is what it looks like in Toronto: The TDSB is facing a \$58-million deficit. They're forced to cut music programs, shut down continuing education and close half of their swimming pools. Over the past week, many parents in Toronto Centre have reached out in anger toward this government. They're raging mad that their children will lose the opportunity to learn to swim, a life-saving skill.

Last week, I wrote to the Minister of Education and called on him to invest in our province's future, our future workforce: our children. This all feels even more critical today as we find ourselves in the midst of Education Week.

On behalf of the students and families of Toronto, I challenge this Conservative government to finally put our kids first, fund public education, fix our schools and keep our swimming pools open.

Education funding

Mr. Billy Pang: I'm proud to rise in the House today to share some exciting news for our neighbours and friends in Markham–Unionville. Our government is investing nearly \$41 million in local education infrastructure through the 2024-25 Capital Priorities Program.

I'm exceptionally thrilled that \$12.7 million has been added to Markville Secondary School for its expansion, and \$28.1 million goes to the construction of a brand new elementary school on Village Parkway.

These investments will create 409 new spaces at Markville Secondary School and 637 new elementary student spaces at the future Village Parkway school, along with 48 licensed child care spaces to support families with young children.

This funding ensures that children from Markham–Unionville can learn in modern, high-quality classrooms close to home and that families have access to affordable child care in our community. This is a significant investment in our riding, one that will meet the needs of our growing community and help prepare students for success in the years ahead.

I want to thank the York Region District School Board for their leadership and advocacy, and I'm proud that our government and the Ministry of Education is delivering real results for families in Markham–Unionville.

Public health

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Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, Speaker, no one's buying what they're selling. I know we're not going to get any answers from the government on this, but I'm pretty sure the RCMP will.

I want to go back to the Premier on a different but very important topic, one that is really preoccupying a lot of parents and families out there right now, and that is Ontario's out-of-control measles outbreak.

Measles cases in Ontario have increased by another 140 this week—just this week alone—and more than 200 the week before for a total of 1,383 cases right now confirmed in the province. This is worse than the case count in the entire United States—just think about that. Why have we not heard anything from this Premier?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Of course, measles is a disease against which we have a vaccine, and that vaccine is very well known. It's called the MMR vaccine—measles, mumps, rubella vaccine. It's widely available in the province of Ontario, and it has been available in the province of Ontario for over 50 years. It's a tried vaccine, it is a tested vaccine, it is a true vaccine, it is an effective vaccine, and people who are vaccinated by this vaccine have a 99% protection rate against measles.

That's why we encourage everybody in the province of Ontario to avail themselves of the vaccine, which of course is perfectly free and can be administered quite readily and easily throughout the province of Ontario.

It is important to get people vaccinated. Vaccines work, and we want to protect children, especially, against measles. Please get vaccinated.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the leader of the official opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: That does not sound like a response from a government that understands we are facing an emergency here.

I asked the Premier to respond; I'm to go back to the Premier again, because cases are increasing, right? Parents are worried about sending their kids to school. We've got Mother's Day coming along this weekend, and families are worried about gathering with their loved ones.

But the government seems to be just totally content with the state of things, like mansplaining this stuff to us here in the Legislature—please. We understand; the people out there don't. They need to hear from the Premier.

Why have we not heard from the Premier about the direct and urgent action that this government is going to take to address the worst measles outbreak the province has seen in decades?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: The measles vaccination is readily available to everybody in the province of Ontario, and of course there is no cost to get the measles vaccination. In fact, you can get it through your local public health unit, and we are very happy that we have elevated the funding for our local health units by over 20%—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The House will come to order.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: So you can go to your local health unit and get vaccinated.

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The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The Minister of Education will come to order.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I want to particularly single out—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member.

The House will come to order.

Back to the member for a response.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you, Speaker.

I want to particularly congratulate Erie Shores HealthCare, where they are launching a dedicated measles assessment clinic outside their hospital in a mobile unit. That is just one example of the actions that have been taken by the provincial government to fight measles.

But, of course, everybody needs to get vaccinated. Once again, I remind everybody that the best protection against this disease is to get the vaccination. It is readily available, and it is 99% effective when you get the vaccination.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Supplementary?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, this government has no serious response. You heard it right there. Where is the public health promotion? Is it just going to be here? Where is the vaccine education? Communities are looking to their leaders to promote public health—vaccine education; trust in the medical system, my goodness—but they're only getting silence.

Look, a child died last year from a—yes, preventable—communicable disease. Our numbers in this outbreak exceed what we're seeing in the United States. There's a travel advisory in New York state about travelling to Ontario, for goodness' sake.

We need a plan. I'm going to ask the government and the Premier to please address this. Let's hold a take-note debate here. Let's come up with a plan together to actually get out there and show leadership. If this government won't do it, let's do it together. Will you call for a take-note debate addressing the measles outbreak?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: The government has launched an information campaign. This was just recently launched in response to the recent events. I want to remind everybody that when you hear the information from the information campaign, the best way to get your immunization is to contact your local health unit. They can set up a vaccination for you.

We've increased funding to health units over 20% since this government took office, because it's very important for people to get their immunizations—especially children. As I look across the PC caucus, I notice members of our caucus who have young children. I encourage them, and everybody who has young children, to get their immunization. It's 99% effective against the disease. We want to make sure that everybody in the province of Ontario is safe, especially our children and especially our children when they go to school.

Public health

Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier. Right now, in Ontario, there are 1,243 cases of the measles, which far outpaces, by the way, all of the United States—all of the United States—

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and twice as much as Texas, which has twice the population. It's the worst outbreak in three decades. Maybe the government doesn't realize it, but it's a serious situation, and we didn't have to be here. We've got to ask ourselves, how the heck did we get here?

So, to the Premier: Why is the Premier failing to protect Ontario's children from the measles?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Essex for a response.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Speaker, of course the measles vaccine is readily available in the province of Ontario. Anybody can get the measles vaccine. It is commonly referred to as the MMR—measles, mumps and rubella—vaccine. It has been around for over 50 years. It is proven and it is effective. We encourage everyone to get the measles vaccine, but especially children, especially young children.

The vaccine is free. You can get it anywhere in the province of Ontario. And it is especially made free because we fund our public health units. We've increased funding to the public health units by approximately 20%. That is one of the reasons we promote the vaccine and want to promote the vaccine, especially for children and especially for young children, because we want to protect our children from getting the measles and we want them to be healthy and good.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Supplementary?

Mr. John Fraser: I'm tempted to send that member some iron because that's the most anemic response I've heard to something in this place.

Measles is a childhood disease that has very serious consequences for children. That's why we worked for decades and decades to get vaccination rates up, and guess what? We eradicated it. Guess what again? It's back. Right now, just like Nero played the fiddle while Rome was burning, the Premier is playing the fiddle while measles is burning through Ontario.

Speaker, we all knew that childhood vaccinations after the pandemic would be a challenge. My question is, why has the Premier failed to do what he needed to do to protect Ontario's children from the measles?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Of course, the funding for the public health units, which has increased by approximately 20%, is specifically made in order to assist for the delivery of such services as the measles vaccine. Of course, unfortunately, the Liberal Party voted against that funding because they voted against the budget that provided that funding. But we believe in providing that funding, as we believe in providing the measles vaccine free for everybody across the province of Ontario.

This is a tried-and-true vaccine. It has been used for over 50 years. It is effective. When children get the vaccine, they are 99% protected against the possibility of contracting this disease. It is very important for people to become vaccinated. We understand that some families fell behind their schedule as a result of the pandemic, but it is definitely important to catch up and get your vaccine.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Supplementary?

Mr. John Fraser: You cut public health funding by hundreds of millions of dollars and the fact is, right now, you're not giving families the tools that they need, the information that they need, the help that they need. That's an embarrassing answer.

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We know that three quarters of measles patients are under 17. Most of those children are unvaccinated, the vast majority of them. And we know that any drop in vaccination rates is a risk because measles is so infectious.

So, respectfully to the member across, the current situation was foreseeable and preventable. I'm going to ask you once again, why is the Premier failing to protect Ontario's children from the measles?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I'll remind members to direct their questions through the Speaker.

Back to the member for Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Again, it's unfortunate that the Liberals voted against the budget which provided the increased funding to public health units because that was an increase of over 20% since this government has taken office. It's very important to provide this funding so that these public health units can provide the vaccine, which is absolutely free to everybody in the province of Ontario. Anyone who wants to get the vaccine can have the vaccine absolutely free, and that is provided through public health units and various other places where you can get the vaccine.

We encourage everyone in the province of Ontario to get vaccinated, particularly if you have fallen behind the schedule as a result of the pandemic. Please get your children vaccinated and get yourselves vaccinated if you have not been vaccinated. You can get a vaccine by contacting your local primary health provider, or you can contact your health unit and they will put you in touch with a source.

Public health

Mr. John Fraser: The government's response so far is, "Hey, guys. Everything's fine." I don't think so.

The Premier likes to say we're in a war. We were in a war long before Donald Trump got elected and that war is an anti-vax war. It's the aggressive campaign that permeates the Internet and social media, trying to get people not to vaccinate their children. It's well documented that anti-vax campaigns are coming from inside and outside our borders. We all knew this. It's nothing new. It's been going on for a long time. In the pandemic, it intensified.

So I don't understand why the Premier failed to act to have Ontario have the best, the most robust information and vaccination campaign in the whole world. I don't why he doesn't aspire to that.

I'm going to ask again, why is the Premier failing to protect Ontario's children from the measles?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member from Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'm interested that the member has brought up issues related to the pandemic because as we remember, after the Liberals left office and the pandemic struck, when we opened the cupboards, the cupboards were bare. There was no preparation for what happened during the pandemic and so this brand new government had to take over in a situation where there was no official rule book.

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I want to say that under the incredible circumstances that occurred during that pandemic, it was really, really, really important that we had the leadership of our present Premier, who steered us through that pandemic with leadership unparalleled by any other Premier.

Getting back to the issue of the vaccinations, just like vaccinations work—the MMR vaccine has been tested for 50 years. It works. People should get vaccinated.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The supplementary.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, when we're talking about the anti-vax campaign, I would like to remind the member opposite—because he waxed so eloquently the other day about all those countries that have special economic zones—if you take a look at that list, that's where this information is coming from, is places like Russia. I know the member had a lot to say about Russia last week, so I would just encourage him to think about that.

Every year, we know that government spends hundreds of millions of dollars on self-serving, taxpayer-funded ads designed to help the government. They spent \$60 million two years ago. This year, I'm willing to bet it's closer to \$100 million. That's a lot of money to pat yourself on the back, and that's what they do with this money. I just think all of that money would have been way better spent making sure we have the best information and vaccination campaign in the world. Does the Premier agree?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Speaker, it's very nice to hear the member endorse our information campaign with regard to informing people about the importance of being vaccinated. That public awareness campaign, of course, has already been launched, so I thank the member for endorsing this government's action in providing information to the public about getting vaccinated.

It's important that people receive that information because there are elements out there that will provide contradictory information, and we want to make sure that our youngest individuals in our population are protected. Those are our children. And I want to make sure that all the parents out there understand that we have a vaccine that's been in place for over 50 years. It's a commonly used vaccine. It's been tested over, over and over again. It is a very safe vaccine. It will protect your children against the measles. It is 99% effective against the measles, and we encourage everybody to be vaccinated.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Final supplementary.

Mr. John Fraser: I think the most appropriate thing I can say is something the member has probably heard before, and that is the term "failure to launch." The Premier and the minister have kept the Chief Medical Officer of Health literally in the basement. Requests for interviews have been repeatedly denied—repeatedly denied—and then we hear the anemic responses that we're getting from the member and the minister on this measles outbreak. Also, these guys have tons of friendly questions. I have not heard one about the measles. Do you think maybe some of your constituents are concerned? Mine are.

Speaker, other places in this country are actually taking stronger action. Even the anti-vax Premier of Alberta is taking stronger action than we are here in Ontario. They're stepping up. My question is, why will this Premier not step up for Ontario's children and prevent the measles?

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Mr. Anthony Leardi: I think the words “failure to launch” best describe the Liberal campaign in Mississauga East–Cooksville. By the way, I’d like to congratulate the PC member from Mississauga East–Cooksville for winning that riding.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The government House leader will come to order. The leader of the third party will come to order.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: But I digress. I should talk about immunization, which is very important for our children. Again, I make reference to some members of our own caucus who have young children of their own, and that’s a wonderful, wonderful example that we should probably follow, the example of good immunization practice—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member. The leader of the third party and the government House leader will please come to order.

The member may continue.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Speaker, I never realized that immunization would cause such a ruckus among the opposition parties. I thought we could all agree that getting immunization is important—important for protecting our children. But I think maybe after a little thought we can all agree on this: It’s important to be immunized, protect our children. It’s a safe vaccine. Please get vaccinated.

Public health

Mr. Adil Shamji: For the Premier: I’d like to begin by thanking the Chief Medical Officer of Health for providing a much-needed update this week. He has a difficult job, and I know that parents were relieved to hear from him.

What concerns me is his statement that we should expect another 100 to 125 cases of measles every week until the summer. We already saw more cases than that last week.

The problem here is that this government is trying to condition Ontarians to mediocrity. They want us to accept housing prices that are out of control, accept ER wait times that are through the roof and millions of people without a family doctor.

Well, on behalf of all Ontarians, I’m here to say that we do not accept those things. We are not willing to settle for less, even as this government collects more tax than any other in our province’s history.

This morning the Minister of Health said that her measles response is working. Why does the Premier think it’s okay to be the only jurisdiction in North America and on this continent to have 125 cases of measles every week until the summer?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Of course we’re all very concerned about the health of our children, and particularly myself; I have children. There are members of all parties in this House who have children, and we all share a concern for the protection of our children against any disease,

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including measles. That's why we have a great vaccine. It's a vaccine that has been in place for over 50 years. It is a tried-and-true vaccine. It's been tested and used over and over and over again.

This vaccine is free. You can get it anywhere in the province of Ontario. You don't have to pay for it. It would be administered by your primary care provider. And on that topic, we're expanding the delivery of primary care across the province of Ontario through this government's programs and through this government's health budget, which has expanded as well.

We encourage everyone to get the measles vaccine. It will protect your children—99% effectiveness against measles.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Supplementary?

Mr. Adil Shamji: The member across has 3,000 children in his riding that don't have a family doctor. Even if they saw his riveting performance during question period, they wouldn't be able to get vaccinated in the first place.

Now, in a shocking update this morning at a press conference, the Minister of Health defended her government's abysmal response on measles by saying she wrote a letter to public health officers reminding them to vaccinate children. She reminded public health doctors, who have a four-year bachelor's degree, four-year medical degree and five-year residency training in public health and preventive medicine, that they need to vaccinate children. They didn't need a reminder; they needed resources and didn't get it.

We need look no further than Alberta, led by an anti-vax Premier and with a fraction of the cases that we have, to see that they implemented a measles hotline, television ad campaign and public vaccination clinics. Why won't this government do the same?

Will the Premier stop selling snake oil in a crystal bottle and come clean with Ontarians about what new steps he will implement, now that he's revealed that the current ones have failed?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: As a medical professional himself, I'm sure that the member who just spoke understands the importance of everybody getting immunized. I'd think that he would promote the government's plan, which is to inform everybody in the province of Ontario about not only the importance of being immunized, but also the availability of immunization, which is absolutely free and very available throughout the entire province of Ontario.

We do, in fact, encourage everybody to get their children immunized against measles. The common vaccine is referred to as the MMR—measles, mumps and rubella—vaccine. I encourage that member and all members of this House to join the government's information program and make sure that their constituents are informed that this vaccine is available for free to everyone. They can even call the number 811 if they want to get further information about where they can obtain the vaccine absolutely free in the province of Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I want to caution our members when they are asking questions on their choice of words. We don't want anything inflammatory.