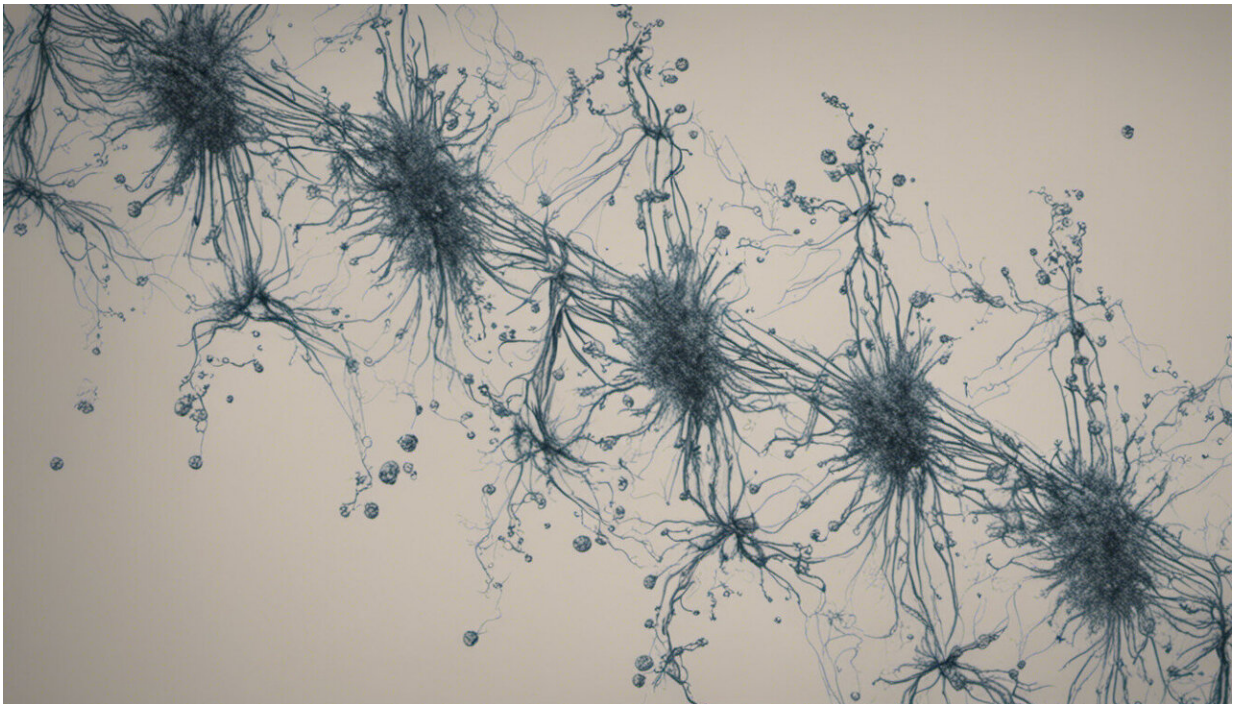


Coronavirus lessons from when the 1937 polio epidemic delayed school reopenings

August 10 2020, by Tara Abraham



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In September 1937, the *Toronto Daily Star* and the *Globe and Mail* began publishing lessons for high school students who had already lost four weeks of school due to the polio epidemic that raged that summer. Soon, the *Star* reported that children had eagerly taken up their studies at home. Teachers were available by telephone if students needed them.

Indeed, COVID-19 is not the first time we've considered closing schools to prevent the spread of disease. After Ontario's [worst polio epidemic in the summer of 1937](#), schools were closed in the fall to protect children, who were the most vulnerable to polio's ravages.

Psychologists assured [parents](#) that the extended holiday was likely to be beneficial, but for some families, [school closures](#) were stressful. As the mother of nine [school-aged children](#) put it in a *Globe and Mail* article from Sept. 18, 1937: "The children are very restless," even though she had kept them busy playing ball, pole-vaulting and boxing in the backyard.

Stressful epidemics

Of course, [school](#) closures were not the only source of stress. Parents were terrified of polio. Polio season regularly took place in late summer, and between July and October, parents, especially mothers, watched their children closely for any signs: neck stiffness, headache, stomach upsets.

Mothers were instructed:

"Don't be afraid. Be watchful. Look for indisposition, sickness, nausea, headache, back or neck ache, sore throat, tremor, prostration. On the appearance of any out of the way symptoms, [put the child in bed and call the doctor.](#)"

During the summer of 1937, mothers kept their children off the streets. Sunnyside Beach, despite the warm water, had only a few bathers. Streets in the central part of Toronto—described by the *Toronto Daily Star* as "the playgrounds of hundreds of poor children"—were deserted. Survivors of polio epidemics remember a [deep-seated fear of infection](#).

Delayed reopening

In 1937, Toronto schools had been set to open on Sept. 1, but in light of the severity of the polio epidemic, Gordon Jackson, Toronto's medical officer of health, decided to delay the return to schools until Sept. 13. After several further delays, schools finally opened on Oct. 12.

Across Canada, several municipal health officials felt that schools should remain open. John W.S. McCullough, Ontario's chief officer of health, noted that [with proper medical inspection and the "watchful eyes" of teachers, nurses and doctors](#), children would be safer in school rather than roaming around the streets unmonitored.

While [public pressure](#) forced closures, the issue divided Torontonians.

STAR WANT ADS
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TEACHERS READY TO HELP PUPILS IN HOME STUDY

Collegiate Students May Telephone or Visit For Instruction, Goldring States
MANY ENTER SPIRIT

Twenty thousand boys and girls of collegiate age read the daily papers with new interest yesterday, for they contained the first installment of "home study lessons" designed to stimulate study while schools are closed owing to the polio epidemic.

According to information received at school headquarters many made at least an effort to cope with the program outlined in English and history. "Of course we have no way of knowing just how many are taking advantage of the outline offered," said Dr. C. C. Goldring, superintendent of schools, "but we estimate the majority are entering into the spirit."

In thousands of Toronto homes yesterday evening there was a safer approach to "a quiet hour" than is usually the case, for many youngsters who are bored with the long vacation found pleasure in re-reading their studies. In many homes they were encouraged by fathers and mothers to spend an hour or two on the English and history work outlined for the first day.

"Fussy how quickly they get off the edge on study," said one education official, telling how he had noted his own boy making more errors than usual in his spelling.

Practically all collegiate and vocational teachers are now said to be back in the city, and if students wish to get in touch with them by telephone or by personal call the teachers are supposed to be at their service for advice and guidance. Individual coaching, however, is impossible, said Dr. Goldring. Principals have been instructed to get in touch with teachers and have none available if needed.

JOB AT HAMILTON ARE ALMOST AT PEAK

Special to The Star
Hamilton, Sept. 28.—Hamilton is not a thousand persons within the all-time employment peak recorded in 1929, it is announced by the chamber of commerce.

Statistics compiled from firms employing 25 or more show that 28,500 men were drawing pay in September, an increase of 441 over August, not within 413 of the record established last year's end. Oct. 2, H. H. Realy declares the record may be broken, as many small industries, employing fewer than 15, are operating full time.

CHECK FAMILIAR WINDSHIELDS
Burlington Beach, Sept. 28.—Motorcycle officers of the provincial police department have been instructed to make a check on all cars being driven with defective windshields.

Second of Home Lessons For Collegiate Students



STRONG AIR ARM SOUGHT BY LABOR FOR AUSTRALIA

Advocates Defence Policy Devoid of All Foreign Entanglements

Canberra, Australia, Sept. 28.—Not only is national defence the chief topic of debate in the federal arena, but it has been exploited on the hustings in the Victoria state election where voters go to the polls on Oct. 2. The federal election takes place Oct. 23, first time in commonwealth history that state and federal campaigns have clashed.

Labor advocates an "Australia first" defence policy with no foreign entanglements and creation of a powerful air arm as the first line of defence instead of a strong navy.

Labor and his government favor collective empire security. Without neglecting the demands of the air force, they trust in the navy as the main bulwark of defence and are convinced the theatre of any war involving Australia would be along her sea communications.

TORONTO STUDENTS INSIST ON STUDYING, SCHOOL OR NO SCHOOL

School is late and may be later, in reopening this year, but conscientious education authorities and teachers are not accepting the excuse that it is an informal, quite studios-looking pose (1). Youthful Mary and Madeline Simmonds, Cluny Dr. (2), are even more informal, and look quite happy among their books. Pearl Goodfellow, of Mount Pleasant Rd. (4), does a spot of studying while her West Highland white pup "Fuzzy" looks on. She is in first form at Northern Vocational school. David and Dorothy Simmonds (3) go into a huddle over their studies, with Dorothy apparently clearing up a knotty point for David.

Helen Hickman, Forman Ave.—fourth form commercial student is caught in an informal, quite studios-looking pose (1). Youthful Mary and Madeline Simmonds, Cluny Dr. (2), are even more informal, and look quite happy among their books. Pearl Goodfellow, of Mount Pleasant Rd. (4), does a spot of studying while her West Highland white pup "Fuzzy" looks on. She is in first form at Northern Vocational school. David and Dorothy Simmonds (3) go into a huddle over their studies, with Dorothy apparently clearing up a knotty point for David.

BAFFIN LAND MINING CLAIMS ARE STAKED FOR ONTARIO GROUP

Former Mountie and a Geologist From University of Toronto Making Report

FIND ANCIENT RELICS

Halifax, Sept. 28.—With the records of three mining claims staked on Baffin Island and mineral bearing samples, F. McInnes, former Mounted Police officer and veteran of the Arctic trails and his companion, J. F. Tibbitt, geologist of the University of Toronto, arrived in Halifax today on Admiralty inlet, Baffin Island.

Both McInnes and Tibbitt, two hardy travellers pulled into the island after 1400 miles by dog team from Churchill.

"We found indication of iron and copper in the rocks in the vicinity of Arctic bay but no particularly rich showings. Most of the trip from Churchill was over rock of the pre-Cambrian shales, but on Baffin Island we found considerable limestone, sandstone and shale."

Both McInnes and Tibbitt declined to discuss claims they had staked until they had reported to the syndicate headed by Colin Campbell, M.P. for Frontenac-Ad-

LISTS HEADACHES AMONG EXPENSES

Unsuccessful Candidate Had "Six Weeks" of Them

Buffalo, N.Y., Sept. 28.—Under the heading "mischievous expenses" in his financial statement of primary campaign expenses, Earl S. Morgan, unsuccessful candidate for congressman, listed "Six weeks of headaches."

Another interesting passenger on the Nasopie was G. W. Rowley of Cambridge University, a member of the British Canadian Arctic expedition headed by T. H. Morgan, who is at Southampton Island in Hudson bay. Rowley and J. G. Gray explored the last considerable part of the west coast of Baffin Island, where white man never before has been. They obtained many fine Dorset archaeological specimens of the natives believed to have inhabited the north before the arrival of the present race.

Most prized of his collection are miniature ivory carvings, evidently done with exceedingly small flint tools. He will check his collection with those in the museums at Ottawa, London and Copenhagen.

MAN, 86, MEETS EVERY TRAIN FOR TWIN LAST HOME IN '76

Watching For Man "Exactly Like Me," Ottawa Citizen Says

WRITE EVERY YEAR

Special to The Star
Ottawa, Sept. 28.—Waiting feverishly to greet his 86-year-old twin brother whom he has not seen since 1876, Robert L. Bond, Ottawa, is confident he will recognize his brother Richard the moment he steps off the train here from Walla Walla, Wash.

Tuesday, for the fourth time since early Monday, the southern Ottawa resident arrived at the union station by street car to meet trains arriving from the Pacific coast. His twin was due to arrive Monday, but his departure from his Walla Walla home is reported to have been delayed 48 hours. The Ottawa brother, though, said he was taking on chances and intended to be on hand for the arrival.

"Dick is the 'dead spit' of me and when the passengers disembark from the coast, I watch each time

ACTOR'S WRISTS CUT AFTER BEING HISSED

Had Received News Mother Dead, Father Ill

London, Sept. 28.—Russ Brown, New York actor hissed by the audience at last Thursday's opening of the musical comedy "Tied in Blue," was confined to a hospital today after he had been found in his west end flat with both wrists slashed.

It was understood that he recently received a cable informing him of the death of his mother. It also was reported that his father was ill a day after receiving the cable.

for a man who looks exactly like me," he declared. "Twelve years ago Dick walked in on our niece and her husband in Los Angeles, after they had not seen him for years and they cried, 'It's Uncle Bob from Ottawa.' No, we will have no trouble in recognizing each other."

DEATH, BLINDNESS, ILLNESS PARALYSIS AFFLICT FAMILY

Lightning Hits Three Daughters—Five Confined to Beds—All Quarantined



Front page stories from the Toronto Star on Sept. 28, 1937 looked at schooling during the polio epidemic. Author provided

Quoted in an article in the Toronto Daily Star from Sept. 27, Toronto School trustee C.M. Carrie denounced doctors who lent themselves to "panic" regarding the polio epidemic. "Why are the children kept out of school and not kept out of anywhere else?" he said. "You can see them running round everywhere."

Another Toronto trustee—Dr. W.H. Butt—was more sympathetic with

medical officials who decided to close schools: "Medicine is not an exact science ... the less crowding of children, the better."

Broadly, these debates reflected parental anxiety, [confusion over the mode of transmission of the disease](#) and tension between health officials and school authorities.

Protecting children

In an article from Oct. 10, 1937, Toronto Mayor William D. Robbins justified the closures, declaring: "They can catch up on their lessons, but you can't restore a child."

Parents responded in ways that reflected their own fears and confusion. Some mothers who led Home and School clubs in Toronto were not alarmed by schools reopening, and felt kids were safer in schools than roaming the streets.

In a *Toronto Daily Star* article published on Oct. 16, another parent claimed that "children have been in just as close, if not closer contact with each other when the schools were closed than at present."

Other articles from September and October of that year showed that mothers who had kept their children out of crowds and away from playgrounds, theaters, and public pools were worried that schools were opening too soon.

One mother hoped that "city schools are not opened until all danger of contagion is definitely and surely passed.... Even if there is only one new case of polio developed after school opening, remember that one may be your child, or mine." Pupils, on the other hand, were said to be "eager for school" and on the first day back, attendance was high with students waiting outside of school ahead of the bell.

COVID-19 school plans

Today, Toronto parents are paying close attention to the question of what school will look like in September. Working parents, particularly single parents, have felt the emotional strain of balancing full-time work and caring for and schooling their children.

Children of all ages have [responded to lockdown and school closures in varying ways](#). Some thrived in the online environment and adapted quickly. Others found online learning challenging.

Demands for mental health services [for children and adults](#) alike have increased.

A [Statistics Canada study](#) reveals that balancing child care, schooling and work was a top concern for families, with worries about managing loneliness and anxiety a major stressor. In July, a growing number of parents [put pressure on the Ontario government to open schools safely and fully](#) in September. The Ford government announced its [school reopening plan on July 30](#), but for many parents it does not go far enough to ensure safety.

Ensuring safety

To be sure, there are numerous contrasts between the polio epidemic of 1937 and COVID-19.

Unlike COVID-19, which disproportionately affects older people, polio struck the very young. While COVID-19 has meant that Ontario children spent the last three and a half months of their school year at home, polio was a summer disease, and when it did affect schooling for the general population, it usually just extended summer holiday.

School closures in 2020 seem indefinite or undetermined. During the 1937 polio epidemic, students just lost a few weeks, while students today have already lost 13 weeks, with potentially more to come.

While anxieties during the polio epidemic often stemmed from fear of the disease, parental anxiety during COVID-19 stems not only from fear of infection (markedly lower than [polio](#) for children) but also from the stress of having to balance full-time work and caring for and homeschooling their kids.

This stress is particularly felt by [mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), who are a much greater part of the workforce than they were in 1937.

This burden also falls more heavily on [essential workers](#) and [lower-income families](#).

School closings affect parents differently. Single parents who do not have relatives nearby [find balancing working from home and home schooling their young children particularly challenging, if not impossible](#)

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Going back to school in 2020 has different stakes: parents must face striking a balance between their sense of collective responsibility towards public health and their personal responsibility to maintain their own mental health and the health of their children.

And this is not to say that a return to school would mitigate emotional stress: for some, lockdown and the fear of [a dreaded second wave of COVID-19](#) means parents will choose to keep their [children](#) home despite any school reopening scenario.

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