

Thursday, December 30, 2021

Memorandum to: Chairs of District School Boards
Directors of Education
Secretary/Treasurers of School Authorities

From: Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

**Subject: Ministry of Education Update: Return to School
– January 2022**

The provincial government has made the health and safety of our school communities a top priority, and we thank our school board partners for their significant contributions towards making schools as safe as possible and keeping them open for in-person learning during the fall of 2021. Moving into the new year, we remain equally committed to this goal while providing our students with a learning experience that allows them to reach their full potential.

As we adapt our pandemic response, and based on advice from the OCMOH, we are building on our past improvements to school safety, with updated and additional health and safety measures in schools. These measures will support a safer return to in-person learning from the winter break and continuity of learning for students – bolstered by rising rates of youth vaccination, significant ventilation improvements, and high quality personal protective equipment (PPE).

The OCMOH has advised that all sectors must plan for the potential of higher than normal levels of absenteeism in the coming weeks, as Ontarians comply with screening and isolation guidance. The education sector is not immune to this, and it will mean planning for higher than normal student and staff absenteeism. The Ministry of Education (the ministry) has been working over the past weeks and through the winter break to support stability in the workforce and safety for students, staff, and families.

This memo outlines supported strategies for Ontario school boards to minimize operational school closures so that we can keep students learning while supporting students who may be at home for screening reasons or a preference for virtual learning.

To provide time for school boards and staff to plan for these changes, the reopening of schools for students following the break is **now on January 5, 2022**, for school boards scheduled to return on January 3. The reopening day for other boards will be as scheduled.

Updated Health and Safety Guidance

The ministry, based on advice from the OCMOH, will be implementing additional health and safety measures in schools effective January 2022. These measures will supplement and build on the existing 2021-22 school year health and safety measures to ensure as safe and healthy a school environment as possible, as outlined in the [COVID-19: Health, Safety and Operational Guidance for Schools \(2021-22\)](#). These measures are not prerequisites to reopening set by the OCMOH, however some of these protocols exceed the recommended guidance out of abundance of caution to protect students, staff, and communities.

1. Masking

Based on the emerging evidence of Omicron spread, students should wear a well-fitted mask in Grade 1-12. The requirement for students Grade 1-12 to wear a cloth or medical mask remains in place and masking continues to be strongly recommended for kindergarten students.

The government will be providing students with expanded access to free high quality three-ply cloth masks. These will be available to students and encouraged to be used. The use of these specific masks is not being mandated at this time. The purpose of this measure is to encourage students to use a higher quality mask than some of the single or two-ply masks that some may currently be relying upon.

In addition, the ministry will also be providing education staff with the option of a non-fit-tested N95 mask. These masks meet the same National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH) standards as fit-tested N95s but have not been, and are not required to be, fit-tested. Staff will have the option to wear either medical/surgical masks or non-fit-tested N95 masks provided by the government. The existing requirement for staff that perform aerosol generating medical procedures (AGMP) to wear a fitted N95 does not change.

The ministry has already provided ordering information to school boards for additional three-ply cloth masks for students, and non-fit-tested N95 masks for staff. The ministry will work closely with the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services and school boards to arrange shipments and related logistics as early as possible, now that the OCMOH approved the Ministry's request on December 20, 2021, to use non-fit-tested N95 masks for staff.

2. Screening

Per the government's announcement on December 30, 2021, testing and case and contact management are now focused on the highest risk settings, which excludes schools. Isolation requirements for individuals with COVID-19 symptoms have also changed.

Rigorous screening and monitoring of symptoms by students, families, and staff is critical to limiting transmission and keeping schools safer and open for in-person learning. As an additional layer of protection for students and staff, effective January 2022, all schools are required to reinstate daily on-site confirmation of screening for all students and staff until further notice.

In addition, on the recommendation of the OCMOH, a more sensitive COVID-19 symptom list is being reinstated for daily active screening of all students and staff in schools and child care. Anyone who has symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 or is a confirmed positive case must self-isolate, regardless of vaccination status. All schools and boards are asked to communicate the new school screener to students, staff and families.

If a student/staff is experiencing **at least one** symptom most commonly associated with COVID-19 or **two or more** symptoms less commonly associated with COVID-19, they must self-isolate as per public health guidelines. If a student/staff is experiencing only one symptom less commonly associated with COVID-19, they must stay home until their symptom(s) has been improving for 24 hours (48 hours for nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea). The OCMOH is also requiring that household members, including siblings, stay home until the household member experiencing symptom(s) is cleared from their isolation.

School principals can connect with the local public health unit's (PHU) school-focused nurse or other designated contact assigned to their school for further assistance.

3. Testing

Building on the testing initiatives announced in October 2021, and to provide targeted access to polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing for students and education staff, the PCR self-collection initiative in schools will continue, with a focus on the most commonly associated symptoms.

Schools already have a limited supply of take-home PCR self-collection kits available in their schools. Effective January 2022, PCR self-collection kits are to be provided to individual symptomatic elementary and secondary students and education staff experiencing only symptoms most commonly associated with COVID-19. Arrangements must be made to provide safe access to kits for individuals requiring them.

The continued and modified use of PCR self-collection kits for schools is part of the government's efforts to reduce absenteeism for students and staff that receive a negative test result.

Building on the government's efforts to provide over 11 million rapid antigen screening tests over the holiday break, schools boards and schools should remind families to use at least 1-2 remaining tests for students before returning to in-person learning in January, and to stay home if a student receives a positive test result.

Pending supply of additional rapid antigen screening tests, the ministry will continue to work closely with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services (MGCS) to expand access to rapid antigen screening testing in schools.

4. Enhanced cohorting measures

To mitigate risks associated with the colder weather and gatherings/travel over the winter holidays and to limit the number of contacts for more vulnerable populations, elementary students will be required to cohort during recess and outdoor breaks to limit contacts as much as possible during this period.

5. Paused sports and extra-curricular activities and community settings

On the strong advice of the OCMOH, indoor high contact and high intensity activities, such as wrestling or basketball, multi-cohort choirs and wind instrument ensembles, will be paused temporarily to ensure the health and well-being of students.

6. Improved ventilation through additional HEPA filter units in schools

Since the beginning of the pandemic, over 70,000 standalone HEPA filter units and other ventilation devices have been deployed in schools across the province, supported by focused investments in ventilation and air quality as part of Ontario's plan to keep schools safe.

To further improve ventilation in schools, the ministry will deploy an additional 3,000 standalone HEPA filter units to school boards.

7. Promoting Vaccination

Vaccination continues to represent our most effective strategy to reduce COVID-19 transmission, and we are pleased to see the growing vaccination rates for school staff and eligible students.

We are grateful for the efforts of school boards to support success during the roll-out of the vaccine for children aged five to 11 and for your work with your local PHUs and partners to create a vaccination experience that is welcoming for students, supports their well-being, and addresses the unique needs of students and their families. As a result of our collective focus and over 400 student focused vaccine clinics in December, Ontario has one of the highest rates of immunization in Canada.

We ask that you continue this work and promote vaccination efforts for students, families, and staff, including third doses for eligible staff.

The ministry will provide further information to school boards regarding new requirements for staff and partners to disclose information related to third doses. Please note, at this time, individuals are considered fully vaccinated with two approved doses.

8. Reporting of COVID-19 Cases

In light of the Omicron (B1.1.529) variant of concern and how quickly it is spreading, the COVID-19 case, contact and outbreak management approach is being updated across all sectors, as directed by the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH) to balance individual risk and societal disruption – while maintaining safety within schools and communities. As a result, cohort-based dismissals may not occur in schools and child care settings.

Given recent changes to case and contact management by the Ministry of Health and OCMOH, the ministry will suspend reporting of [COVID-19 cases in schools](#). Further information will be shared shortly with school boards on reporting expectations of absences in schools and school closures due to COVID-19, in conjunction with educational and pediatric leaders.

9. Child Care Centres in Schools

We recognize that the closure of schools from January 3-4, 2022 will have an impact on families who may be unable to care for their child at home. In light of this, we are directing school boards to continue to provide access to their on-site child care centres and to authorized recreational and skill building programs, as those programs are permitted to operate on non-instructional days.

The measures outlined above build on existing health and safety measures already in place that supported a successful 2021-22 school year. To support the continued safe operation of schools, the ministry is providing temporary COVID-19 funding supports, with more than \$1.6 billion in resources available to school boards throughout the year.

Supports for Students

In the 2021/22 school year, all school boards have been directed to offer a virtual learning option to their students. Some families may request a transition to full-time, ongoing virtual learning and school boards are asked to accommodate these requests to the greatest extent possible.

However, school boards may receive requests for a short-term virtual learning option from more families and students than can be accommodated with current teaching capacity in virtual learning. In addition, school boards should anticipate that students may be screened out of in-person learning on a regular basis, albeit unpredictably.

In light of these circumstances, school boards are asked to develop a plan to support short-term virtual learners through the following strategies:

- Continue to develop remote learning packages.
- Develop a broadcast option for virtual, grade-based curriculum that can be accessed by multiple students on a streaming basis. This may not be interactive given the volume of students, but the objective would be to ensure that a teacher is available for the full school day providing grade level curriculum-based content.
- Ensure that parents are aware of provincially provided resources:
 - TVOntario (TVO) and Télévision française de l'Ontario (TFO) will broadcast grade-level, curriculum-based content from 9 am to 3 pm, beginning the week of January 10.
 - Digital elementary curriculum-based content will be available to parents on the TVO and TFO websites, including engaging learning activities linked to grades and curriculum.
 - Secondary students may access the “open house” course material in the Independent Learning Centre offered by TVO.
- School boards are encouraged to identify board level resources for students and parents as well to support all short-term virtual learners.

For students accessing the short-term virtual learning opportunities above, the requirements of PPM 164 may not be able to be fully met. School boards are encouraged to identify virtual learning solutions that are aligned with PPM 164 if student absences from in-person learning will be prolonged.

School boards are to work with local PHUs to assess an appropriate timetabling model for secondary schools for February 2022.

Supports for Staff Absences to Minimize Operational School Closures

In recognition of anticipated increases in staff absences, we ask all school boards and schools to monitor staff capacity and absenteeism, and take the following steps if needed to avoid and minimize school closures for operational reasons, given high rates of expected absenteeism. The aim is to keep children in-class using every tool available to us, however, when required, the following steps must be taken first to protect safe in-person learning:

- Introduce rotating, planned remote learning days for schools if needed, up to one day per week (beginning with 1 day per two weeks); and
- Allow school boards to combine classes and assign students to different classes to ensure supervision. Class size standards should continue to be respected.

In addition, school boards must ensure that plans are in place to support students with special education needs to learn remotely that leverage the capacity of education workers and board professionals (e.g. behavioural experts, speech language pathologists, and other professionals) to support remote learning.

School boards are expected to make every effort in the provision of in-person support for students with special education needs who cannot be accommodated through remote learning based on student needs. Our collective support for these children is critical to their wellbeing.

School boards are best positioned to determine which students with special education needs may require this accommodation. School boards have flexibility in determining how to deliver in-person instruction in such circumstances, based on local conditions, however every effort must be made to ensure in-person learning and consistency in their lives.

The ministry will continue to work with the OCMOH and local PHUs to adjust health and safety requirements (e.g., more or less restrictive measures) and update guidance as required, based on the public health environment to ensure schools remain safe and open for in-person learning – critical to student mental and physical health and academic success.

Thank you for your ongoing partnership as we work to keep schools safe and open to in-person learning in the months ahead.

Sincerely,

Stephen Lecce
Minister

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

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