

January 21, 2022

Dear parents and guardians,

I hope most of you are as pleased as I am to see in-person learning resume. All of you know better than anyone how important school is for children, and how much they will benefit from this. In the grim times we are experiencing with the Omicron variant, this is truly a bright moment.

No doubt all of you are aware of how quickly the Omicron variant is spreading, and how many are becoming ill. The risk of infection in the community is greater than it has been at any point in this pandemic. Reassuringly, in the September to December period, Public Health's contact tracing found that the risk of COVID-19 infection in school was much lower than during a child's out-of-school life. The measures Public Health and our schools put in place have proven to protect children.

It is important for us in Public Health that we facilitate the opening of schools by continuing to take all reasonable steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 when your children are in school. The provincial government has put in place several enhancements to improve safety from COVID-19 in schools already. In this letter, I wish to outline the measures that we are advising your children's school to implement, measures that build upon but in some cases go beyond the baseline set by the provincial government. The goal is to give your children the margin of safety that they deserve in school.

Masking in Junior and Senior Kindergarten

While masking of children in kindergarten has previously been optional, in order to protect everyone from the Omicron variant, we are now requiring that masking be required in kindergarten, similar to how it is required in grade school.

Masking Exemptions Require a Health Care Provider's Note

Public Health now requires that any exemptions to wearing masks be justified by a health care provider's note. Please follow your school's or school board's specific process on seeking these exemptions. Public Health won't be providing a standard mask exemption form, nor will Public Health be approving any exemptions.

While not required, Public Health recommends every parent ensure their child has a good quality mask to give them the best possible protection: a mask should fit flush to the face

without gaps and have at least 3 layers. Your school will be able to supply such a mask if you do not already own one.

Notification and Dismissal of Cohorts

COVID-19 spreads when we have contact with each other. Interacting with classmates is critical for a child's healthy development. Unfortunately, that can also put a child at risk of COVID-19 if a classmate has the infection.

When a class or cohort where there is an infected child is kept home, the opportunities for infection to spread are broken. A key reason we have seen only limited spread of COVID-19 in schools has been that dismissal of cohorts early has stopped the spread of infection. While very disruptive to parents and children when it happens, its benefits in health have outweighed that disruption in our estimation.

Public Health intends to continue dismissing cohorts where there is a test-confirmed COVID-19 infection in order to stop the spread of infection as early as possible. **Students who are vaccinated with 2 doses, however, will be exempt from such dismissals.** Parents nonetheless will be notified so that they can make a decision around whether their child should remain in school or not.

In coordination with our school boards, where dismissal happens, it will be for a 5 day period, which is a reduction from the 10 day dismissals seen in previous months. It is noted though that COVID-19 infection can last longer than 5 days or develop after 5 days. The 5 days dismissal is the minimum period of risk, and parents should be attentive of any symptoms a child may develop shortly after dismissal or even after the 5 days are over.

Where parents have access to rapid tests and are concerned about a child's exposure to COVID-19 infection, Public Health recommends testing 5 days after last being around someone who had COVID-19. Testing earlier than that may not be reliable.

To help us notify other parents when there has been an infection in the classroom, Public Health requests parents confidentially notify us if your child has tested positive by PCR or Rapid Antigen Test through Public Health's [COVID-19 Reporting Portal](#).

Monitoring of Air Quality and Ventilation

As we know COVID-19 can spread through the air, we are working with our schools and school boards to regularly monitor the quality of ventilation in classrooms. Where ventilation is poor and the air poses a greater risk of enabling COVID-19 to spread, we will be aware and able to take action to correct this, such as by adding portable HEPA filters to the classroom.

Vaccination

In addition to the above measures, the most effective way to keep children protected from COVID-19 is the one that is in your exclusive control as a parent or guardian: deciding to get

your child vaccinated. A sincere thank you if you have had your child vaccinated. If you have not, I strongly recommend the benefits of vaccination for your child. We at Public Health would be happy to speak further about any questions you may have, and we also encourage speaking to your health care provider. Our call centre can be reached at (905) 688-8248 and press 7, Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 4:15 p.m.

Public Health has created a separate and more private children's clinic within our larger vaccination clinic at the Niagara Falls Convention Centre (6815 Stanley Avenue, Niagara Falls). There are hundreds of unfilled appointments the next few days between 9:30 a.m. - 6:45 p.m., and parents can sign-up at Ontario.ca/BookVaccine. To book a second dose appointment at an interval of less than eight weeks, please call the Vaccine Contact Centre at 1-833-943-3900. In addition, Public Health can accommodate walk-ins for children seeking a first dose. Pharmacies and many primary care providers are also able to vaccinate children.

I recognize that some of the above measures will no doubt create difficulties for you and your family. I sincerely regret this. However, in the face of the Omicron variant, I truly believe these additional measures are justified to give your child the protection they deserve when they are in school and learning.

Thank you for your cooperation with these steps to protect our schools, and for all your efforts and sacrifice over the past 22 months to help combat the pandemic. I look forward to a successful rest of the school year for everyone.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Hirji', with a long, sweeping underline.

M. Mustafa Hirji, MD MPH FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health /Commissioner (Acting)