

## Reopening Schools During COVID-19

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**To:** Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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**Prepared By:** Ishan Angra, Health Promotion Specialist; and  
Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum, Associate Medical Officer of Health

**Approved By:** Dr. Matthew Tenenbaum, Associate Medical Officer of Health

**Submitted By & Signature:** *Original signed document on file*

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**Dr. Nicola J. Mercer, MD, MBA, MPH, FRCPC**  
**Medical Officer of Health & CEO**

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## Recommendations

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It is recommended that the Board of Health:

1. Receive this report for information.

## Key Points

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- Elementary and secondary schools in Wellington, Dufferin and Guelph will reopen on September 8, 2020, after being closed since March 14, 2020, as part of the provincial COVID-19 response.
- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) endorses and will strongly support the safe reopening of schools for the educational and social benefits it provides to children and communities.
- WDGPH has been working closely with schools and school boards for months to ensure that the education system is equipped with appropriate public health measures.
- Schools can be made safer, but the risk cannot be reduced to zero. Safe school reopening is only as good as our ability to manage community transmission and the public has a role to play in maintaining safe behaviours.

# Discussion

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## Background

Elementary and secondary schools across Ontario were closed on March 14, 2020 as part of the provincial response to contain the spread of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Initially planned as a two-week extension to March Break, school closures were subsequently extended throughout the spring term.<sup>2</sup> This decision was based on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and was supported by WDGPH and other public health units.

Since the spring, COVID-19 transmission has decreased substantially and the provincial government has gradually reopened sectors of the economy. On June 19, 2020 the Minister of Education released the provincial framework for school reopening and tasked school boards with preparing their own reopening plans.<sup>3</sup> As part of its broader response to COVID-19, WDGPH has been supporting school boards with their planning efforts.

Elementary and secondary school is set to resume on Tuesday, September 8, 2020. WDGPH has been taking an active role in ensuring that the risk of school reopening is appropriately managed and that schools and school boards are equipped with the guidance they need to reopen safely.

## Rationale for School Reopening

Schools were initially closed in March, 2020 as part of a broader set of closures that were intended to reduce person-to-person contact. Evidence suggests that school-aged children play an important role in driving transmission of influenza, including during the 2009/10 H1N1 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of evidence about the role that children play in COVID-19, this provided a compelling rationale for closing schools.

Evidence that has accumulated through the pandemic suggests that children may be less important to transmission than was previously thought.<sup>5</sup> Published reports generally find that children are not a major source of transmission in school and child care settings, where children were infected, it was typically due to transmission from adults or exposures that happened in the home.<sup>6,7</sup> Children also tend to have milder infections than adults, which may contribute to their risk of transmitting COVID-19 to others.<sup>7,8</sup> Modelling studies also suggest that school closures have a very modest impact on COVID-19 transmission, compared to other public health measures.<sup>9</sup>

The benefits of school closure must also be weighed against harms posed to students, parents and the broader community. School closures during COVID-19 disrupt family routines and negatively impact children's learning opportunities. Further, school closures have been linked to decreased physical activity, poorer nutrition, worsened mental health, and increased risk of child abuse or neglect.<sup>5</sup> School closures also place a financial burden on families that need to forgo income in order to provide child care, compounding the economic crisis caused by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Child care obligations disproportionately impact women and COVID-19 has already decreased women's labour force participation to its lowest levels since the 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

Though, not without its risks, reopening schools promotes the overall health of children and facilitates a stronger, more equitable economic recovery.

## Provincial Framework

On June 19, 2020 the Ministry of Education released a general framework that would support school reopening for the 2020-21 year. Given uncertainty about how transmission would look in the fall, school boards were asked to develop plans for three different educational models:

1. A conventional, full-time, in-person model supported by enhanced public health protocols in the schools;
2. An 'adapted' model that includes a blend of in-person and remote learning, with different groups of students attending school on alternate days or weeks; and
3. A fully remote model whereby all students learn at home through a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities.<sup>3</sup>

On July 30, 2020, the Ministry of Education released further guidance to support local planning efforts. This included guidance on screening, physical distancing, masking, and other public health measures based on input from the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

The Minister also announced that all elementary schools and some secondary schools would return using the conventional model (Model 1). Select secondary schools in designated school boards would return using the adapted model (Model 2). All public schools within Wellington, Dufferin and Guelph will operate using the conventional model (Model 1).<sup>11</sup>

## Local Support for a Safe School Reopening

WDGPH has been liaising with local school boards and private schools since March as part of the agency's COVID-19 response. As local case counts decreased and the provincial framework was rolled out, WDGPH has supported school boards with their planning for a safe reopening. This support for schools is multifaceted and includes:

- Advance planning support;
- Implementation support;
- Development of case and outbreak management protocols; and
- Building a team of School Public Health Nurses.

## Advance Planning Support

WDGPH has proactively supported local school boards and private schools in the development of their reopening plans. Drawing on provincial guidance and lessons-learned from the first pandemic wave, WDGPH developed a School Safety Checklist that outlined important public health considerations for their plans. Feedback on all aspects of these plans was provided through regular meetings with school board staff and through ongoing emails.

WDGPH has been focused on ensuring that schools and school boards understand the role of public health measures that will keep students and staff safe. These include:

- Screening of students, staff and visitors;
- Physical distancing;
- Hand hygiene;
- Use of face coverings and/or PPE;
- Cohorting;
- Environmental cleaning and disinfection;
- Documentation and record-keeping; and
- Managing ill individuals.

WDGPH has emphasized that schools must use a combination of measures, since they work together to reduce transmission in the school setting. The Agency has also clearly articulated that schools should use every means possible to implement these measures as fully as possible, and this may require creative changes to the school environment.

WDGPH has worked with school boards to exceed the public health measures recommended by the province, where doing so would offer additional protection. For example, while the Ministry of Education only requires that students use face coverings in Grade 4 and above, WDGPH has strongly recommended that younger students also use face coverings. Upper Grand District School Board and Wellington Catholic District School Board have since mandated face coverings for younger students.

## Implementation Support

To support schools and school boards with implementation of appropriate public health measures, WDGPH has been developing a number of resources that make best practice recommendations as clear as possible. These include:

- A comprehensive School Safety Checklist;
- Additional guidance regarding parameters for physical distancing, hand hygiene, use of face coverings and exclusion of students or staff;
- Screening tools for students and teachers;
- Protocols for managing an ill student in the school setting;
- Protocols for managing cases or outbreaks of COVID-19; and
- Letters to parents, including template letters that would be used in the event of a COVID-19 case or outbreak.

WDGPH has also shared appropriate provincial resources, where such resources exist. Several provincial resources, including provincial guidance regarding outbreak management, are still in development at the time of writing. WDGPH's locally-developed

School Safety Checklist has been shared with Public Health Ontario and will form the foundation of an upcoming provincial resource.

WDGPH's Liaison team regularly assists schools and school boards with questions they have about how to operationalize the Agency's recommendations. WDGPH staff will conduct school walk-throughs with local school boards to review how public health measures will be implemented. The Agency is committed to ensuring that these partners have the support they need to implement measures properly in the run-up to school reopening.

## Case and Outbreak Management

In the event that a student became a case of COVID-19, WDGPH would work closely with the school and school board to manage the situation. This would include:

- Conducting case management with the student and ensuring that she or he is isolating at home for 14 days;
- Working with the school to identify school-based contacts that may have been exposed to COVID-19;
- Following up with the relevant contacts to ensure that they seek testing and self-isolate, where appropriate;
- Ensuring that relevant spaces within the school are cleaned/disinfected; and
- Coordinating communications so that teachers, parents, and other students understand what is being done to keep them safe.

In the event of an outbreak in the school setting, WDGPH would recommend that the school implement additional measures, as appropriate, for the situation. These measures may include isolating students, closing specific classrooms or in certain circumstances closing a school and moving all students to a remote learning model. WDGPH is awaiting provincial outbreak management guidance that will prescribe measures for different situations.

Given that COVID-19 still exists in the community, WDGPH expects that cases and outbreaks will occur in the school setting. The safety of our schools is closely linked to the number of cases of COVID-19 circulating within the community and adherence to public health measures. In addition to using the preventive measures listed above, WDGPH will work aggressively to limit transmission in these scenarios.

## School Public Health Nurses

On August 11, 2020 the Ministry of Health announced that WDGPH would receive additional funding to recruit additional nurses (approx. 11 FTE) that would support schools with public health measures. Priorities for these roles include:

- Providing support in the development and implementation of COVID-19 health and safety plans;
- Providing sector-specific support for infection prevention and control (IPAC); surveillance, screening, and testing; outbreak management and case and contact management; and

- Supporting communication and engagement with parents and local communities, as well as the broader health sector.

New staff will join existing public health staff to create a team that will directly support each school within the region. These staff will work to ensure each school has appropriate public health measures in place and will provide a critical link between each school and WDGPH.

## Conclusion

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WDGPH is supporting local schools and school boards to make schools safer and to reduce the transmission risk of COVID-19. This includes implementing a robust suite of preventative and responsive public health measures that are guided by best practice. However, the risk cannot be reduced to zero so long as COVID-19 is circulating in the community. Safely reopening our schools is only possible if our entire community acts together to ensure the transmission rates of COVID-19 remain as low as possible in our region.

Throughout the entire pandemic, WDGPH has been proactively supporting schools and school boards to ensure they understand how to keep students and staff safe. Schools have been an area of focus over the summer and will continue to be after school begins in September. Supporting schools throughout our region will be the largest single program undertaken by WDGPH.

## Ontario Public Health Standard

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### **Infectious and Communicable Disease Prevention and Control**

- The board of health shall work with community partners and service providers to determine and address the need for knowledge translation resources and supports in the area of infection prevention and control.
- The board of health shall communicate, in a timely and comprehensive manner, with all relevant health care providers and other partners about urgent and emerging infectious diseases issues.
- The board of health shall, based on local epidemiology, supplement provincial efforts in managing risk communications to appropriate stakeholders on identified risks associated with infectious diseases and emerging diseases of public health significance.

### **School Health**

- The board of health shall offer support to school boards and schools, in accordance with the *School Health Guideline, 2018* (or as current), to assist with

the implementation of health-related curricula and health needs in schools, based on need and considering, but not limited to:

- ...
- Infectious disease prevention (e.g., tick awareness, rabies prevention, and hand hygiene).

## WDGPH Strategic Direction(s)

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**Service Delivery:** We will provide our programs and services in a flexible, modern and accessible manner, and will ensure they reflect the immediate needs of our Clients and our role in the broader sector.

**System Transformation:** We will equip the Agency for change in all aspects of our work so that we are ready for transformational system change when the time comes.

**Knowledge Transfer:** We will ensure that our decision-making and policy development efforts are informed by meaningful health data at all times.

## Health Equity

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School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted children and their families. These disproportionately affected high-risk populations including: children living in poverty, children with behavioural problems and complex medical needs, and children in the care of Canada's welfare system.<sup>12</sup> As with other pandemic impacts, the burden of this intervention has not been experienced equally across society.

## References

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## Appendices

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None.