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Ida Li Preti
TCDSB Trustee, Ward 3
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Dear Ida Li Preti,

Re: COVID-19: Reopening Schools

Thank you for your interest in Toronto Public Health's (TPH) perspective on the Ministry of Education's plan for reopening schools. As you know, Toronto Public Health is generally supportive of the Ministry of Education's (Ministry) plan, *COVID-19: Reopening Schools*, which has adopted many public health measures to ensure that the return to school will be as safe as possible. Over the summer, we provided guidance to Toronto school boards, including the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) to facilitate the inclusion of public health measures into their return to school plans. This advice has, to our knowledge, largely been adopted by school boards. Of course, a low level of transmission in the population is also essential to enabling schools to reopen safely. We realise that any policy concerning school re-opening must be a compromise between the benefits of providing an in-person school experience, especially important for the earlier grades, the need to protect both students and teachers against COVID-19, and issues of both feasibility and cost. We have therefore concentrated, not on everything which might be done, but on the priority issues.

To build on the Ministry's and the TCDSB school re-opening plan, TPH recommends the following:

Physical distancing and class size:

Achieving physical distancing with children is difficult, but the more space that is available, the more they will be able to keep a distance – ideally 2 metres, or if this is not feasible given space limitations, as much physical distancing as possible. **We therefore recommend that class (or cohort) sizes be limited to allow for this 2 metre distancing.** This could be achieved, for example, by splitting kindergarten classes into two cohorts. This will require more room and more staff. Small classes will also help limit virus spread to fewer people if a case is identified in a school setting, and will enable public

health to investigate cases and quickly isolate their close contacts. Additional public health measures can also be included such as wearing a mask, or adding other forms of physical barriers.

Regional approach within the City: It is feasible to identify areas and schools which could be prioritized to receive resources to prevent COVID-19 in certain neighbourhoods. For example, Toronto has maps of current COVID-19 activity that show that certain neighbourhoods continue to have a substantially higher incidence of COVID-19 compared to other neighbourhoods. **We recommend that the priority for allocation of resources should be schools within high incidence areas.**

Testing resources: Effective testing strategies can greatly assist in rendering schools safer. We acknowledge that this is being considered by the Ministry and have suggested to them that consideration also be given to new testing methods. For example, having tests highly accessible and results quickly available would be advantageous, especially if the aim is to avoid repeatedly shutting down classes. A protocol involving a confirmatory test would probably be required. **We recommend that a saliva-based test be actively considered as a pilot project that can be scaled up as needed.** Whilst saliva-based tests may be less accurate than nasopharyngeal swabs, their ease and acceptability may make them the better choice in practice. Having saliva testing kits available at schools and even at home should also be considered. Surveillance testing can also look to prioritize areas where COVID-19 activity may be increasing, or where situations in schools warrant additional surveillance.

Augment screening: The Ministry's plan states that all staff, students, and visitors must self-screen every day before attending schools. Active screening is an important public health measure to reduce the likelihood that those who have symptoms and may be contagious enter the school. In order to strengthen screening protocols, Toronto Public Health strongly recommends active screening before school entry so that all school staff, students and visitors complete a COVID-19 [symptom screening questionnaire](#) before entering the school. The questions can be completed on a paper-based questionnaire (i.e. asked directly and answers recorded), electronically or verbally. The use of smartphone applications, stickers or other innovative methods to indicate that individuals have completed their screening may also be considered. If it is impossible to actively screen prior to school entry, completion of the questionnaire can be done at home before arriving at school. In these circumstances, it will also be important to have a mechanism to ensure that screening for all staff, students and visitors was completed.

Mask/Face Coverings: The Ministry's plan requires all students (Grade 4 to 12), staff and visitors to wear masks while indoors, and students in Kindergarten to Grade 3 are encouraged to wear masks indoors. In order to strengthen this public health measure, Toronto Public Health strongly recommends mask use indoors for Kindergarten to Grade 3 students. It is also recommended that schools plan for mask breaks with appropriate physical distancing (2 m) throughout the school day; it would be preferable if mask breaks take place with the children outdoors, so as to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

Start date for school year: Finally, we recommend that consideration be given to starting school later on in September or to have staggered start dates for students, in order to allow sufficient time for public health measures to be incorporated.

Thank you for your ongoing collaboration with us in support of the health of your students and staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "E. de Villa".

Eileen de Villa, MD, MBA, MHSc, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health

copy:

Hon. Christine Elliott, Minister of Health
Helen Angus, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health
Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Hon. Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education
Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education
John Tory, Mayor, City of Toronto
Joe Cressy, Chair, Toronto Board of Health
Carlene Jackson, Interim Director of Education, TDSB
Rory McGuckin, Director of Education, TCDSB