

Public Health
277 Victoria Street
5th Floor
Toronto, Ontario M5B 1W2

Tel: 416-338-7820
Fax: 416-392-0713
eileen.devilla@toronto.ca
toronto.ca/health

August 14, 2020

Ida Li Preti
TCDSB Trustee, Ward 3
80 Sheppard Avenue East
North York, ON
M2N 6E8
ida.lipreti@tcdsb.org

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,



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



August 14, 2020

Toronto Board of Health Members

Re: Update on Toronto Public Health Recommendations for School Re-openings

Dear colleagues,

In advance of schools re-opening this fall, Toronto Public Health has provided recommendations to the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) in a letter today. I have included the letter as an attachment.

As we continue learning how to live with the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, Toronto Public Health has acknowledged that the importance of in-person learning for both children and parents must be balanced with the risks of COVID-19 transmission in schools. With this in mind, Toronto Public Health and our Medical Officer of Health Dr. Eileen de Villa have suggested additional recommendations to the Ontario Ministry of Education's initial plan, *COVID-19: Reopening Schools*.

The recommendations include the following:

- Ensuring that class sizes are limited to allow physical distancing of 2 metres between all students;
- Strongly encouraging masks for younger students (below Grade 4) where possible;
- Prioritizing resources for schools in high-transmission and high-needs areas;
- Piloting a saliva-based testing option that could be used in homes and schools;
- Implementing active daily screening practices; and,
- Encouraging a flexible start date in order to allow school boards and schools time to prepare and incorporate public health recommendations.

While Toronto has made tremendous progress on reducing transmission, COVID-19 is still a threat in our city. Re-opening schools will be a significant test of how we handle the next stage of our response to this virus. As many experts have noted, physical distancing is the most important tool we have to combat the spread of COVID-19. In many classrooms, this will mean that significant adjustments need to be made – but I am confident that if we continue to follow the guidance of our public health experts, as we have since January, we will have taken the steps needed for a safe re-opening of schools.

I want to thank you all for your commitment and hard work over in recent months, and to acknowledge the dedication of our Trustee Members Stephanie Donaldson and Ida Li Preti to this important issue.

Sincerely,

Joe

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe Cressy", with a long, sweeping underline.

Councillor Joe Cressy
Chair, Toronto Board of Health
Ward 10, Spadina-Fort York
416 392 4044
councillor_cressy@toronto.ca