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January 29, 2021

Hon. Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
5th Flr, 438 University Ave,
Toronto, ON M7A 2A5

Hon Christine Elliott,
Minister of Health
College Park 5th Flr, 777 Bay St, Toronto,
ON M7A 2J3

Dear Ministers Lecce and Elliott,

Re: Safe Return to School is an Essential Priority

Ontario's Medical Officers of Health support the reopening of schools as essential for children as community rates of COVID-19 decrease across the province. Upon careful review and consideration of local indicators, we believe it is possible, and in fact, imperative, that schools begin to open before the reopening of other sectors, as the Stay-at-Home orders are lifted provincially. Safe reopening of all schools in Ontario is essential.

Evidence-based data on the importance and safety of school openings

We echo the updated advice of the Hospital for Sick Children, "Guidance for School Operation during the Pandemic," which notes the harms of prolonged school closures and recommends that daily in-person classrooms should be the "*last to close and the first to open*"¹.

Data from published reports echo the experience of local public health agencies which has shown that the risk of transmission from children to children and children to adults in primary school and daycare settings is low when public health measures are in place and are followed^{2,3}. An updated evidence review published by the National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools⁴ includes studies before and after school reopening which consistently have shown no impact of school opening on COVID-19 cases or hospitalizations.

Similarly, a very recent Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publication⁵ showed that with masking requirements and student cohorting in place, transmission risk within schools appeared low, suggesting that schools might be able to safely open with appropriate mitigation efforts in place, and despite some times when high community transmission was present.

Maximize infection prevention and control measures in schools

The implementation of infection control measures which are present in all Ontario schools is critically important to limiting transmission of COVID-19 in school settings. Increasing some of the infection prevention and control (IPAC) measures such as the daily confirmation of screening of staff and students, wearing masks, and ensuring physical distancing will help to continue to keep schools safe. Public health capacity to do complete case and contact follow up in school settings is also crucial for the safe return to school. Adherence to public health measures must be rigorous and comprehensive.

Focus on interventions to reduce risks for staff

We also advise that more efforts are needed to reduce close unprotected staff/staff interactions such as during breaks and in lunchrooms. This includes ensuring that there are no in-person staff training, meetings or social gatherings. Personal protective equipment (PPE) measures for staff should also be reiterated including refreshers before returning to the classroom.

Itinerant staff have continued to pose a higher risk for schools. We recommend that itinerant teachers not provide in-person instruction to multiple cohorts. We also recommend reducing the number of schools that staff attend.

Utilize and enhance testing resources for the biggest gains

In order to support active screening in schools, all communities must have same day access to testing for COVID-19. With evidence of the presence of a much more transmissible variant of the SARS CoV-2 virus in many of our communities, early case and contact management continue to be critical tools in the prevention of spread. We welcome the improved turnaround times in many parts of the province. The deployment of rapid testing for symptomatic individuals will also support earlier detection and containment of the virus.

The role of testing asymptomatic students or staff for COVID-19 as a surveillance tool, outside of an outbreak, identifies few additional cases, suggesting that widespread asymptomatic transmission does not commonly occur in the school setting⁶. Enhanced testing around cases and in outbreak situations will enable testing resources are utilized to provide the best gains.

Continue to reduce community transmission, especially in areas with high rates

The literature is clear that levels of community transmission are important predictors for the risk of introduction and transmission of COVID-19 in school settings. However recent modeling done with academic partners shows that extending the closure of schools by a few weeks has less of an impact than the implementation of additional public health measures impacting the community. We recommend that schools be opened first, while other non-essential businesses or sectors remain closed, especially if community transmission rates in certain areas remain high. As well, local consideration can be given to staggering reopening of schools by grade.

Summary

Many schools in Ontario have safely reopened across the province so far, and we are confident that all schools can be safely reopened. We recognize that the recent identification and transmission of variants of concern (VOC) pose a heightened risk for Ontarians and local public health agencies will continue to both monitor and evaluate their potential impact on our communities. At this point, we do not believe they present a reason to delay a return to the classroom.

In conclusion, we recommend:

- Reopening schools should be a priority, even before community restrictions are lifted.

- Ensure community public health measures are maximized to support school reopenings.
- Ensure IPAC measures are maximized in schools to prevent spread in the school setting. This includes measures to ensure physical distancing, reduce staff-to-staff interactions, and minimize interactions of staff with multiple cohorts.
- Have access to appropriate testing resources and utilize testing in ways that will provide the most benefit.
- Ensure public health capacity is available to complete full case and contact management in school settings.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Paul Roumeliotis
Chair, Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health

COPY: Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health
Alison Blair, Associate Deputy Minister, Pandemic Response and Recovery (Health)

¹ COVID-19: Guidance for School Operation during the Pandemic January 21, 2021 accessed January 25, 2021 at <https://www.sickkids.ca/en/news/archive/2021/covid19-updated-guidance-school-operation-during-pandemic/>

² European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. COVID-19 in children and the role of school settings in transmission - first update. Stockholm; 2020. Accessed January 28, 2021 at https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-in-children-and-the-role-of-school-settings-in-transmission-first-update_1.pdf

³ Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Focus on: COVID-19 prevention measures in K-12 schools: optimizing screening and masking. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2020. Accessed January 28, 2021 at <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/sch/2020/12/covid-19-focus-on-optimizing-screening-and-masking.pdf?la=en>

⁴ National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools. (2021, January 21). Living Rapid Review Update 12: What is the specific role of daycares and schools in COVID-19 transmission? Accessed January 22, 2021 at <https://www.nccmt.ca/knowledge-repositories/covid-19-rapid-evidence-service>

⁵ Falk A, Benda A, Falk P, Steffen S, Wallace Z, Høeg TB. COVID-19 Cases and Transmission in 17 K–12 Schools — Wood County, Wisconsin, August 31–November 29, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. ePub: 26 January 2021. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7004e3>

⁶ National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools. (2021, January 21). Living Rapid Review Update 12: What is the specific role of daycares and schools in COVID-19 transmission? Accessed January 22, 2021 at <https://www.nccmt.ca/knowledge-repositories/covid-19-rapid-evidence-service>