

My name is Leila Stamatakis and I am the mother of a kindergarten child in the TCDSB. While we have always followed all school COVID protocols and encouraged our child to do so, over the past year, the restrictions in schools are being taken much further than those set by the province and are hindering overall child well-being. This is happening at the board level, as well as via individual schools that are taking these restrictions to the point where harms (both potential and real) are overshadowing potential benefit of controlling COVID spread. Here are some examples from my child's school. Before I list them, I emphasize that my child's main classroom teachers have been very warm and understanding, and I am grateful for them. However, the school has enforced the below measures which are of deep concern to me.

1. Children told to face the wall when they ask to drink water during gym (both indoors and outdoors). In our child's case, this happened on more than one occasion. This led my child to stop drinking water all together at school thinking that facing the wall was a punitive response to her basic bodily need to drink. While I was told that this was a school policy based on TPH guidance, I was not provided with any policy in writing from TPH to justify this.
2. Masks required outdoors, even during outdoor gym for kindergarten students when the province doesn't mandate masks for kindergarten indoors, let alone outdoors. I was told children can step aside 6 feet away from others to take a mask break - something they shouldn't need to request outdoors.
3. "No mask, no voice" approach wherein children are told they cannot speak without a mask. Even this phrasing is concerning to me as a mother of a young child. Children internalize such messages in harmful ways – my child has asked me to not speak at our own dinner table saying I will spread COVID. Our children should never be made to believe that their voices are dangerous, or worse, that their voices don't matter.
4. Designated zones drawn outside on the pavement where cohorts are not permitted to step outside that space while outdoors. The school calls these "fun zones" when there's nothing fun about limiting children's social play outdoors.

My child comes from a privileged and loving home, and yet is struggling with these extreme restrictions that are overshadowing her education. I shudder to think how children from more difficult circumstances are enduring this. Children with speech delays and hearing loss are masked, exacerbating inequities for these kids. Children in K to grade 2 are falling behind in sound recognition and early reading. It's time for child well-being to return to the forefront again.

While the above measures may have been implemented with good intentions, they are no longer justifiable and are impacting many children – including mine – very negatively. We have access to vaccines, boosters and rapid tests. If the board wishes to advocate for the vulnerable, funding efforts should be directed towards better quality masks to allow very effective one-way masking instead of using precious in-class learning time to enforce universal cloth masking.

1 person with N95/KN95/KF94: 90+% protection

2 people with surgical mask: ~75% protection

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/15/our-playbook-fight-covid-19-is-outdated-here-are-10-updates-2022/>

As the province removes restrictions in various settings, it's important that the board and its schools refocus on achieving well-being of the whole child. It's imperative that the board and its schools adhere to guidance set by the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Trustees and educators are not public health experts, and they should not be interpreting public health guidance from TPH to develop policies based on these interpretations.