



Submission to OCDSB for meeting of November 22, 2022

Dear Ottawa-Carleton District School Board Trustees,

I am writing to provide public health data and context as you consider ways to increase mask wearing in schools. I am thankful that you are continuing to assess how to best support the health and well-being of children, youth and educators after more than two years of significant adaptation.

Ottawa Public Health is strongly recommending mask use in all indoor public settings and crowded outdoor settings, in addition to other layers of protection provided, from staying home when sick and vaccination, to help limit transmission of respiratory illness, protect capacity for pediatric care, and reduce risks for severe illness requiring hospitalization.

Last week, Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) for Ontario, also urged Ontarians to use all layers of protection available to them to limit the spread of respiratory illnesses, including a Province-wide recommendation that masks be worn in indoor, public settings and indoor social settings where there are populations at risk for severe illness. We have disseminated this information to our local partners along with links to resources to support an increase in mask wearing across the city. We have also shared a letter from Dr. Moore with a call-to-action aimed at parents and caregivers with school boards and with the child care sector. Furthermore, on November 7, the Ottawa Board of Health approved a motion calling for the province to publicly release modelling data for this fall and winter respiratory illness season, and to intensify communications on vaccination, masking, and other measures for limiting the impact of respiratory illnesses. We have attached Ottawa Public Health's letter to Premier Ford, Minister Jones and Dr. Moore for your reference, as well as Dr. Moore's letter to parents and caregivers.

Current epidemiology

Three main respiratory viruses are contributing to illness in Ottawa this season: COVID-19, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and influenza. It has been shared that pediatric emergency room visits for respiratory illness and critical care occupancy due to respiratory illness have been at a record high for CHEO, with a stabilization over the last week. Provincial leaders with Ontario Health are in the best position to describe how the healthcare system is managing.

Concerning COVID-19, indicators from wastewater, percent of people eligible for PCR testing who test positive, hospitalizations and outbreaks show that the level of COVID-19 is decreasing and is now moderate. The COVID-19 level may rise again this winter with newer variants now circulating in Ontario.

For the influenza virus, the season started earlier than usual and the percent of people testing positive for influenza is higher than typical for this time in the season, with wastewater levels showing a rise. The percentage of people testing positive for influenza has been increasing in Ottawa over the last month and the peak of spread in our community is expected in early to mid-December, with about 4 weeks of decline in the rate to follow, according to an assessment by the Office of the CMOH. Influenza testing is typically only available to hospitalized people or in outbreak situations. OPH has received reports of 123 lab-confirmed cases of influenza this season to date (from August 28 to the week ending November 19), and 41 (33%) of those cases were among children and youth. Hospitalization data specifically for influenza are just starting to be reported by hospitals to the Ministry of Health and operational data, such as the occupancy of pediatric critical care units, is also collected by the Ministry.

RSV levels appear to be declining in the wastewater and while the percent of people testing positive has been increasing since September, the percent was neither increasing nor decreasing last week. RSV is not reportable to OPH except in outbreak situations.

While we do not have complete data on student absences, the data we do have indicate that absences due to any illness, especially among elementary school students, have increased over the past few weeks (from 5% to 7% between the weeks of October 23 and November 14). Total student absences, for any reason (illness or not), in elementary and secondary schools combined, have also increased during this same time period (from 11% to 14%). These absence rates are comparatively lower than the peaks in absences for any reason seen in mid-January (19%) and in early April (16%), 2022.

Further local epidemiological information can be found on our [COVID-19 dashboard](#), in our [Respiratory and Enteric Surveillance Report](#), on our [Outbreak Reports](#) page and on [613covid.ca](#).

Masks

Well-fitted masks can help protect the wearer from exposure to respiratory viruses and can decrease transmission from people who are shedding virus. The more people that wear high quality masks in indoor settings, the greater the benefit.

OPH specifically recommends a [well-fitted mask](#) as not everyone has access to surgical or N95 masks. In addition, knowing it can be challenging for some children to be comfortable in a mask, we recommend a well-fitting mask rather than a specific type of mask to help children have support for what works best for them.

Considerations for schools

OPH recognizes that there are students and education staff at higher risk for severe respiratory illness who are present in schools. Additionally, many families have younger siblings at home, or may be concerned about people close to them at risk for serious illness. It is key for all school environments to foster understanding that mask wearing protects others and to make mask wearing an easier option. Adults can lead by example and model mask-wearing for children and youth.

The Ontario COVID-19 Science Table [reported](#) in August 2022, heading into this fall, temporary infection-related health and safety measures can help reduce the transmission of COVID-19 in



schools, however, some can pose additional challenges to student wellness and wellbeing. Studies support that the overwhelming majority of healthy children accepted and tolerated mask wearing, especially when their peers did so as well, with no evidence of physical, cognitive or objective mental health impact. Unanswered questions about health and safety measures in schools require ongoing study. OPH has heard from parents, caregivers and educators concerned about the impact of the health and safety measures on their families; on the challenges of an isolated mask requirement, on emotional toll and on the divisiveness within schools, peer groups and families caused by required mask use. The voice of children, youth and their families would ideally also be an input into decision-making. What studies show to-date is that the biggest impacts on mental health of children and youth during the pandemic have likely related to social isolation and school closures as well as community-based closures and restrictions. The Science Table pointed out that schools are not isolated from communities and so implementation of temporary measures should not be done in isolation of the broader community measures for indoor spaces.

The data we have are insufficient to evaluate the impact of the spring 2022 mask requirement in OCDSB schools on hospital capacity.

Requiring masks for everyone, without a documented medical exemption, could place an additional burden on families and the health system as people seek a written note from a physician. A population-based survey of Ottawa residents in June 2022 demonstrated that 14% of people in Ottawa do not have a regular health care provider and 30% reported difficulty accessing a provider in the past 6 months. In some Ottawa neighbourhoods and amongst some populations, the proportion of people without a regular health care provider is much greater.

Requiring mask use

If a masking requirement is supported by the Board, the determination of an end date has challenges. While OPH reports weekly on levels of respiratory viruses in the community, OPH does not declare an end to the influenza season. Multiple viruses are being monitored and their impact on the population and health care system varies with community uptake of vaccines and immunity levels. Throughout the pandemic, OPH has maintained a standing recommendation to wear a mask to limit exposure to airborne and respiratory viruses in indoor spaces. CHEO is in a better position to comment on their critical care capacity as a trigger. As the CMOH is just now strongly recommending masking in schools, an end to a mask requirement could perhaps be tied to when the CMOH messaging reverts to general masking guidance.

The current context is different from that previously in the COVID-19 pandemic, where non-immune populations were facing exponential growth of a novel virus. Both Influenza and RSV have circulated widely in the population prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, we have a more prepared community with experience of what works – wash your hands, wear a well-fitted mask, stay home when sick – we have access to Rapid Antigen Tests, COVID-19 booster vaccines, and now the Influenza vaccine. Now is the time for the community to increase the use of the [layers of protection](#). The goal of increasing mask use now is not to stop all transmission but to limit transmission to people who may experience severe illness and slow transmission to ensure the healthcare system can manage to care for people through the peaks of illness this respiratory season.

Local measures can be an important element of protecting people from infections where there are unique local factors that need to be addressed.

With an active and mobile population like the one in Ontario, decisions on requirements to address the transmission of viral respiratory diseases would ideally be consistent across regions; over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, this is what has been shown to be most effective. The Province is in the best position to require mask use in indoor settings, given the province-wide challenge and their knowledge of how the healthcare system is managing.

Ottawa Public Health will continue to monitor the situation in Ottawa and assess all possible options.

What we can all do to help

Individual actions can add up to population-level protection when we use multiple layers of protection:

- **Masking:** Wear a well-fitted mask in indoor public settings, including in malls, schools and child care.
- **Vaccinations:** Anyone 6 months and older should stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccines, including a fall booster for anyone 5 years of age and older and a fall influenza vaccine. Anyone aged 5 and older can safely get their COVID-19 booster and flu vaccine at the same time.
- **Stay home if sick:** Monitor for symptoms. Stay home, even if symptoms are mild, and until you are feeling better.
- **Clean your hands:** Use hand sanitizer or wash hands often.
- **Clean surfaces:** Clean commonly touched surfaces frequently

Supports to assist people to stay home when they are sick are important. OPH continues to stress the value of flexibility from employers and access to sick leave.

Support from OPH and healthcare system partners

OPH will continue to use all communication channels to keep people in Ottawa informed about the current respiratory virus situation and measures that individuals and organizations can take to help. OPH has requested our partners increase messaging and approaches to promote mask use in their work and public spaces. OPH supports businesses, workplaces and organizations that encourage and welcome mask wearing.

OPH will also continue to work with schools and school board staff to receive reports of absenteeism and assess and address issues of infection prevention and control in schools.

OPH and health system partners are promoting public awareness of when to go to the hospital emergency departments, community-based [alternatives for primary care](#) and where to turn for help when a child has a respiratory illness. Hospitals are ensuring people have access to the care they need, including emergency care.

Thank you for the opportunity to add to your discussion about increasing mask use in schools.



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