

August 25, 2020

Ottawa-Carleton District School Board
133 Greenbank Road
Ottawa, ON K2H 6L3

Dear members of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board:

Thank you for your August 18 letter regarding the safe reopening of schools. Ottawa Public Health shares your interest in making the return to school as safe as possible, including limiting COVID-19 transmission and promoting the health of children and youth. Keeping schools open with in-person learning options is important for the overall health of our population.

Thank you also for extending the invitation for me to attend the Board meeting on Tuesday, August 25. As you can understand there are many competing priorities and unfortunately, we are unable to provide a representative from OPH. Please accept my comments provided through a video message in addition to the attached responses to your questions.

It is outside of OPH's purview to provide advice on school board priorities and OPH cannot comment on the limitations to operations that may exist. The responses are provided based on the most up to date scientific information available. Should you need more information on any of the topics included below, please do not hesitate to reach out. Ottawa Public Health looks forward to continuing the ongoing dialogue with school boards and stakeholders regarding school reopenings. Several Public Health Nurses will be present in the school community to provide support, and we will continue to update our School Resources COVID-19 webpage as more information becomes available.

Sincerely,



Vera Etches MD, MHSc, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health
Ottawa Public Health

Cc:
Trustees, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board
Senior Staff, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board
Corporate Records

Responses to OCDSB Questions

Face Masks

From a public health perspective, would this add significantly to the safety of our students and staff at school? Who should be exempted from such a face mask mandate? Are face shields an appropriate alternative for students who cannot safely manage face masks? Could you identify any best practices that would minimize the risk associated with improper mask handling, especially for younger students?

OPH Response

- Although there is a lack of evidence about the effectiveness of masks in younger children specifically, mask use in the general population has demonstrated its effectiveness at reducing community COVID-19 transmission.
- Ottawa Public Health cannot quantify the benefit that mandatory masking of younger children (K – grade 3) would provide in the safety of returning to school but expects that masking would provide some additional benefit. OPH recommends that younger children should not be discouraged from wearing masks if they are tolerated and if they are able to wear them properly.
- Ensuring proper mask size and fit and allowing a child to become accustomed to wearing a mask at home before wearing one in public may increase tolerance of mask wearing.
- If a young child tolerates a mask for only brief periods of time, schools and parents should consider prioritizing masking for situations when physical distancing may be more difficult to maintain (e.g., pick up and drop off).
- While masking K to grade 3 is likely to be beneficial, a decision on making masking in this age group mandatory should be made only after gaining experience. With age appropriate education regarding the benefits of masking and strong environmental supports in place, we can learn from the experience of voluntary compliance.
- A face shield is not a substitute for wearing a face mask as it does not filter respiratory droplets. A face shield may provide some protection for the wearer against droplets expelled from another person, however these droplets may still be inhaled around the shield. It could be considered a better alternative to no mask but it is not a replacement for a mask.

Class Size and Physical Distancing

With all the other precautionary measures in place, will physical distancing of one metre be sufficient regardless of the number of students in a classroom? With limited availability of funding for additional teachers and of additional suitable classroom spaces, do you have any advice on how to prioritize the use of our resources to address class size and distancing issues? Should we direct more resources to kindergarten

classes serving our youngest students, or to larger classes of our older elementary students? How effective are desktop barriers? Are there areas of the city where students may be at higher risk where we should be directing more resources?

OPH Response

- OPH recommends that physical distancing of 2 metres or more be maintained between individuals in school settings whenever possible. A [Sick Kids report](#) recommends a one metre separation and notes that the protection from one metre of separation may approach the benefits of a two metre separation (provided individuals are asymptomatic and adequate symptom screening practices are in place) furthermore, research has found that there is additional protection the greater the distance up to and beyond two metres.
- While 2 metres is the preferred distance and has been communicated publicly by OPH, the school environment would be considered a more controlled environment, thus shorter distances between 1m and 2m may be considered as a result of the added protections, such as masks, PPE, enhanced cleaning, and regular screening.
- There is no 'one-size fits all' approach to class sizes and physical distancing, as each school and classroom are unique in configuration, space and circumstances.
- The greater the number of children in the classroom the greater the risk of the introduction of COVID-19 into that cohort of students. Efforts should be made to reduce as much as possible the number of students in classrooms.
- At present time, evidence indicates that [younger children](#) tend to have less severe disease than older children. While emerging evidence suggests that children under the age of 10 may be less likely to transmit the virus as older children or adults, a review of evidence by the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) shows that children of all ages are capable of efficiently transmitting the virus.
- We do not yet understand the contribution of different age groups to spreading COVID-19 and how well the proposed mitigation measures will reduce these risks. Consequently, OPH cannot provide evidence-based recommendations related to age about where resources should be prioritized to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Decisions like these need to account for school-specific considerations which may impact spread of disease (classroom layout, classroom capacity, resources available) in addition to the differing education requirements of classes, grades and individuals.
- Schools should seek to distance students as far apart from others as possible and reduce the number of students and staff that come into close contact with each other. As per the [provincial guidance](#), cohorting and student mixing should take into consideration the number of children/youth that would be exposed should a student or staff test positive for COVID-19 with the goal of minimizing the number of contacts.
- We have not been able to find any information about the effectiveness of desktop barriers. In general, physical barriers are thought to provide some limited protection for individuals sharing the same space, first by preventing people from getting too

close and also by preventing particles or droplets exhaled by one person from entering the breathing zone of another.

- COVID-19 can be transmitted between individuals sharing spaces when the physical barrier is not a full enclosure (e.g., a plexiglass sheet with open sides in a classroom). It is important to understand that desktop barriers, if used as part of a school reopening strategy, represent only one of many components and interventions that would be required to reduce potential transmission of COVID-19.
- As with other workplaces, occupational health and safety of school staff is the responsibility of the employer, in keeping with provincial guidelines from the Ministry of Labour.
- Keeping COVID-19 transmission low at the community level will be key to reducing the likelihood of introducing the virus into schools. There has been variation in levels of COVID-19 activity in Ottawa and some neighbourhoods have higher rates of COVID-19 than others. OPH will continue to monitor and should targeted issues arise. We will communicate with the Director of Education.

Screening, Testing, Contact Tracing, Self-Isolation and Quarantine

Many parents are anxious to know the specifics of public health protocols for dealing with instances of students or staff who contract COVID-19 and when and how decisions might be made to shut down one or more classes within a school or to close a school if there is an outbreak. When will details of these protocols be published?

OPH Response

OPH is awaiting further guidance from the Province on outbreak protocols in schools, guidance is expected in the following days. We will update our [Covid-19 and Schools](#) webpage to ensure parents, teachers, school staff and others have the latest information. In the interim, OPH is taking the usual approach of identifying people in close contact with someone who has confirmed COVID-19 and will be directly contacting any families who need to ensure their children self-isolate or present for COVID-19 testing at an appropriate time.

Itinerant Staff and Movement of Specialist Staff within a School

What additional precautions should be in place for itinerant staff and occasional teachers who may serve more than one school? What additional precautions should be in place for teachers and educational assistants who may move from class to class within a school to deliver specialized instruction or support to students?

OPH Response

- It is very important that staff who serve more than one school maintain a log of the schools and classes they have attended, in order to facilitate contact tracing.

- The same would apply for staff who may move from class to class. The health and safety of students and school staff are the responsibility of the board. It is important for all staff to receive adequate training on school procedures and protocols, such as proper PPE use, and follow all the other factors to increase protection, such as use of masks, physical distancing practices and vigilance with hand hygiene.
- Schools should limit the movement of staff moving between and within schools as much as possible, recognizing that movement of staff in this manner increases the number of contacts that staff have and the possibility of introducing COVID-19 into new setting or group of individuals. This could be achieved through administrative and scheduling practices. It is extremely important that all school employees be screened for COVID-19 symptoms each day, prior to beginning their workday.
- All school staff must take care to maintain physical distancing with other adults in the school at all times, including in lunch/break rooms.

Ventilation

With a mixture of older and newer school facilities and HVAC systems in the OCDSB, can you provide advice with regard to prioritizing upgrades to existing systems and/or short-term solutions for situations requiring immediate attention?

OPH Response

- Decisions related to prioritizing upgrades must be based on local context.
- In general ventilating indoor environments with fresh air, whether by increasing the outdoor air ratio of the HVAC system or by opening windows, will dilute the air exhaled by the occupants, and reduce the risk of infection with COVID-19.
- General information about HVAC systems and the spread of COVID-19 below:
 - COVID-19 is primarily transmitted via direct contact and droplets propelled for various distances. While ventilation of indoor environments with fresh air is important, physical distancing; hygiene measures, such as hand hygiene, cough and sneeze etiquette, respiratory source control; and environmental cleaning and disinfection, are cornerstones of reducing transmission risk.
 - Based on available evidence there is no indication that COVID-19 can be transmitted through air conditioning units or ventilation systems to individuals in other units/rooms serviced by the same heating, ventilation/air-conditioning system.
 - The general objectives for preventing airborne transmission in buildings are to prevent air flowing from infected areas into common areas, and to reduce the overall concentration of infectious particles. Depending on the building type and system, one or more of the following may be relevant:
 - Ensure that mechanical ventilation is operating as intended to supply the required design ventilation rates. If ventilation rates have been reduced as an energy-saving measure, consideration should be given to returning these to normal;

- Ensure that corridor pressurization (if in place) is sufficient to prevent air from areas of isolation flowing out into corridors where other people are passing;
- Ensure that filters are clean. Although typical residential filters (MERV 8-13 filters) are unlikely to effectively reduce airborne SARS-CoV-2, ensuring that filters are clean is important for adequate flow rates. Filters should not be upgraded without consulting a professional;
- Within individual units, the Public Health Agency of Canada recommends increasing natural ventilation (i.e., opening a window if weather permits) to lessen the risk of transmission.

Containing Community Spread

Recognizing that success in containing the spread of COVID-19 when schools reopen will be contingent on a collective community effort to support multiple precautionary measures, could you please comment on the appropriateness and adequacy of the combination of measures that are being implemented? Are there more actions that could and should be taken?

OPH Response

- Keeping COVID-19 transmission low at the community level will be key to helping prevent introduction of the virus into schools. Early detection and responding to outbreak clusters in schools will be vital to controlling the transmission of the virus in the community. There are concrete actions that parents, and all of us, can continue that will make a difference to the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools.
- We must help limit COVID-19 from entering schools in the first place. Data has shown children who test positive for COVID-19 often were exposed to the virus from adult family/household members – often parents.
- Wearing a mask, maintaining adequate physical distance, staying home when sick and exercising hand hygiene remain key to containing community spread.
- We continue to see high uptake of public health measures such as physical distancing and mask use, which if maintained and even improved, will continue to help in keeping community transmission at a manageable level.