

November 18, 2021

Memorandum to: Chairs of District School Boards
Directors of Education
School Authorities

From: Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

Subject: **Fall/Winter 2021-22 COVID-19: Health and Safety Update
for Schools**

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to keeping schools safe and open for in-person learning.

The Ministry of Education is committed to continual review of health and safety guidance during this school year, so that we can best adapt to the broader health trends while providing students with a more normal learning experience.

With the December break approaching, the purpose of this memo is to provide an overview of the key actions that the ministry, in consultation and partnership with the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH), is taking to help mitigate against any further impact on the health and well-being of school-aged children as well as moving toward a to return to pre-pandemic learning environments. These actions include:

1. Introducing time-limited health and safety measures, particularly in elementary schools, where most children are not yet eligible for vaccination;
2. Additional testing supports through the provision of rapid antigen screening kits for all students in Ontario to minimize any potential disruptions in learning and support a safer return to the classroom in January 2022, following the winter break;
3. Making rapid antigen tests available for unvaccinated students and coaches prior to participating in high contact, indoor, extra-curricular sports (e.g., basketball) in schools for boards who choose to implement this screening measure and that have the support of their local public health unit (PHU);
4. Communicating and reinforcing existing federal protocols for international travel;
5. Permitting school boards to resume a regular secondary timetable of 4 courses a day for the Winter semester, or earlier, with support by the local medical officer of health and;
6. Confirming that the remaining COVID-19 funding supports will be provided to school boards for the second half of the school year, including access of up to two per cent from school board reserve funds.

These targeted measures and supports will provide another layer of protection, particularly for unvaccinated individuals in elementary schools. They will also assist in returning secondary schools to a more normal student experience, which is supported by one of the highest rates of immunization for youth 12-17 in Canada and will support student mental health and learning.

1. Time-limited health and safety measures in schools:

To mitigate risks associated with the colder weather and gatherings/travel over the winter holidays and to limit the number of contacts for unvaccinated populations especially in elementary schools, the ministry is implementing enhanced health and safety measures for schools. While this approach will allow for vaccine rates to rise in children, following the approval by Health Canada of a COVID-19 vaccine for children 5-11 years old, these measures will remain in place until the OCMOH recommends they be lifted. To allow for more time to roll-out the COVID-19 vaccine, once it is approved by the federal regulator, the Chief Medical Officer of Health has recommended a cautious approach including:

- Virtual-only parent teacher conferences/interviews in elementary and secondary schools;
- Starting in January, virtual-only assemblies in elementary schools unless a local PHU/school board chooses to enforce this measure earlier; and
- Restricting lunches/breaks to classroom cohort when indoors, where distancing between cohorts cannot be maintained in elementary schools.

Schools and educators are encouraged to support as normal conditions as possible within the classroom cohorts during lunch and breaks (e.g., allowing students to sit in groupings and/or circles to facilitate engagement and conversation between peers with as much distancing as possible within a cohort).

In addition, elementary and secondary schools will be required to **implement daily on-site confirmation of screening prior to/upon arrival at school for at least two weeks following winter break**. School boards are encouraged to continue this practice throughout the year, or as prescribed by a local public health unit.

For further details on required health and safety measures for the 2021-22 school year, please see [COVID-19: Health, Safety and Operational Guidance for Schools \(2021-22\)](#). Key changes have been made to the following sections: Introduction (i.e., secondary) and Protective Strategies (i.e, cafeteria use and lunch protocols, assemblies, and music).

2. Rapid antigen screening for students for winter break period

If recommended by a local medical officer of health, to avoid whole school closures, targeted rapid antigen screening in high risk areas will continue to be available.

In addition to the PCR take home initiative rolling out across the province, to support the safe return of students after the winter break, the ministry in partnership with MOH, OCMOH and the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services (MGCS) will provide public schools with rapid antigen screening kits for all students in Ontario. Before the winter break, every student will be able take home a BTNX rapid antigen screening kit that contains five tests. These test kits will support all students to complete **voluntary screening at home prior to the return to the classroom in January.**

School boards will receive shipments of rapid antigen screening kits using the same distribution locations as PPE. Shipments began the week of November 15th. School board central deliveries are planned to be completed by December 10th and school-based deliveries are to be completed by December 16th. **School board delivery locations will be required to coordinate pick-up / delivery of kits to individual schools. Schools will be required to ensure every student is sent home with a rapid antigen screening kit when leaving for the winter break in December.** Students are not required to complete the rapid antigen test in order to return to the classroom in January 2022. Use of the tests are voluntary but use by students is encouraged.

For students who choose to use rapid antigen screening kits, it is recommended students conduct the rapid antigen tests every 3-4 days over the holiday break on every Monday and Thursday beginning December 23, until all five tests have been used.

Tests are packaged in convenient boxes of five (5), which enables all students to receive an individual box of tests for at-home screening. If a student tests positive using the rapid antigen screening, they must follow their [local public health guidance](#), which includes isolating and getting a confirmatory test at a [local testing site](#) as soon as possible.

These rapid antigen tests are not equivalent to PCR tests, and any students who have symptoms of COVID-19 infection or who are high risk contacts of cases should still obtain PCR testing.

Instructions for using BTNX COVID-19 rapid antigen tests will be sent through regional offices, along with a “letter to school communities” that schools will be required to print and send home (or email) with each student alongside the rapid antigen screening kit before the winter break. The letter to school communities will include information such as: recommended frequency of testing; when to use the rapid antigen screening kits; what to do based on results, etc. This information will be sent to school boards by regional managers in the near future.

3. Rapid antigen screening testing for high contact, indoor, extra curricular sports

The ministry will support the provision of rapid antigen screening tests for unvaccinated students and coaches prior to participating in high contact, indoor, extra-curricular sports (e.g., basketball, hockey). These tests will be available for school boards that have the support of the local medical officer of health. This measure is optional and the responsibility for implementation, including required reporting on use of tests, monitoring, verification, distribution and compliance with necessary privacy obligations under applicable legislation rests with the school board. If a school board has the support of a local medical officer of health to implement rapid antigen screening for this specific circumstance, please contact your regional Field Services Office.

It is important to note that rapid antigen screening is not a replacement for vaccination. Vaccination represents our most effective strategy to prevent COVID-19 transmission and we are pleased to see the growing vaccination rates for school staff and eligible students. While we anticipate the approval of vaccines for children aged 5-11 and the subsequent implementation of widespread vaccine campaigns as another protective measure to support safe and healthy school environments, it is important that we remain vigilant and pursue strategies that limit the spread of COVID-19 in schools. We are determined to ensure safe and healthy learning environments which is vital to keeping schools open and students learning.

4. Winter break travel protocols

With the holiday season approaching, it is anticipated that many staff, students and families will choose to make travel plans for the December break. As we prepare for this, we would like to remind school boards to communicate to staff and families of students, the need to follow federal directives related to international travel and quarantine requirements. By working together to share and discuss this information, we can help to ensure everyone has a healthy and safer holiday period.

Individuals must follow [federal testing and quarantine requirements](#) upon return from any international travel. This includes not attending school or child care for the 14 days following a return from international travel for individuals advised to quarantine or not attend school/child care upon their return.

While unvaccinated children under the age of 12 who travelled internationally with a fully vaccinated companion are exempt from federal quarantine, they **are not permitted to** attend school or child care for 14 days following their return.

Generally, individuals (staff and students) who are fully vaccinated are exempt from federal quarantine and may continue to attend school or child care. Individuals with all other federal quarantine exemptions (e.g., travelling for cross-border custody arrangements; travelling for medical treatment) may also continue to attend school or child care.

All staff, particularly unvaccinated staff considering international travel, must take into consideration federal testing and quarantine requirements for themselves and their dependents.

5. Winter Timetabling for Secondary Schools

For the winter semester starting in February 2022, all secondary schools province-wide will be able to resume a regular timetabling model of 4 courses a day, unless not supported by the local medical officer of health based on local epidemiology. This move is supported by high rates of vaccination amongst youth aged 12-17 across the province.

If a school board has the support of their local PHU to change their timetabling approach sooner than February 2022, they can resume this model prior to the start of the winter semester.

To support the return to regular timetabling, the ministry will continue to work closely with the Ministry of Health (MOH), including the OCMOH, on any updates to the Ministry of Education's operational guidance on the management of COVID-19 in schools.

Although the intention is to continue full time in-person learning, school boards are asked to continue to have plans in place to pivot to other modes of delivery if necessary on a localized basis while still providing students with access to the full breadth of courses (e.g., alternative timetables and full remote delivery).

6. 2021-22 COVID-19 Funding Supports

As announced on May 4, 2021, to support the continued safe operation of schools in 2021-22, the ministry is providing temporary COVID-19 funding supports, with more than \$1.6 billion in resources available to school boards throughout the year.

At the time of the announcement, school boards were expected to budget for approximately half of the more than \$1.6 billion in resources to support the first half of the school year, including access to one per cent from their reserves. The resources related to the Grants for Student Needs (GSN) investments of \$104.6 million as well as Priorities and Partnership Funds (PPF) investments to improve connectivity for remote learning technology of \$20 million, and learning recovery and renewal of \$20 million, were already released in their entirety for the full year.

While there is important progress being made in the fight against COVID-19, the ministry remains focused on ensuring safe learning environments for students. As a result, the ministry is confirming that the remaining COVID-19 funding supports will be provided to school boards for the second half of the school year, including access of up to two per cent from school board reserve funds. If a school board anticipates an in-year deficit greater than two per cent of its operating allocation, Minister approval will be required.

The ministry will proceed with executing the COVID-19 funding transfer payment agreements and provide them to school boards in the coming weeks. In addition, the ministry will update the 2021-22 Education Finance Information System (EFIS) Revised Estimates Document Set to reflect the increase in the reserves limit, with additional details to be shared with the sector shortly.

As a reminder, information on COVID-19 funding supports for the 2021-22 school year, including funding amounts by school board can be found in memorandum [2021:B07 Planning for the 2021-22 School Year](#) and are summarized below:

- \$383.6 million to help support school boards in having staffing in place to navigate a safe school year (\$304.0 million via PPF and \$79.6 million through the Language Grant in the GSN);
- \$65.5 million for enhanced cleaning protocols and other health and safety measures in student transportation;
- \$59.0 million for special education, mental health and well-being, and equity initiatives (including an annual \$10.0 million investment as part of the GSN);
- \$29.4 million for increased costs related to school operations in recognition of the need to operate ventilation systems longer and replace filters more frequently;
- \$20.0 million for re-engaging students and reading assessment supports;
- \$34.9 million in additional technology funding (including an annual \$14.9 million investment to support technology such as devices for students in the GSN and \$20.0 million in connectivity supports for remote learning technology);
- up to \$450.0 million to provide required personal protective equipment (PPE) and critical supplies and equipment (e.g. cleaning supplies) through the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services and the pandemic stockpile;
- \$86.0 million to support school-focused nurses in public health units and testing in schools; and
- up to \$508.0 million for school boards to access up to two per cent of reserves to support COVID-related expenses.

School boards are also being provided with additional flexibility from the \$304.0 million staffing investment to address other COVID-19 emerging pressures, such as lower than expected enrolment. In addition, in recognition of the additional work school boards are undertaking to support the successful and safe roll out of the Instructions issued by the OCMOH, school boards may use up to five per cent of this funding allocation to support COVID-19 related implementation costs, such as the vaccination disclosure policy and any costs that may be related to hosting clinics for school-aged children and their families.

The ministry will continue to work with the OCMOH and local PHUs to adjust health and safety requirements (e.g., more or less restrictive measures) and update guidance as required, based on the public health environment and province-wide metrics.

Adjustments may be made at a regional level and local PHUs may also require schools to adopt additional or enhanced health and safety measures based on local risk assessment and epidemiology. We encourage school boards to continue to work closely with their local PHUs on their health and safety plans.

By following these requirements, we can all enjoy a safer holiday season and support the continued operation of in-person learning. We are encouraged by the progress made to date and we remain committed to ensuring healthy and safe school environments.

Sincerely,

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