

August 3, 2021

Memorandum to: Chairs of District School Boards
Directors of Education
Secretary/Treasurers of School Authorities

From: Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister of Education

Subject: **COVID-19: Health, Safety and Operational Guidance for schools 2021-22**

Collectively, we recognize the importance of returning students to a more normal, full-time, in-person learning environment. For Ontario students, nothing matters more. It is key to their well-being and long-term success.

As students head back to class for the 2021-22 school year, and with the safety of school communities top of mind, the ministry announced in May 2021 that it will continue to provide ongoing COVID-19 funding supports, with more than \$1.6 billion in resources available to school boards throughout the year, supporting mental and physical health and learning recovery, as detailed further below.

As the public health situation evolves over the coming months, the ministry will continue to consult with and act on the advice of public health officials, including Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. While the success of our province's vaccination program is promising in providing protection against COVID-19 and its variants, greater vaccination coverage is required across all age cohorts, recognizing Ontario's youngest learners are not currently eligible for a vaccine. As recommended by Ontario's Science Table, the Hospital for Sick Children, and the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, this necessitates a cautious start to reopening schools. The ministry will continue to monitor the COVID-19 situation with the aim of creating a more normal experience for Ontario students, as recommended by Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health.

As students head back to class, I want to thank you for your continued collaboration on this important matter.

2021-22 School Year Health and Safety Guidance:

As we look toward the 2021-22 school year, we will continue to focus on the health and well-being of students, families and staff, while aiming to return to as normal conditions as are safely possible. That is why, based on advice from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH), province-wide in September:

- Students will return to in-person learning daily for the full school day (5 instructional hours). As noted in the [May 2021 school year planning memo](#), remote learning will remain an option;
- Students in Grades 1-12 and staff will be required to wear masks while indoors and on student transportation (encouraged for students in Kindergarten), while not being required outdoors, and;
- Extra-curricular and inter-school sport activities will be permitted with some modifications.

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 \(2021-22\)](#). This guidance aligns with and is in addition to the earlier guidance provided in memorandum [2021:B07 Planning for the 2021-22 School Year](#) released in May 2021.

We also encourage school boards offering in-person summer school in August and schools beginning their school year in early August to transition to the 2021-22 guidance as soon as they are able to do so.

The Ministry will continue to work with the OCMOH and local public health units (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 targeted health and safety measures based on local experience and data. We encourage school boards to continue to work closely with their local PHUs on their reopening plans.

Ventilation:

We recognize the extensive work that has been undertaken by all school boards over the past year to optimize and improve ventilation and filtration in schools.

In the 2020-21 school year, school boards were provided over \$550 million to support improvements in ventilation and air quality:

- The province provided \$100 million in funding for immediate measures to optimize and improve ventilation in the 2020-21 school year. This funding has supported immediate improvements in all publicly funded schools.
- As a result, in schools with mechanical ventilation:
 - 99% of the systems have been assessed and/or recommissioned to optimize air flow
 - 92% of the filters are being changed more frequently and/or using higher grade air filters, including MERV-13 rated air filters
 - 91% are running systems longer
 - 87% have increased fresh air intake
 - Over 50,000 standalone HEPA filter units and other ventilation devices purchased.

- Canada and Ontario announced \$450 million in funding specifically for HVAC and window projects through the COVID-19 Resilience Funding stream of the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program. This funding is supporting 2,052 ventilation improvement projects in over 1,670 schools and co-located childcare facilities across 70 school boards. Most of these projects are underway in preparation for the 2021-22 school year.

For the year ahead, school boards are expected to continue optimizing air quality in classrooms and learning environments through improving ventilation and/or filtration. This is a key element in the multiple protective strategies to support healthy and safe learning environments for students and staff.

School boards are required to ensure ventilation systems in all schools are inspected and in good working order prior to the start of the school year and continue inspection and maintenance throughout year. Inspections can be done internally by school board staff or by third parties.

For schools with full mechanical ventilation, school boards are expected to continue to:

- use the highest-grade filters possible, preferably MERV 13 filters
- undertake frequent filter changes through the school year
- operate ventilation systems 2 hours or more before and after school occupancy
- calibrate HVAC systems for maximum air flow and increased fresh air intake

This guidance also applies to schools with mechanical ventilation for parts of schools, such as additions.

For schools or parts of schools without mechanical ventilation, school boards are expected to place standalone High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filter units in all classrooms and learning environments. The deployment of additional HEPA filters and broader air ventilation enhancements are consistent with the expert advice of Ontario's Science Table, the Hospital for Sick Children, and the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. These units ensure particle filtration of air and improve air exchange. These units must be sized for the classroom or learning environment that is being used. In larger classrooms and learning environments, more than one HEPA unit may be required.

For schools with mechanical ventilation, school boards are expected to place a standalone HEPA filter unit in every occupied Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) classroom as an additional health and safety measure to recognize that JK-SK students are not masked in the classroom.

In addition, school boards are encouraged to support outdoor education where possible, and open windows where this augments ventilation for classrooms and learning environments.

An updated ventilation best practice guideline for school boards for the 2021-22 school year will be released as a separate memo.

Vaccination and Public Health Supports:

We know that vaccination is an important tool to help stop the spread of COVID-19 and allow students, families, and staff to safely resume normal activities. We ask that school boards work with local PHUs over the coming weeks to build on progress to date and reach out to families to promote vaccination prior to the 2021-22 school year. We ask you to support vaccination opportunities as well as 'catch up' opportunities in schools, where appropriate, for other vaccine preventable diseases.

To assist schools and families, the Ministry will continue to work with the Ministry of Health to support local PHUs and school boards with the planning and prioritization of public health nursing and other school health supports for the fall.

Testing:

Our testing strategy in schools is grounded in guidance from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and reflects close collaboration with local public health units, schools and Ontario Health. This guidance will take into account different factors such as if the individual has symptoms, is a close contact of someone who has been diagnosed with COVID and the vaccination status of the individual.

When an individual is identified as needing testing under the guidelines, where possible, they will be offered a testing approach that is as minimally invasive as possible (e.g. nasal, mouth and saliva testing).

When tests are indicated we will make them quickly accessible through multiple approaches (e.g. assessment centres and community testing sites) with a focus on reducing barriers to access and recognizing the unique needs of certain communities and geographies. When the guidance indicates a need for prompt testing for an individual, starting in September we will initiate a program in some secondary schools where student and staff will be provided with a test kit to take home. The test can be self-administered or administered by another person and returned to an approved drop-off location. This testing approach is in addition to locally-driven testing initiatives, and may be expanded throughout the school year to additional secondary and elementary schools based on uptake, effectiveness and demand.

Regardless of how or where the testing is performed, once the test has been collected and submitted to a provincial lab we are committed to a quick processing time. We recognize the necessity for quick turn around time for tests for working parents, students, and education staff. The province has made steady investments in our testing capacity. With a focus on reducing student and staff absenteeism, and impacts on working parents, consistent with the provincial standard, more than 80% of test results are available within 2 days; and most within 24 hours.

These efforts to ensure that testing is done quickly and effectively will minimize time away for students, children and staff while also reducing the impact on their families.

Health and Physical Education:

Being active has a positive impact on physical fitness and is an important element of achievement, mental health, well-being and overall student success. Based on advice from the OCMOH, extra-curricular and inter-school sport activities will be permitted with some modifications province-wide in September.

A cautious approach for sports in schools is recommended by the OCMOH for the start of the 2021-22 school year. Guidance regarding sports activities in schools will be monitored and adapted in response to public health trends.

As outlined in the COVID-19: Health, Safety and Operational Guidance for Schools (2021-2022), high-contact and low-contact sports are permitted outdoors. In indoor settings, only low-contact sports are permitted at this time provided physical distancing can be maintained between cohorts. If distancing requirements cannot be maintained low-contact sports may still be played indoors when wearing a mask.

To support schools in determining which sport activities are permitted indoors for the start of the school year, the Ministry of Education has provided some examples to support application of the guidance. This information will be updated to align with changes in the public health environment as required. See Appendix A for further details.

Student Mental Health and Well-Being:

Promoting positive mental health and ensuring a supportive and inclusive environment for all students is all the more important as we return to in-person learning. Comprehensive supports for student mental health and well-being should continue to be prioritized in all planning. This includes support for healthy, active living, along with nutritious food and a healthy environment to help students reach their full potential. To support positive mental health, we have provided over \$175M over two years – a record level of investment and recognition of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on students and young people. This significant school-based investment has enabled the hiring of more mental health workers, the launch of new supports, and early intervention programs.

As we reopen schools to in-person learning, priority should be placed on understanding the needs of students and collaborating with community partners to deliver culturally relevant supports for students. Remedial programs should be targeted to students who experience greater barriers to achievement and wellbeing.

Plans should consider inclusive ways to welcome all parents/caregivers and families as important members of the school communities and to value peer relationships, and promote family mental health. Planning should also consider re-engagement of those students who were not able to fully participate in learning over the past school year,

and children who may have been temporarily separated from parents/caregivers or may have had to assume additional responsibilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Continued COVID-19 Funding Supports:

As noted in memorandum [2021:B07 Planning for the 2021-22 School Year](#), to support the continued safe operation of schools in 2021-22, the ministry is providing for another year of COVID-19 funding supports totalling more than \$1.6 billion in resources available to school boards.

New or enhanced provisions include:

- \$383.6M for additional staffing, including \$79.6M in the GSN to support students requiring language programs;
- \$20.0M to support learning recovery and renewal;
- \$29.4M to support increased operating costs such as those related to ventilation systems and frequent filter replacements;
- \$40.0M over two years for connectivity for remote learning technology such as improvements to connectivity with school buildings; and
- Up to \$507.9M in access to reserves. Where school boards access more than a total of two per cent of their reserves over the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, the ministry will provide funding to cover the excess use of reserves up to the equivalent of two per cent of their 2021-22 operating allocation.

A number of the 2020-21 funding supports are continued, including:

- \$65.5M for enhanced cleaning protocols and other health and safety measures in student transportation;
- \$59.1M for special education, mental health and well-being, and equity initiatives;
- \$86.0M for school-focused nurses in public health units and testing;
- Up to \$450.0M for personal protective equipment & critical supplies and equipment; and
- \$14.9M for technology such as renewal or replacement of devices.

We are encouraged by the progress made to date and remain committed to ensuring more normal, healthy and safe school environments for students and staff that meet the educational and development needs of students.

Thank you again, for your ongoing commitment to the students of Ontario.

Sincerely,

Stephen Lecce
Minister

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

c: Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health
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