



Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board
Believing, Achieving, Serving

December 3, 2021

Re: COVID-19 Health and Safety Update for Schools

Dear Parents and Guardians:

This week begins the beautiful season of Advent with its welcome message of hope, love, joy, and peace. It is a time, Pope Benedict XVI tells us, when “the whole church is called to be hope, for itself and for the world.”

In a world grown weary by COVID-19, we are starting to see glimmers of hope and a gradual return to normalcy in our schools, communities, and homes as we slowly rebuild and recover from the pandemic. Over the past couple of weeks, there has been a slight loosening of public health measures as the number of COVID-19 cases in our schools continues to remain low. These changes, which include the lifting of the recess cohort requirement for Grade 7 & 8 and visitor access restriction for in-school childcare programs, follow a Ministry review of health and safety guidance for schools within the context of broader health trends and mark a “cautious” return to more normal routines.

Rapid-antigen screening for students during Christmas Break

With Christmas holidays fast approaching, caution is key not only to our students’ and staff’s safe return but to our return to pre-pandemic life. To help mitigate against any further impact on the health and well-being of students, the Ministry of Education has provided BTNX rapid antigen screening kits for students to use during the break. The kits, which contain five tests, will enable students to complete voluntary screening at home prior to the return to the classroom in January. Kits will be distributed to all students before the Christmas break, along with a “letter to school communities” with instructions on how and when to administer the test. Students who test positive using the rapid antigen screening must follow [local public health guidance](#), which includes isolating and getting a confirmatory test at a [local testing site](#) as soon as possible.

School-based PCR take-home testing

To facilitate timely access to testing, the Ministry of Education has provided take-home polymerase chain reaction (PCR) self-collection kits for schools. Students with COVID-19 symptoms and students who have been identified as close contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case will be able to pick up PCR self-collection kits at school, complete the specimen self-collection at home and drop the specimen off at a participating pharmacy. Participation is completely voluntary; students, staff and families will still have the option to seek testing through community-based testing sites. The purpose of the Ministry initiative is to support continued in-person school attendance in schools with multiple cases of COVID-19 by identifying and quickly isolating any additional COVID-19 cases. More information on the availability and distribution of kits will be provided by the school.

Daily Screening verification

Following the Christmas Break, students (K-Grade 12) will once again be required to provide confirmation that they have taken and passed the daily [COVID-19 school screening](#) upon arrival at school. This confirmation of a “pass” screening result can be the green check mark from the online screening, or a parent/guardian signature on the [attestation calendar](#). Screening verification will begin on Monday, January 3, 2022, and will be in effect for a minimum of two weeks. Screening verification will be required any time there is a pause in learning, e.g., March Break, as an added measure to protect our students and staff from COVID-19.

Paediatric vaccine for 5 to 11-year-old children

While rapid antigen screening kits are an important tool for managing the spread of COVID-19, vaccination remains the most effective protection against the virus and its variants. Early last week, the province announced the availability of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for children 5 to 11 years of age. As of November 23rd, parents are now able to [book an appointment](#) for their child to receive the vaccine. The 5 to 11-year-old vaccination rollout is a major initiative of Health Canada to protect children, keep children in school, and get Ontario back on track to normalcy. Provincial data shows that school-aged children currently account for approximately one-third of COVID-19 cases. As we have seen in our HWCDSB schools, COVID-19 is having a far greater impact on young children than other school populations who are now largely vaccinated against the virus. While we strongly encourage all eligible persons to get the COVID-19 vaccine, we recognize that some parents/guardians may be hesitant or concerned. We encourage parents and caregivers to read the attached letter from Dr. Kieran Moore, Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, to learn more about [COVID-19 vaccines for children and youth | COVID-19 \(coronavirus\) in Ontario](#).

In-school COVID-19 vaccine clinics

COVID-19 vaccines are available to children and youth at a number of family friendly clinics throughout Hamilton. Although vaccine clinics are not currently offered in our HWCDSB schools, the board is in discussions with Hamilton Public Health Services to host in-school vaccine clinics for children and youth in the new year. These in-school clinics will be offered after-hours and on weekends, and vaccines for children aged 5 to 11 will require parent/caregiver consent.

International travel

Families who travel during the Christmas Break must follow [federal testing and quarantine requirements](#) upon their return. Please be reminded that although unvaccinated children under the age of 12 who travel internationally with a fully vaccinated adult are exempt from federal quarantine, they are not permitted to attend school or child care for 14 days following their return.

Secondary Learning Model

The Ministry of Education has released new health and safety guidance which allows secondary schools to return to a regular timetabling model of four courses a day starting in the new year. This move is supported by high rates of vaccination among youth aged 12-17. HWCDSB secondary schools will transition to the traditional 4-course day in Semester 2, which begins on Wednesday, February 2, 2022.

Inclement weather

As we have learned from this pandemic, school closures need no longer pause learning. In the event that transportation is cancelled and/or schools closed due to inclement weather, students who are learning in-school will have the opportunity to participate in learning activities via the myClass Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). These learning activities are designed to reinforce and supplement classroom learning. Teachers will be available online to support students during regular school hours. Students in the elementary virtual school will continue their learning as normal without interruption.

Athletics / Extracurriculars

Clubs, activities, athletics, bands and extra-curriculars continue to be permitted in indoor settings, subject to masking, physical distancing and other health and safety requirements. Eligible student athletes participating in high contact sports are required to show proof of double vaccination or agree to regular antigen testing. In our elementary schools, CYO sports will be kicking off the winter season this January with Grade 7/8 Girls' Basketball and Grade 7/8 Boys' Volleyball. The plan is to extend indoor sports programming to Grade 4-6 students after the March Break.

As we return to more normal routines, we want to recognize the outstanding work/service of staff throughout our Catholic school system. Their commitment, together with the understanding and support of students and parents, has been invaluable as we continue to navigate these unprecedented times.

Advent

In his *Angelus* address on the First Sunday in Advent, Pope Francis called on Catholics to "be vigilant" and to persevere in prayer. "The secret to being vigilant is prayer," he stressed, saying that prayer always keeps the lamp of our heart lit, bringing us back to God, and allowing us to focus "on what matters, on the purpose of existence." During these next weeks leading up to Christmas, we invite you to visit the Diocese's [Advent Resource for Families](#) and, as a family, carve out a special time for prayer.

Through the intercession of our Blessed Mother, we pray that our God of love and hope showers you and your family with all of His Blessings.



Patrick J. Daly
Chairperson of the Board



David Hansen
Director of Education