

Important COVID-19 Update for School Families as the Province Reopens

Dear Students, Families, and Staff:

Thank you for all you are doing to protect yourselves, your families, your schools, and your communities from COVID-19. As we mark two weeks since our return to in-person learning, and as the province begins gradually reopening, we are reassured that absence rates at local schools have remained stable. We know that public health measures work to limit the spread of illness in the school setting. However, we also recognize that the return to in-person learning can come with mixed feelings.

As you are aware, there is a new approach to managing COVID-19, both in schools, and across the province. The pandemic landscape has changed, and the Omicron variant can spread quickly. In response, we have had to change the way we respond. In general, intensive testing of symptomatic individuals, routine case and contact follow-up, and dismissing classroom cohorts is no longer an effective strategy in low-risk settings. Instead of focusing on where the virus is, we are focusing on where it is going and minimizing transmission with public health measures. We are supportive of these changes, and recognize that this is a shift from the focus on reporting individual cases, to a population-based approach that monitors school absences.

This change in our approach is better suited to address a virus like Omicron, and will also limit unnecessary disruptions to in-person learning. **In-person learning remains the best choice for healthy child development and the many health benefits of children remaining in schools outweigh the risks.** We have seen very limited transmission in schools to date, robust public health measures remain in place in schools, and enhanced isolation requirements will help ensure the individuals most likely to be contagious with COVID-19 are not present in the school setting.

Changes to Management of COVID-19 in Schools

While these changes came into effect upon the return to in-person learning, they are summarized here for your information:

- **Exposures that occur ONLY in the school setting are now typically considered low-risk – due to public health precautions that are in place in schools.** As a result, public health will no longer be dismissing cohorts in response to symptomatic individuals or confirmed positive cases.
- Any dismissals or closures of a school will be based on operational requirements (e.g., staffing shortages) determined by the school and/or school board.
- Parents/caregivers will NOT receive a letter from public health to advise them of a case or suspected case of COVID-19 at their school. Without widespread access to testing, it is not possible to know about or follow-up with every confirmed or presumed COVID-19 case.
- Molecular (PCR or rapid molecular testing) has been prioritized for certain high-risk groups. In general, school staff and students are not eligible for a molecular (PCR) test at this time.
- Anyone who tests positive on a rapid antigen test OR does not pass the screening tool is considered to have COVID-19. They do not need to get a confirmatory molecular test (PCR test) or notify public health or their school, but should notify their high-risk contacts (social,

North Hastings

1P Manor Ln., L1-024, Bancroft, ON K0L 1C0
T: 1-800-267-2803 | **F:** 613-332-5418

Prince Edward County

Suite 1, 35 Bridge St., Picton, ON K0K 2T0
T: 613-966-5500 | **F:** 613-476-2919

Quinte West

499 Dundas St. W., Trenton, ON K8V 6C4
T: 613-966-5500 | **F:** 613-965-6535

household, workplace) of their exposure. More information can be found at [Ontario.ca/exposed](https://ontario.ca/exposed) or hpePublicHealth.ca.

- **Schools are not required to assist with notifying the contacts of a case in the school setting since contacts will be considered low-risk due to public health precautions that are in place.**

Absence Monitoring and Reporting

- Staff and students are asked to inform the school of absences regardless of the reason.
- To support ongoing monitoring and transparency related to COVID-19, schools will report student and staff absences to the Ministry of Education daily through the Absence Reporting Tool (ART). This information is available at [Ontario.ca](https://ontario.ca) and includes **all absences due to any reason** and is NOT the per cent of absence above baseline absences (baseline is the % of absences expected in the school setting at any specific point in time).
- Schools will monitor levels of absences and report **absences that exceed 30% of their baseline** to the school board and to public health.
- If **absences exceed 30% of the baseline**, communication will be sent to school families, and public health will support the school with any necessary steps to improve health and safety at the school.

More Information About Positive or Presumed COVID-19 Cases

Anyone who has tested positive on a PCR, rapid molecular, or rapid antigen test OR who is presumed to be positive based on their symptoms, should notify their own high-risk contacts of their exposure.

IMPORTANT: Individuals who are only exposed at school with all required public health measures in place are not generally considered high-risk contacts due to the health and safety measures in place.

As a result, no action is required by other members of a cohort, other than regular symptom monitoring. Parents are not required to report positive PCR or RAT test results to their child's school.

If you hear about symptomatic students or positive cases in your child's classroom, no special action is required. Please continue to diligently screen your child daily for symptoms as you would usually do. As long as they continue to pass the screening tool and/or have not otherwise been advised to isolate, they can continue attending school. More details, including the definition of a high-risk close contact, can be found at [Ontario.ca/exposed](https://ontario.ca/exposed).

A Word About Testing

With changes to the provincial testing strategy, reporting the number of cases and contacts no longer has the same value as it did previously. Knowing for certain if an individual has COVID-19, or another infectious disease, does not change the need to stay home when sick in order to avoid spreading illness.

Ongoing and Enhanced Public Health Measures

The Ministry of Education, in consultation with the Ministry of Health, is responsible for providing operational guidance for school boards and schools. To best protect students, staff and our community, Ontario's **COVID-19: Health, Safety and Operational Guidance for Schools**

(2021-2022) provides return to in-person learning guidance for all Ontario schools that is to be applied consistently across the province.

It is important to remember that protocols have been in place for many years to identify and respond to infectious disease outbreaks in school settings. At this point in the pandemic, we are gradually shifting towards these traditional approaches to monitor and respond to respiratory illnesses. We recognize that this shift away from individual reporting, to monitoring of school absences is a change from the approach used in schools to-date in this pandemic. However, this is a common measure used by public health for infectious diseases such as influenza and RSV, or rhinovirus.

While the risk of exposure in the school setting cannot be completely eliminated when the prevalence of the virus is so high in the province, families can be reassured that there are many measures in place in schools. The best way to reduce transmission in schools is to limit transmission in the community. With the increased transmissibility of Omicron, it is even more important that we all continue to follow public health measures such as:

- screening,
- masking,
- maintaining physical distance,
- limiting our number of contacts,
- staying home when symptomatic, and
- getting vaccinated.

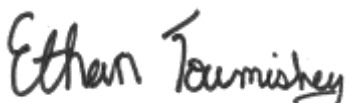
Vaccination

While individuals aged 5 to 19 years appear to be at lower risk of severe disease from Omicron compared to other ages, this risk can be even further reduced through immunization. High vaccination rates also reduce transmission in settings such as schools, which helps reduce the risk of illness for your child and their friends, classmates and teachers.

Vaccination remains the best defense against the COVID-19 virus. You can book first and second doses of the COVID-19 vaccine for students aged 5 and up, and individuals 18 and over can also book a booster dose. Book online using the Provincial Vaccine Appointment Booking system at Ontario.ca/bookvaccine. Many locations in the region are also accepting walk-in appointments. Visit hpePublicHealth.ca/vaccine-booking for dates and locations.

For more information, please visit hpePublicHealth.ca.

Sincerely,



Ethan Toumishey, MD, MPH, CCFP, FRCPC
Acting Medical Officer of Health
Hastings Prince Edward Public Health