

MEMORANDUM

TO: Niagara Region Schools and Childcare Settings

FROM: Dr. M. Hirji, Medical Officer of Health (Acting)

SUBJECT: Niagara Specific Guidance for COVID-19 in the School and Childcare Settings

DATE: August 30, 2021

Thank you for your ongoing efforts and dedication to keeping children of Niagara safe. As we head into the start of a new school year, elementary schools and childcare settings will likely be the largest congregation of unvaccinated persons in our society. It is therefore the top priority for us in Public Health to protect the health, safety and well being of all children in schools and childcare.

In this memo, we summarize our key advice for keeping schools and childcare safe from COVID-19. Much of what is included here mirrors provincial guidance. However, in some cases, Niagara Region Public Health is recommending additional or more extensive measures given local learnings from the 2020-2021 school year.

PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES

Vaccination is the best line of defense for preventing COVID-19 in the school or childcare setting. **Niagara Region Public Health recommends all eligible individuals be vaccinated against COVID-19.**

VACCINE EXEMPTIONS

Adults

- For information on a workplace vaccination policy, please refer to your organizational policy or ministry directly. These types of policies have been made at the discretion of each individual employer, not by Public Health.
- For more information, read [Ontario Makes COVID-19 Vaccination Policies Mandatory for High-Risk Settings](https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1000750/ontario-makes-covid-19-vaccination-policies-mandatory-for-high-risk-settings)¹

VENTILATION

Since COVID-19 spreads rapidly through the air, good ventilation and filtration plays a key role in the prevention of COVID-19 and ensuring our school environments are healthy and safe. Ventilation is the exchange of indoor air (which might be contaminated) with fresh outdoor air; filtration is the removal of contaminants from the air. Increasing ventilation is best achieved by operating heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) to maximize air exchange. Maximizing air flow also optimizes the benefit of filtration by removing the virus from the air. HVAC filters should be the highest possible that the system will accept, at minimum MERV 8 filters should be use and ideally MERV 13 filters.

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In the absence of good air flow from an HVAC system and/or use of lower-rated filters, portable air cleaners/purifiers are recommended to be operated to filter the air. Opening windows will also allow more ventilation at minimal cost.

Niagara Region Public Health strongly encourages schools and childcare centres to ensure that all ventilation systems are inspected and in good working order prior to the start of the school year and continue with the inspection and maintenance throughout the school year. Filters should be regularly changed.

ACTIVE SCREENING

NRPH continues to recommend active screening, especially amongst staff, visitors, contractors who may enter the school or childcare. "Active screening" means that schools and childcare centres are responsible to ensure no individuals (ie. students/staff/visitors) enter the facility unless it is confirmed that they have completed the screening and the result indicates that they are allowed to enter. This is different from "passive screening", which occurs when individuals do their own screening and decide for themselves whether they may enter the facility or not.

In the event active screening is unattainable, mandatory passive screening is required. Heightened awareness of symptom onset throughout the course of the day is always essential. If a child fails the screening tool, they must self-isolate at home immediately and either:

- Contact their health care provider for a medical assessment

OR

- Contact the Niagara Health COVID-19 Assessment Centre to book an appointment for testing, this can be done [on-line](#) or by calling 905-378-4647 ext. 42819.

If anyone becomes ill at school/childcare, they must:

- Immediately isolate from others, in a separate room if possible, until they can go home.
- Be provided with a medical mask.
- Be asked to maintain physical distancing. If physical distancing is not possible, a medical mask goggles/face shield, gloves and gown must be worn by the staff member supporting the child.

If an individual develops any of the following new and mild symptoms within forty-eight hours of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, they may continue to attend school or childcare as long as they wear a medical grade mask:

- Headache
- Fatigue
- Muscle Ache
- Joint pain

Any other symptoms of COVID-19 (e.g. cough, shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell), even if they are mild, are to self-isolate immediately and get tested. If the individual has a fever or symptoms persist longer than forty-eight hours, the individual must isolate immediately and get tested.

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

With parental permission, it is recommended all children two years of age through to Senior Kindergarten wear a face covering indoors when tolerated.

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Eye protection is not required for education staff working with students who wear masks. Both medical mask and eye protection (goggles or face shield) are required for educational staff when in close contact with students who are not wearing masks.

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Niagara Region Public Health recommends the following public health measures:

- Masking outdoors for all children and staff when physical distancing cannot be maintained.
- Masking for high and low contact activities outdoors when able and when physical distancing cannot be maintained. Mixing of cohorts can occur but is discouraged.
- Masking for high and low contact activities indoors, when able and when can be worn safely based on the activity. Mixing of cohorts can occur but is strongly discouraged.
- Mixing cohorts is discouraged during recess and breaks. If mixing of cohorts occurs during recess and breaks, physical distancing and masking outdoors must be in place.

MUSIC AND WIND INSTRUMENTS

Music programs are permitted in areas with adequate ventilation; refer to above ventilation recommendations.

- Use of wind instruments is permitted indoors within a cohort if a minimum distance of **three metres** or more can be maintained. As much distance as possible should be encouraged and the use of large, well-ventilated spaces should be prioritized.
- Use of wind instruments is permitted outdoors in mixed cohorts when a minimum distance of two metres or more can be maintained.
- Singing is permitted indoors, if a minimum distance of **three metres** can be maintained. Masking is encouraged but not required for singing indoors.

SHARED SPACES

Shared indoor spaces should be used by one cohort at a time as much as possible. Distancing must be maintained. Seating locations are to be recorded.

Libraries

- Maintain a sign-in log for all individuals entering and exiting the library.
- Establish capacity limits that encompass the physical distancing requirements of at least two metres between all individuals.

Collaborative Desks

- Avoid or limit the use of collaborative desks as much as possible.
- Should collaborative desks be required the following mitigation strategies are strongly recommended: use within a cohort, limit the number of students, record seating locations, masking, physical distancing of at least two metres and consider the use of physical barriers that are smooth, non-absorbent and can be easily cleaned. Follow recommended cleaning and disinfection standards and protocols.

Elevator Use

- The use of elevators is strongly discouraged unless an individual requires use due to physical limitations or it is necessary to transport items.

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- If use is required, limit the capacity to promote physical distancing as much as is operationally feasible. Capacity signage and markings on the floor are to indicate two metre physical distancing. If distancing is not possible, only one individual should use the elevator at a time.
- Recommended cleaning and disinfection standards and protocols are to be followed along with any by-laws, policies or procedures for operating elevating devices.

Washrooms

- Limit capacity to maintain physical distancing of at least two metres or as much as is operationally feasible. Capacity signage is to be posted on entry/exit doors.
- Where possible, limit the use to every other stall and sink.
- Proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette is to be practiced including the use of paper towels to dry hands, turn off faucets and open doors.
- Recommended cleaning and disinfection standards and protocols are to be followed.

Cafeteria and Lunch Protocols

- Distance as much as possible between cohorts when eating outdoors.
- When eating indoors or in cafeterias, distancing is to be maintained between cohorts, distancing is to be maintained within cohorts while masks are removed for eating and seating locations are to be recorded.
- Distancing as much as possible between cohorts while eating outdoors is strongly recommended.

Staff Meetings and Staff Rooms

- Staff meetings should be conducted outdoors or within locations that allow for a minimum of two metre physical distancing.
- Distancing and masking is required within staff common areas. Masks are not to be removed except during the consumption of food.
- A sign-in log is to be maintained for all users and seating locations are to be recorded.

Assemblies

- Only outdoor assemblies are to occur and a minimum of two metres must be maintained between each individual.

TESTING AND RETURN TO SCHOOL

Symptomatic students who test negative for COVID-19, or receive an alternate diagnosis by a health care provider, can return to school when:

- They have been free of fever for over twenty-four hours **and**
- They have been free of vomiting or diarrhea for forty-eight hours **and**
- Other symptoms have mostly improved for at least twenty-four hours **and**
- They have not been directed to self-isolate **and**
- Have had no contact to a confirmed case of COVID-19

Note: If symptoms compatible with COVID-19 are persisting or worsening, the symptomatic individual is to continue to stay home from school/work. A repeat COVID-19 test should be considered.

If a health care provider has told a student or staff person that the symptom(s) are related to a chronic or pre-existing condition (e.g., allergies, post-nasal drip, migraines, asthma) the child can return to school/childcare once they feel well enough, without waiting for symptoms to go away.

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If the child is not assessed by a health care provider, **and** testing for COVID-19 was declined for any reason, the child is to self-isolate for ten days from symptom onset (away from household members when possible).

Note: If self-isolation away from household members is not possible, unvaccinated household members are to self-isolate as well for the duration of the child illness, and then for an additional ten days from last exposure to the symptomatic child. If household members become symptomatic, they should consult their health care provider and/or go for testing.

Niagara Region Public Health will follow up with all cases who test positive.

Medical notes or proof of negative tests should not be required for staff or students to return to school

SIBLINGS AND OTHER HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS LIVING WITH A SYMPTOMATIC CHILD

- If a test is recommended by a health care provider for the symptomatic child, or a decision is made to get tested at an assessment centre, all **unvaccinated** household members who are **not fully immunized with two doses of vaccine are to self-isolate**, until the test results are back. If the test result is negative, household members can leave self-isolation.
- Asymptomatic fully vaccinated household members are not required to self-isolate and may attend work/school/childcare
- If a health care provider advises that a test for COVID-19 is not needed, household members can leave self-isolation.

SIBLINGS OF AN ISOLATING COHORT

- Siblings who are not contacts, but are household members of an isolating cohort, may continue to attend school as long as they remain symptom-free and the isolating family member remains symptom-free.

REPORTING COVID-19 CASES IN THE SCHOOL OR DAYCARE

Niagara Region Public Health has created a COVID-19 reporting portal to allow for timely reporting of confirmed laboratory results or positive rapid testing results. To report a positive COVID-19 lab result of staff or child please go to:

[Reporting Confirmed COVID-19 Cases or Positive Rapid Test Results - Niagara Region, Ontario](#)

To speak to a COVID-19 Health Professional you may call our COVID-19 information line at (905) 688-8248 press 7 OR email covidschools@niagararegion.ca OR talk to your school health nurse.

Niagara Region Public Health may ask that principals or their designates dismiss individuals or cohorts while awaiting results of a public health investigation

HIGH RISK CONTACTS OF CASES

High risk contacts of a case are to isolate for **ten days**, unless they are **fully vaccinated** or if they were previously positive within the past ninety days and recovered.

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Testing at day seven is recommended to all high risk contacts regardless of vaccination status. If testing is declined, isolation is extended for an additional **ten days (total of twenty days)**, to those who are not fully vaccinated.

Niagara Region Public Health will determine isolation and return to school dates for the vaccinated and unvaccinated high risk contacts and cohorts.

For more school/childcare COVID-19 information go to www.niagararegion.ca or you may contact the Public Health COVID-19 Info-Line at 905-688-8248, press 7.



M. Mustafa Hirji, MD MPH FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health /Commissioner (Acting)

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