



Renfrew County and District Health Unit
"Optimal Health for All in Renfrew County and District"

For Immediate Release

(Pembroke, Ontario, 10:30 a.m., January 15, 2022)

Statement of Support from Renfrew County and District Health Unit Medical Officer of Health Regarding the Return to School

The Medical Officer of Health from Renfrew County and District Health Unit (RCDHU) has released a statement regarding the upcoming return to in-person learning for students and educators across the region.

To all students, school families, education, and school transportation staff:

As we enter yet another year of the pandemic, we remain committed to working with local school communities to help students stay in class and to do so as safely as possible. We support the return to in-person learning on January 17. Keeping students in class is beneficial for mental, social, and physical health.

Throughout the pandemic, public health measures have been effective at limiting the spread of COVID-19 in schools. While the risk of COVID-19 cannot be eliminated when community transmission is high, risk of transmission in schools is significantly reduced by the many layers of protection that have been put in place, including:

- Screening for symptoms before attending school and staying home with symptoms of illness
- Thorough cleaning and disinfection
- Cohorting as much as possible, physical distancing, and masking, including access to three-ply masks for students, as needed
- Frequent hand hygiene
- Active screening and isolation of individuals with symptoms, their household members, and high-risk contacts
- Enhanced ventilation and HEPA filters as outlined by the Ministry of Education
- High levels of vaccination in students aged 12 to 18 years, and rising levels of vaccination in students aged 5 to 11 years
- Rapid Antigen Tests (RAT) for students and staff in schools and child care
- Reporting of higher than normal absenteeism rates to public health which will trigger a review of infection prevention and control measures in the school

The COVID-19 monitoring and response strategy has changed. We have had to make changes to how we respond to the virus. The Omicron variant is highly transmissible, and spreads at a rapid rate and therefore widespread testing has limited value in slowing the virus. As a result, all

individuals with symptoms of COVID-19 can be presumed to be infected with the virus and must isolate as directed. Without confirmatory testing, these individuals will not be permitted to attend school until their isolation period is complete.

Public Health has already established protocols in place under The Health Protection and Promotion Act, 1990 to respond to infectious disease outbreaks in school settings. When the absentee rate in a school or child care setting increases sharply by approximately 30 per cent, a notification will be provided to school families with information on any additional public health measures that should be followed. Routine notification of families and exclusion of cohorts will not be taking place. Exposures that occur only in the school setting, with public health measures in place, will not typically be considered high-risk, and therefore, no action is required by others in a cohort - other than regular symptom monitoring.

We must all work together to keep the risk as low as possible. Everyone in the community, including staff, students, and families, must monitor diligently for illness and follow directions for isolation when applicable. To help limit the spread of illness in the community, we encourage everyone to get vaccinated.

Together with our school community partners, we look forward to welcoming students back to in-person learning. The return to class will provide immeasurable benefits to the mental and physical well-being of all students and their families. We know that there may be questions and concerns in response to changes and you can be reassured that we will continue to work with school partners to support a safe and healthy return to school throughout these changes.

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