



Dawn Danko
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Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
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June 8, 2021

Hon. Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
315 Front Street, 14th Floor
Toronto, ON M7A 0B8

Dear Minister Lecce,

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) Trustees and staff were disappointed to learn about the provincial direction to finish the school year in remote learning despite the medical expert advice. We were also surprised to learn about the direction to try to support in-person celebrations for all students at the end of the school year.

At HWDSB, we feel strongly about the importance of providing students and educators with an opportunity to connect in person to finish this school year in order to support the mental health of our students.

With the support of our local public health and following all of our established health and safety COVID-19 protocols that have successfully minimized the risk of spread this year, we respectfully request your permission to allow our elementary students and staff complete the last week of the school year (5-7 days, June 21 to 29) in person.

Trustees approved a motion to support this direction, which was confirmed at the Board Meeting on June 7. By allowing elementary students to return in person for the last week of school, we can provide safe and equitable access to in-person, end-of-year activities that support relationships and routines for our students.

Ultimately, our goal is to support mental health and well-being after such a difficult year. The provision of transportation and allowing all elementary-aged students to attend school at the same time is an important aspect of equitable access.

In-person learning may help educators identify students who may require additional supports due to the prolonged remote period. Additionally, we saw significant drops in student engagement in remote learning last June, a trend that we are concerned about for the end of this year. A return to in-person, even for a short time, will re-engage students in critical social learning and facilitate a more positive return in the fall.

HWDSB

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We cannot ignore the impacts of remote learning on our educators and staff. While a shift to in person is another change in delivery for this year, we have also heard that, for many, an opportunity to connect with their students in person would support their mental health.

In a recent statement, Hamilton's Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Elizabeth Richardson said, *"... we're disappointed that the Province has not followed the advice of public health experts, leading pediatric hospitals, including McMaster Children's Hospital, the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table and others, to open schools first, which has been our priority throughout the COVID-19 pandemic when moving forward with reopening our communities. We as a community recognize how critical it is for our young people to be in school for their mental and emotional wellbeing and for that sense of routine."*

The province has decided it is safe to reopen non-essential stores, albeit at lower capacities. We have invested in lowering in-person class sizes in elementary schools this year to facilitate one-metre physical distancing. We have also had low numbers of outbreaks, even when our community COVID-19 numbers were much higher. This time of year allows classes to spend more time outdoors, and we believe that your statement that schools are safe is in fact true. We can also provide opportunities to pick up any personal items and return Board resources, which would require families to mobilize if we were not in person.

We hope that you will consider our request to return to in-person learning for the last 5 to 7 days of school for elementary students. This would allow us to provide end-of-year celebrations for students and support student mental health and well-being without increasing the risk to our community beyond the current reopening plans in any measurable way.

Sincerely,



Dawn Danko
Chair, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board