HWDSB

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September 27, 2021

Hon. Christine Elliott, Minister of Health
College Park 5th Floor
777 Bay St, Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

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

Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health
393 University Avenue, 21st Floor
Toronto, ON M5G 2M2

Re: Schools should be the first to open and the last to close

Dear Minister Elliott, Minister Lecce and Dr. Moore,

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, families have responded to many transitions in education. Parents, guardians and caregivers supported their child/ren's education in the best way they could as we moved between remote and in-person learning. Staff have been incredible supporting these transitions while under such challenging circumstances.

HWDSB Trustees have advocated for enhanced public health measures to ensure our schools are in the safest conditions possible to combat COVID-19, and we have invested reserve funds to lower class sizes as much as we can.

We have heard time and again that schools should be the first to open and the last to close; unfortunately, this is not the approach taken in June 2021. At Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB), we urge the government to adhere to the principle that schools be the first to open and the last to close going forward, for the sake of student mental health and well-being and to support working families.

We know that over this pandemic, students and families have felt the impact of schools not being prioritized to open first. While we were able to keep students and staff safe from COVID-19 by shifting to remote learning, the costs to mental, social and emotional well-being have been too high.

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In an open letter, the Canadian Pediatric Society have spoken consistently in support of in-person learning, which is "crucial for the developmental, emotional, psychosocial and mental health of children and youth" (May 28, 2021).

Research from Sick Kids (July 8 2021) found that a majority of children and youth reported worsening mental health during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns. Over half of 758 children aged eight to 12 years old and 70 per cent of 520 adolescents reported clinically significant depressive symptoms during the second wave (February to March 2021). In addition, there is a strong association between time spent online learning and depression and anxiety in school-age children (six to 18 years old).

The evidence is alarming, and supported by McMaster Children's Hospital who also wrote to your government to urgently support school reopening in June.

Between September 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021, Hamilton had a total of 67 school COVID-19 outbreaks. This encompasses both elementary and secondary, as well as public and private boards. Within these outbreaks, there was a cumulative 220 confirmed cases (155 students and 65 staff). With vaccination rates on the rise and the upcoming possibility of vaccination for those aged 5 to 11, we are hopeful that we can reduce the chance of any school closure this year and minimize the impact of classroom closures or individual isolation requirements.

Public education is the cornerstone and foundation of a healthy, vital and progressive society, and keeping schools open must be a priority for us all.

The health risks associated with COVID-19 impact every community. We commit to doing our part to ensure we only close a school when all other avenues have been exhausted. We ask the government to do everything possible to ensure schools are the last to close and the first to open in the 2021-22 school year.

Sincerely,

Dawn Danko
Chair of the Board

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