



Dawn Danko  
Chair of the Board of Trustees  
Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board  
20 Education Court, P.O. Box 2558  
Hamilton, ON L8N 3L1  
[ddanko@hwdsb.on.ca](mailto:ddanko@hwdsb.on.ca)  
289.775.0269

January 6, 2022

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

Dear Minister Lecce,

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ontario Government stated that “schools should be the last thing to close and the first thing to open,” yet this week, Ontario closed schools for in-person learning across the province for the fourth time.

On behalf of Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Trustees understand that the emergence of the Omicron variant has presented the most recent COVID-19 pandemic challenge for public education. We believe that for the public education system, student success must be prioritized and the well-being of students, education workers and families must be paramount.

Therefore, in order to ensure an outcome for public education that is different than previous extended closures, we are formally requesting the immediate implementation of the following specific measures to help ensure that schools can reopen for safe in-person learning as soon as possible:

**1. Priority access to vaccinations for frontline education workers and students.**

Our Board cannot function without the hard work and dedication of educators. In order to re-open schools and minimize COVID-related workforce disruption, it is critical that all frontline educators be provided with priority access to COVID-19 vaccinations as quickly as possible. Further, to ensure student safety in a congregate setting once schools are re-opened, priority access to COVID-19 vaccination booster shots should also be provided to students aged 12 to 17 as soon as possible.

We welcome the opportunity to help support in-school student and employer-based vaccination clinics, noting the urgency of this request.

**2. Continued tracking and public reporting of confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases in schools.**

It is our ethical responsibility as a board of education to ensure that parents, frontline educators, and their families and loved ones know if they have been in close contact with a potential COVID-19 infection.

We recognize that Hamilton Public Health Services staff do not have the capacity to complete contact tracing, as we have in the past. However, tracking and public reporting can be achieved through adequate supply of take-home PCR test kits or Rapid Antigen Test kits, voluntary self-reporting of probable or test-confirmed cases, and absence tracking.

It is important that staff, students, and families are informed when there is a probable or confirmed case in their classroom, and we request the Ministry support a modified tracking and reporting mechanism for COVID-19 in schools, as well as an ongoing supply of PCR or Rapid Antigen Tests for school boards.

**3. Ministry funded or provisioned high-quality masks for students.**

Masking is another critical strategy that has helped reduce the risk of transmission during the pandemic. We thank the Ministry for providing 3-ply masks for students; however, we note the inventory provided is quite limited. To ensure students have equitable access to higher-quality masks, we request the Ministry provide or fund an ongoing inventory of masks for students in our system. In addition, we are seeking further direction on refined mask exemption requirements for students.

**4. Additional technology funding to ensure that every student receives a device for learning.**

As of January 5, preliminary numbers from our Remote Learning Device Request survey to families indicate that we have more than 8,000 students in need of a device, which is approximately 2,000 devices short from what we are able to offer. Trustees request additional funding for technology as the need for individual devices has grown beyond our current inventory. During this critical stage of the pandemic, equity of access is vital to supporting the education needs of our students.

**5. Transparent and timely communication to families and staff regarding changes to in-person learning.**

Throughout the pandemic we have advocated for timely planning and communication from the Ministry of Education and provincial government. Changes in learning modes are challenging for many families and they need adequate notice to plan for their child's childcare and learning needs.

We respectfully request that any potential changes to the target date for the return to in-person learning be communicated as early as possible and in a transparent manner.

We know the decision to temporarily move students to remote learning was a difficult one as we have heard clear evidence from our pediatricians and mental health experts about the significant, lasting negative impacts this can have on our students. We appreciate hearing this is a targeted and time-limited strategy. We continue to advocate for a return to in-person learning as soon as possible and feel strongly that the additional steps listed above are essential.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to discuss our requests further.

Sincerely,



Dawn Danko  
Chair, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board