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April 12, 2022

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

Re: Request to Reinstate Universal Masking for Students and Staff Indoors at School

Dear Minister Lecce,

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) requests that you take immediate action and work with the Chief Medical Officer of Health to reinstate temporary mandatory indoor masking in schools to address the significant challenges faced by public schools in this province as we enter a resurgence of the pandemic.

HWDSB has demonstrated leadership by advocating for the health and safety of our students and staff throughout the pandemic. While we have seen progress made in terms of vaccinations and treatments, we recognize the pandemic is not over.

Among many experts in the health community, Public Health Ontario has [published](#) their recommendation for masks in schools: *"Optimizing layers of prevention in K-12 schools, including temporary re-implementation of masking requirements indoors and improved air quality can reduce the risk of in-school transmission and related disruption for students, families and educational settings."*

Further, Hamilton Public Health Services recommends indoor masking, especially where it is difficult to distance, or there are vulnerable individuals, which applies to schools.

There are two critical issues face by public schools right now that we draw to your attention:

Staff Shortages

- At HWDSB, we remain committed to keeping our schools open and supporting our students and staff through multiple health and safety measures; however, we are already experiencing unprecedented levels of staff absences that are significantly impacting our school operations.
- HWDSB continues to engage in staffing practices that support schools remaining open. This includes a system review of unfilled jobs, redeployment of school and central staff, and utilizing uncertified emergency casual teachers. Human Resource Services staff continue to recruit and hire for occasional positions to maintain healthy pools of staff to call upon for daily positions. This situation is not sustainable and we are seeing increases in unfilled positions that impact our schools and the quality of programming and supports for our students.

- Without an intervention of increased public health measures like mandatory indoor masking, we will continue to see this trend increase and negatively impact the quality of education in our schools because of staffing shortages.
- While we have yet to close a school, we fear that this may become an unfortunate outcome as we have already seen at other boards in the province. This is an urgent public health situation that needs immediate attention.

Student Absences

- In the absence of a provincial or local health unit program that tracks COVID-19 cases in our schools, we offer families the option to self-report COVID-19 cases based on rapid or PCR test results.
- We have seen increased self-reporting of COVID-19 cases by families since the beginning of April, and expect this trend to continue based on expected COVID-19 projections shared by the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Student absences result in disruptions for student learning, school-based supports and for families.

We have asked a lot of our students and education workers over the course of this pandemic, resulting in significant challenges for everyone in the system. Our students have missed out on key milestone experiences that we cannot recapture. Dr. Moore, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health reported that a resurgence will not peak until the end of May. We must protect our school year and our ability to support normal activities by doing everything we can to promote health and safety measures that reduce the transmission of COVID-19 in schools. Reinstating temporary mandatory indoor masking in schools is a simple additional layer of protection that Public Health Ontario states "can reduce risk of in-school transmission and related disruptions." We have a duty of care and ask that you take this step for the sake of our students and staff.

We are grateful to the staff and students in HWDSB who continue to wear their masks in schools. Without a mandate, however, we are seeing reduced use of masks, leading to great risks for students, staff, and their families, especially those who are immunocompromised.

Minister, please demonstrate leadership and prevent the spread of COVID-19 by reinstating temporary indoor masking requirements for schools until we see COVID-19 cases decline.

Sincerely,



Dawn Danko
Chair, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board