

Monday, August 24, 2020

Dr. Lawrence Loh  
Medical Officer of Health  
Peel Public Health  
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Dr. Loh,

You have asked the people and communities of Peel to show our commitment to the “Core Four” steps to help limit exposure to, and spread of, COVID-19. I am writing to express our deep concern that the basics of these important actions – Stay Apart, Lather Up, and Mask Up – are not supported in the plans to reopen our elementary schools. This failure to provide adequate protections will expose students and teachers to risks that threaten not just their own health and lives, but also the health and lives of their family members and, through them, others in the community.

### **Stay Apart – Make Physical Distancing Possible**

The opening plans for our elementary schools do not provide for the safe physical distancing of two metres recommended for all other settings in the province. Even the riskier one-metre distance suggested by the Ontario Government will be a struggle to consistently maintain, especially if class sizes are not reduced in every class at every school.

With a packed classroom of 20, 24, or in some cases 30 students, it is impossible to ensure physical distancing. It is not feasible to space that many desks one metre apart. Additionally, students and teachers will need to pass between desks at times throughout the day, and when multiplied by 20 or more students, it results in ongoing un-distanced interaction.

Regardless of the spacing of desks, students in the younger grades are more active, have less self-regulation, and find it harder to judge appropriate physical distance and personal space than older students. Kindergarten, where there may be 30 children in a confined space, is especially concerning. These students do not sit in rows; they are engaged in learning through play.

We cannot rely on masks to provide protection when physical distancing is not possible, as there are too many situations in which masks will not be worn (e.g., Kindergarten, any grade during lunch, snacks, or when drinking water, which will be needed often in warm weather).

We need smaller student cohorts at all grade levels in every school to ensure safe physical distancing based on the two-metre guideline.

### **Mask Up – Require Mandatory Masks for All Students**

It is extremely troubling that, unlike students in Grades One through Eight, students in Kindergarten will not be required to wear masks. Children in Kindergarten range in age between three and six years old. In contrast, municipal by-laws require all individuals age two and older to wear a mask inside public spaces, not including schools. With COVID-19 symptoms being milder and less noticeable in children, younger students carrying COVID-19 may be at school, likely not wearing a mask, and could all too easily spread the illness to others.

Requiring everyone, including our youngest students, to wear masks is prudent and necessary.

### **Lather Up – Provide Hand Soap at Classroom Sinks**

Hand soap continues to not be provided at classroom sinks in Peel elementary schools. The only access to handwashing is at the washroom sinks. Elementary schools in Peel vary in size from about 150 students to 1000 students. If all students were to wash their hands before eating lunch, we would see line ups of hundreds of students at the washrooms waiting their turn to wash their hands. To date, this consistent attention to handwashing simply has not been happening. Now that we are facing a pandemic, it is imperative that all students be able to practice good hand hygiene.

With the reopening of schools, classrooms will now be provided with hand sanitizer. The use of hand sanitizer will be an important part of hand hygiene routines, but this should not replace handwashing, especially before eating lunch after outdoor play. However, even with staggered lunch breaks and possible pre-scheduled times for classes to access the washrooms, it is unlikely that the one washroom for girls and one for boys on each floor of a typical school will be sufficient to allow all students access to handwashing, especially in our larger schools.

To ensure that every person in the building can wash their hands with soap and water before eating lunch, soap needs to be provided at classrooms sinks. This would alleviate the burden on the washrooms, decrease time spent waiting in the hallway, and minimize interactions between classes.

By and large, most elementary classrooms have sinks, although there are a few schools and classrooms that do not. The current situation of providing the lowest common

denominator of no soap to any classroom may have achieved equality, but it is by no means equitable. For safety and equity, all staff and students need to have sufficient access to handwashing.

Hand soap needs to be provided at classroom sinks.

**We Need to Make the Return to School Safe for Everyone**

Schools are supposed to be safe spaces. You have said that the “Core Four” steps are the fastest path to overcoming COVID-19, and that they will protect us and protect others. It is therefore imperative that these actions be supported in our schools.

I urge you to provide guidance to the Peel District School Board about the gaps in their plan and to publicly insist that the “Core Four” steps are necessary in our schools.

We do not want schools contributing to a second wave of the pandemic. We cannot afford to get this wrong.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'GBC', followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Gail Bannister-Clarke  
President

GBC:LMG

cc: Bruce Rodrigues, PDSB Supervisor  
Collen Russell-Rawlins, PDSB Interim Director of Education