

COVID-19 Cases and Outbreaks within Schools

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health:

1. Receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Keeping schools open through the pandemic, so long as it is safe to do so, is a priority locally and provincially. Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) has been working closely with local schools and school boards to incorporate public health measures into day-to-day school operations.
- WDGPH has experienced four outbreaks of COVID-19, to date, with each involving two or three individuals. In most instances, a case of COVID-19 in the school setting does not cause further transmission.
- WDGPH has developed protocols for managing cases of COVID-19 within the school setting and works closely with schools to implement these protocols as appropriate.
- Community transmission of COVID-19 is an important determinant of school safety. Daily screening, physical distancing, face coverings, and other public health measures help students and school staff keep themselves and each other safe.

Discussion

Background

After being closed in March 2020, due to COVID-19, Ontario's elementary and secondary schools reopened on September 8, 2020, for the 2020-21 school year. Prior to this, WDGPH supported local schools and school boards as they planned for how to operate amidst COVID-19. WDGPH's work to support school reopening was previously shared with the Board of Health in September (BH.01.SEP0920.R14).

Operating schools during a COVID-19 pandemic has raised new challenges for school partners, who have had to incorporate public health measures, such as physical distancing into their day-to-day operations. These challenges must be weighed against the harms faced by families when schools are closed, which include worsened mental health, additional financial pressures, and increased risk of child abuse or neglect.¹ Keeping schools open through the pandemic, so long as it is safe to do so, is a priority locally and provincially.²

COVID-19 Activity within Schools

As of November 20, 2020, 40 school-related cases of COVID-19 have been reported to WDGPH. These cases include 34 students and 6 staff from 24 different schools.

'School-related' cases include cases who either (1) acquired COVID-19 from the school setting, or (2) were present at school on dates when they could have passed the infection on to others. Remote learners or cases who were at home during their communicable period are not included, as they are not considered to pose a risk to the school environment.

Since September, WDGPH has declared 4 school outbreaks. In each instance, there was at least one individual with COVID-19 who acquired their infection at school. Each outbreak has since been declared over.

The remaining instances represent scenarios where a student or staff member attended school during their period of communicability, but there was no further transmission of COVID-19 within the school setting. WDGPH believes that the absence of transmission in most instances reflects that schools are doing a good job of implementing appropriate public health measures.

How WDGPH Responds to a Case in a School

When a student or school staff member is reported as a case of COVID-19, WDGPH works in close coordination with the school and school board based upon established protocols. These protocols clarify the roles of each party and ensure that appropriate, actionable information is shared promptly.

When a case is reported, WDGPH staff conduct a thorough assessment of the case (or the case's parent/guardian, as appropriate). For a student or school staff member, this includes determining whether they:

- Likely acquired COVID-19 while in the school setting, or
- Were at school during their communicable period (beginning 48 hours before they developed symptoms or were tested), on which dates they could have passed the infection on to others.

Either of the conditions above represent a scenario in which there could be an additional COVID-19 risk in the school setting. In these scenarios, WDGPH staff contact the school to inform them and to collect information about other students or staff who may have been exposed. This involves reviewing documentation such as attendance records, seating charts, and lists of students/staff within the same cohort as the case.

In general, all students who are part of the cohort are considered high-risk contacts; this means that they are directed to isolate for up to 14 days and to be tested for COVID-19. WDGPH works with the school to have all students dismissed (if during the school day) or to have all students notified not to attend school (if after hours). While the school facilitates mass notification of all students, WDGPH staff still follows up with each person individually to ensure that they are isolating and following further public health guidance.

WDGPH follows up with students who develop symptoms, and also receives COVID-19 test results as they are reported. Provided there are no additional cases identified, the cohort can return to school once their isolation period is complete. If additional cases are identified, WDGPH may declare an outbreak in coordination with the school.

How WDGPH Responds to an Outbreak in a School

If additional cases are identified within the school setting, WDGPH repeats the steps above to identify additional individuals or cohorts who need to isolate or seek testing. If the additional case is thought to have been exposed within the school setting, an outbreak is declared and posted to WDGPH's website.

Depending on the transmission dynamics specific to the outbreak, WDGPH may implement additional measures as needed to keep students and staff in the school safe. These may include:

- Informing outside agencies that use the school/daycare of the outbreak;
- Reinforcing masking, PPE use, hand hygiene, and physical distancing;
- Reviewing student/staff/visitor use of the provincial symptom screening tool and enhance if needed;
- Reviewing environmental cleaning and disinfection processes and recommending enhanced cleaning/disinfection steps;
- Further minimizing the movement of staff between cohorts;

- Conducting an on-site visit to observe infection control practices within the school;
- Only allowing essential visitors into the school;
- Limiting student activities to their required cohorts and/or discontinuing extra-curricular activities;
- Restricting staff (including school, transportation, staff from home care agencies or others that provide medical services to those in school) from working in other schools;
- Reinforcing the need for all staff/students and their families to limit their close contacts outside of the school setting; and
- Issuing orders under section 22 of the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, if necessary.³

Dismissal of the entire school is generally not necessary but would be considered if there was evidence of widespread transmission or if less severe measures were not effective. WDGPH recognizes the significant disruption that this would cause and would only proceed with this step if warranted by the situation.

Conclusion

WDGPH has supported local schools and school boards over the course of the autumn term and worked to ensure that schools remain a safe environment for teachers and students. While there have been cases of COVID-19 within the school setting, WDGPH and school partners have worked quickly to isolate and manage the affected cohorts. To date, there have been few examples of COVID-19 being transmitted within the school setting.

The level of COVID-19 activity in the broader community continues to be the most important determinant of the COVID-19 risk within schools. It is critically important that students and staff continue to use the provincial screening tool every day to reduce the risk of COVID-19 entering the school setting. Additionally, community members can decrease transmission risk by continuing to practice physical distancing, using face coverings diligently, and limiting non-essential close contact with people outside of their household.

Ontario Public Health Standard

Infectious and Communicable Disease Prevention and Control

- The board of health shall work with community partners and service providers to determine and address the need for knowledge translation resources and supports in the area of infection prevention and control.

- The board of health shall communicate, in a timely and comprehensive manner, with all relevant health care providers and other partners about urgent and emerging infectious diseases issues.
- The board of health shall, based on local epidemiology, supplement provincial efforts in managing risk communications to appropriate stakeholders on identified risks associated with infectious diseases and emerging diseases of public health significance.

School Health

- The board of health shall offer support to school boards and schools, in accordance with the *School Health Guideline, 2018* (or as current), to assist with the implementation of health-related curricula and health needs in schools, based on need and considering, but not limited to:
 - Infectious disease prevention (e.g., tick awareness, rabies prevention, and hand hygiene).

2020 WDGPH Strategic Direction(s)

Service Delivery: We will provide our programs and services in a flexible, modern and accessible manner, and will ensure they reflect the immediate needs of our Clients and our role in the broader sector.

System Transformation: We will equip the Agency for change in all aspects of our work so that we are ready for transformational system change when the time comes.

Knowledge Transfer: We will ensure that our decision-making and policy development efforts are informed by meaningful health data at all times.

Health Equity

School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted children and their families. These disproportionately affected high-risk populations including children living in poverty, children with behavioural problems and complex medical needs, and children in the care of Canada's welfare system.¹² As with other pandemic impacts, the burden of this intervention has not been experienced equally across society.

References

1. Public Health Ontario. COVID-19 Pandemic School Closure and Reopening Impacts. [Internet]. 2020 Jul 27 [cited 2020 Aug 22]. Available from: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/main/2020/08/covid-19-school-closure-reopening-impacts.pdf>
2. Government of Ontario. COVID-19 Response Framework: Keeping Ontario Safe and Open. [Internet]. 2020 Nov 3 [cited 2020 Nov 20]. Available from: <https://files.ontario.ca/moh-covid-19-response-framework-keeping-ontario-safe-and-open-en-2020-11-03.pdf>
3. Ontario Ministry of Health. COVID-19 Guidance: School Outbreak Management. [Internet]. 2020 Oct 1 [cited 2020 Nov 20]. Available from: <https://files.ontario.ca/moh-covid-19-guidance-school-outbreak-management-en-2020-11-18.pdf>

Appendices

NONE.