

Facebook Live | Return to School

Wednesday, September 9, 2020 | 4:00 p.m.

Introduction

Hi everyone. I'm Dr. Miriam Klassen, Medical Officer of Health for Huron Perth Public Health and we see people are just joining so we will start the Facebook Live event for today, Wednesday September 9, 2020 in about one minute.

Alright, so it's now 4:01 p.m., I'm Dr. Miriam Klassen, Medical Officer of Health for Huron Perth Public Health and this is a Facebook Live event on Wednesday September 9, 2020 specifically with return to school as the focus of our Facebook Live event today.

This past March, schools in Huron-Perth closed their doors, and we weren't sure when they would re-open.

Now it's September, and schools are preparing to welcome students back for the 2020-2021 school year.

These last six months have been marked with uncertainty, personal sacrifice and economic sacrifice. Through these sacrifices, we have flattened the curve of the first wave of COVID-19 in Ontario and in our area.

Now schools are reopening, and many are experiencing mixed emotions. Families, educators and support staff, students young and old, may all feel a combination of relief, fear, pride, worry, excitement. All of these emotions are valid, and we are all sharing this experience.

We also all share a common aim—our unwavering commitment to protect our school communities, and the larger community, from COVID-19.

Today I will answer as many questions as possible about the return to school. If I don't get to your questions today, my staff are monitoring and may provide you a response online.

We will also be sharing important links so please keep an eye on the comment section. One link I will mention now is our COVID-19 information and schools page. Which staff will place into the comment box, I believe. www.hp-ph.ca/school

Please also note that we are recording this Facebook Live event so you can re-watch it later and share it with friends you think maybe interested. I thank you for your patience if we hit any technical bumps in our time together. As I have mentioned before, technology is not my strong suit.

I'd like to start by answering some of the common questions that we have received recently.

Questions

What role does public health have this year for schools?

So, first of all it's important to note that everyone, everyone has an important role to play to keep our schools safe. Because keeping community transmission low is the best way to protect our schools. But in addition, parents, schools and public health all have very important and complementary roles in keeping transmission as low as possible within schools.

Parents and caregivers must be aware of the possible [symptoms of COVID-19](#) and there are many, and must learn how to assess their children for these symptoms. It's very important to keep anyone ill at home and NOT permit them to go to school. In addition to if you have been asked to stay at home because of travel or contact to a case. Keeping children home when ill is a way to protect students and staff.

Schools, as you are likely already aware, are putting in precautions to reduce the spread of COVID-19 at school.

These precautions include measures such as cohorting (keeping groups together), to minimize the number of other students and staff your children will be exposed to, increasing [hand washing and hand hygiene practices](#), increasing the frequency of cleaning, requiring the use of a masks (face coverings) for staff and students in grades 4 and up. I'll speak further about masks and students a little bit later; in the meantime my staff will post links to the main school board pandemic response pages, the one for Avon Maitland and the one for the Huron Perth Catholic District School Boards.

[\(\(Avon Maitland District School Board: Back to School Planning
Huron Perth Catholic District School Board: Pandemic Response\)\)](#)

Now public health always works closely with our local schools to support healthy school communities but obviously our role this year will be somewhat different. First of all, HPPH is establishing a team of seven nurses making up our school COVID-19 response team. This team will support schools with COVID-19 prevention measures as well as mental health support and well-being promotion. We will also work together with the case and contact management team if and when there are cases that are associated with schools.

One critical role of HPPH is to complete all contact tracing and to follow up with any case including any student or school staff case who has tested positive for COVID-19. We have done a lot of planning on how we will conduct our case and contact management and my staff will also post the province's operational guidance around COVID-19 management in schools in the comments section.

[\[https://www.ontario.ca/page/operational-guidance-covid-19-management-schools?_ga=2.162971708.160043291.1598377098-1669126342.1580499114\]](https://www.ontario.ca/page/operational-guidance-covid-19-management-schools?_ga=2.162971708.160043291.1598377098-1669126342.1580499114)

This document is a good overview of the process, and we also have additional documents and direction from the province.

A lot of the questions from parents that we have been receiving is about what will happen if a child is ill. Here are some of the most common questions we're hearing:

Will my child need a COVID test every time they have a mild symptom? Will they have to stay home every time they have a sniffle?

So, this is going to be a challenge for all of us to manage together because children do typically get sick with viral illnesses more than adults as they do not have the same immunity, they haven't been exposed to as many viruses. So we will be providing a screening tool that will help you make an informed decision about what may be happening when your child shows symptoms.

DAILY PARENT SCREENING TOOL: SHOULD MY CHILD ATTEND SCHOOL?

What symptoms are they showing? Is this a normal or usual symptom for your child? Who has your child been in contact with?

I cannot stress enough, that children and staff who do not pass the screen must stay home and be further assessed. This is our best defense to mitigate against COVID-19 in our schools. It's going to be challenging for families and for employers but we must all commit together to supporting families to take these measures.

Now if your child has symptoms that are usual for them such as allergies or asthma, they can likely return to school. It's a good idea for families to discuss these chronic conditions with your family doctor so that you can have a plan as how you are going to best manage these chronic conditions and when you need to be concerned and alerted. What are the red flags that your child needs to stay home and be reassessed?

If your child has symptoms which are new or worse or different than their usual symptoms, they must not attend school and they must be assessed. They may be advised to be tested for COVID-19 in which case they cannot attend school until they receive a negative test result and are symptom-free for at least 24 hours. If they receive a positive test result, public health will contact your family and will advise you further. If they receive an alternative diagnosis from their health care provider, then they can return to school once they are symptom-free for 24 hours.

The ministry continues to update and refine guidance around symptoms and screening and management. Based on the latest data and our evolving understanding, and so some of this information may be updated.

If I don't want my child to have a COVID test...

...do they need to stay home for 14 days? Or just until symptoms have resolved for 24 hours?

If the screening tool and/or your healthcare provider determines that your child is likely to be having COVID-19 or the symptoms are highly consistent with COVID-19 and you're advised to have your child

tested, then your child will **need to self-isolate for 14 days from symptom onset** in the event that you choose not to have that test. Household contacts will also be advised to self-isolate.

If I don't have a healthcare provider, where can I go to have my child further assessed?

If you do not have a family doctor, call the HPPH Health Line at 1-888-221-2133 ext 3267 and staff are going to post that information.

Where can I get a note saying a COVID test was not needed...

...so that my child can return to school?

We are not recommending clearance tests or doctor's notes to return to school. Public Health will advise on the clearance date for children and staff who test positive and will advise on what household contacts will need to do as well. Families and family doctors and public health and schools will all need to work together to keep our schools safe. We're counting on everyone taking seriously their accountability and their responsibility to do daily screening and to comply with the advice of their health care providers.

If a child is being tested, do siblings and parents have to stay home too?

That will depend on several factors such as why your child is being tested - is it because they have symptoms or because they're a close contact of a known case. Are their symptoms highly suspicious for COVID-19, is there a high level of community transmission happening? When your child is being assessed by the healthcare provider, the healthcare provider will let you know if household members must also isolate.

How many masks should I send to school? Where does my child put their mask when they are eating?

- We advise you pack several masks each day and send your child to school with two bags for masks, one labelled "clean" and one "dirty."
- When your child is about to eat, they should first wash their hands, remove the mask by the ear loops.
 - Don't leave the mask tucked under the chin, hanging from one ear, or pushed up on the forehead
 - **If it is not wet or soiled, they will be able to reuse the mask**
- Instruct your child to put their mask in the "dirty" bag if it gets wet or soiled, and to use a new, clean mask. If the mask has remained clean, it can be reused.
- Wash the masks at the end of each day before reuse.

I also encourage families to work with their children to help them understand how to properly put on and remove their masks and to get used to it.

Be sure to avoid the use of any mask lanyards or mask clips that could become a strangulation hazard.

Will you make masks mandatory in Grades K-3?

At this moment, HPPH is not recommending that wearing masks be mandatory for students in these age groups. However, we are always reviewing the information - the latest evidence, and the guidance from the Ministry of Health and so this recommendation could change.

We do at this time consider masking for students in junior kindergarten to grade 3 likely to be beneficial. Younger children should be encouraged to wear masks if they are able to do so properly and if they are able to tolerate them.

I recommend that parents consider the following:

Your child may find it easier to wear a mask if you have ensured proper mask size and fit, and allowed a child to become accustomed to wearing the mask at home before wearing one in public.

If your child tolerates the mask for only brief periods of time, schools and parents should consider prioritizing masking for situations when physical distancing may be more difficult to maintain such as during pick up and drop off.

We're getting lots of questions about face shields. A face shield is not a substitute for wearing a face mask as it does not filter respiratory droplets. A face shield may provide some protection for the wearer against droplets expelled from another person and it may provide some source protection, so in other words keep some of the wearer's droplets in and keep them from spreading, however, there is still the ability for the droplets to pass by the face shield. It's probably a better alternative to no mask at all but it is not a replacement for a face covering that covers the nose and chin properly.

Where can I get masks?

Schools are preparing to have masks available. But if you are looking for additional masks, please know that non-medical masks are available at a variety of price points. United Way Perth-Huron has compiled a list of **where to find masks** in Perth and Huron Counties and encourages those who have difficulty with the cost to apply to their **urgent needs fund**. Individuals can also call 2-1-1 or visit **211ontario.ca** to access this information. You can see the links in the comment section.

[\[https://perthhuron.unitedway.ca/where-to-find-masks/\]](https://perthhuron.unitedway.ca/where-to-find-masks/)

Why not make masks mandatory for more grades to keep more of our youngest students safe?

That's a complicated question and it has to do with the evidence around masking and what does it show right now. The reason that we are advocating for masking at a population level, so the reason we are having everyone mask in students is more for source protection that is, you're wearing the mask not to protect yourself, the student is not wearing the mask to protect themselves but more to protect everyone else around them. The more people that can wear masks properly then lower the risk of respiratory droplets being in the environment because everyone's nose and mouth are covered. The evidence, what it's showing is that adults that can properly mask and older students are both more able to use masks properly and also more likely to transmit at this time. That's what the evidence is showing. What the evidence suggests at this time is that younger students are less likely a source of infection and also they are going to be having trouble using the masks properly. So what is going to protect the younger students and everyone else are all the other measures. The most important one is that we all screen staff and students every day and take seriously a commitment to not go to school if you don't pass the screen. It's going to be hard for everybody to do that, it's going to create a lot of inconveniences, and extra challenges but it's so important. Then, there is the distancing, the staying at your desk, the hand hygiene, the cohorting, all the other measures that are important but keep in mind

that masks used this way is not so much about keeping the wearer safe because your eyes are still not covered and respiratory droplets can get in that way, it's really much more about all of us wearing a mask to protect everyone else when we're able to do that. It's one layer of protection but it's not the most important, it's not the number one layer of protection.

If one child has a cold does that mean siblings must stay at home as well?

I did answer that, it really will depend. The child who is sick needs to be assessed and then depending on a number of factors, the health care provider who does the assessment may advise that everyone else in that household stays home as well while awaiting a test result. Again, part of what will inform that decision is the nature of the symptoms and the level of community transmission. As we see what's happening across Ontario as schools open and as we learn, our approach will continue to evolve to be aligned with the best evidence that we have available.

Why can a child attend school if someone at home has COVID?

If someone is diagnosed with COVID-19 then all their close contacts will be required to self-isolate for the isolation period, which at this time is 14 days from the time of their last contact. So at this time if there is a close contact including a child in a household, they would not be permitted to go to school if they are close contact of someone with COVID-19 they would fail the screen that is in place.

What percentage of cases in schools will warrant closures? What will that look like?

That's a really good question and I don't think that there is one answer, because COVID is new we are continuing to learn and we're not 100% sure of what this will look like in schools. We have put a lot of measures in place that should decrease transmission. What we are seeing right now in Ontario and this has certainly been our experience in Huron-Perth is that in workplaces where measures have been put in place we're not seeing a lot of transmission, we're seeing transmission much more right now from people socializing in things like weddings and other social gatherings.

With all the measures put in place in schools right now, if there is a single case, first of all the assessment will involve understanding was the person at school during the time when they were capable of transmitting infection. If they weren't, if it was the weekend and they stayed home when they were sick then that might not affect everyone else at school at all.

If they were at school during the period when they were capable of transmitting infection then that's our job, Public Health, that's our bread and butter, this is what we do with reportable diseases, what we've always done is we will do an investigation and we will determine who in that school is a close contact and that will likely involve a class cohort, it may involve other students on a bus or in other activities, depending but schools have taken many measures to really minimize that but certainly that cohort that is considered close contacts will be advised to stay home and maybe advised to be tested and so that may just impact one class.

In terms of what would lead to an entire school being closed or if that could happen, we would need to see evidence of transmission that isn't contained by all those other measures. We'll have to continue to have this dialogue and come back to it. What we can tell you right now is if there is a case there will be an investigation and certainly all close contacts will be advised what measures to take which will include self-isolating and possibly testing. Low-risk contacts will also be advised to self-monitor and will continue to monitor what develops in Huron-Perth and other areas in Ontario and make decisions based on what we learn.

What does contact tracing in the school look like from Public Health?

So hopefully I just answered that question, it's the same as contact tracing always looks like which is that wherever possible, we contact people directly and we really try and protect the privacy of everybody involved. Where there is a need to more publicly provide information about a site or a location then we do that. Which fits in nicely with the next question.

Will Public Health be reporting school outbreaks on the portal with daily updates like long term care? If not, will it be reported on the COVID-19 school tracker?

The final details of what surveillance is going to look like is still being worked out but what we know is that the Ministry of Education has certain requirements that schools will have to report and Public Health, we have our duty to protect our community while also protecting privacy. We will be reporting on cases and outbreaks as required, so that people have enough information, we're still expecting finalized ministry guidance on what is going to be reported at a school level.

Do you think that having one course all day for a week...

...is good for high school age student's mental health and physical health (sitting in one spot all day)? Students have already been home for 6 months.

That's a great question and I don't think that would be anybody's first choice. You know, what is best for students is to be in school with their peers and to have a chance to interact socially and also what is better and I think that is what the Ministry of Education would have preferred is to have smaller chunks of time devoted to one course but I'm not an education expert.

What I can say is that decisions are being made that are trying to strike the best balance possible so that we protect the health of everyone involved as best we can while offering the best education experience that we can and I know that the Ministry of Education has had a lot of consultation and planning to try to reach the right balance.

If a child has symptoms and is advised to be tested by Public Health and parent refuses to test them, what happens?

Where health care providers feel that a child's illness, or anyone's illness is consistent with COVID-19 and they decline testing, they will be advised to isolate for 14 days, essentially they will be treated like a probable case so their close contacts will also be provided advice.

Conclusion

That is the end of the questions that I have seen in the chat box, I'm just going to check with my staff, Rebecca on the line if there is any additional questions Rebecca that you're aware of that I've missed.

In that case, I think that brings us to the end of this Facebook Live event, thank you very much for the great questions and for your time and listening. I hope you found this information helpful. The health unit is here if you have questions, you can always email or call Health Line.

That brings us to the end. I would encourage everyone to continue to remain calm, and kind and patient as we continue to navigate this new territory of COVID-19 and Stage 3 together and we continue to all try and do our part and make the best decisions we can and find the right balance for everyone.

Thanks everyone. Bye bye.