HALTON CATHOLIC DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

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April 22, 2022

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

RE: Request to Reinstate Protective Strategies for Students and Staff

Dear Minister Lecce,

I am writing on behalf of the Halton Catholic District School Board, to share some of the significant challenges we are currently facing across our district since the recent relaxation of some of the health and safety measures that were previously in place in our schools.

For the past two years, school boards across the province have had to implement a number of new protocols and practices to help keep students and staff safe as we live and learn through a global pandemic. When schools re-opened for in-person instruction, our senior leadership team implemented a Return to School Plan, developed in consultation with Halton Region Public Health and in accordance with the Province's Operational Guidance for Schools. We are proud of the way our community worked together to adopt each of the measures that were put in place to help keep our schools healthy and safe.

As you know, on March 21, 2022, some of the measures were lifted across our province, including the mask mandate for schools. While we strongly encourage the use of masks by students and staff while indoors at school, in the absence of a mandate, we have witnessed a marked decrease in the use of masks that has reduced our ability to stop the spread of COVID-19 in our school communities.

We have received a number of concerns from staff and families in our community and we write to you today to share the impact on our district, with the hopes that your Ministry will consider reinstating some of the protective strategies that were in place prior to March 21st, including mandatory masking for students and staff while indoors at school.

Staffing Shortages

Staffing shortages have been an ongoing concern throughout the past two years, and our school board, like other school boards across the province, have experienced challenges in meeting supply teacher and support staff coverage needs due to the volume of staff absenteeism associated with exposure/contraction of COVID-19, in addition to our existing non-COVID related absenteeism challenges. Our Human Resources team continues to implement strategies and practices to help mitigate staffing challenges, however this has become increasingly more difficult to do, arguably impossible. Since the lifting of protective strategies on

March 21, 2022, we are experiencing unprecedented levels of staff absences that are significantly impacting school operations.

As outlined in the chart below, our school district experienced a notable increase in educator absenteeism in the three-week period following March Break (after the masking mandate in schools was lifted), as compared to the three-week period prior to March Break (when the masking mandate in schools was still in effect). This is true in both our elementary and secondary schools, although the rate of increase in absenteeism is greater in the elementary panel.

Absences for Educational Staff (Teachers, Educational Assistants and DECEs)			
	3 Weeks Prior to March Break	3 Weeks After March Break	Percentage Increase
Elementary	5160	6267	21.5%
Secondary	2388	2731	14.4%
TOTAL	**7548**	**8998**	**19.2%**

Our schools work closely with our Human Resources department to find supply coverage when staff are absent and are doing all they can to provide continuity of learning while ensuring adequate supervision is in place in our classrooms to keep all students safe.

It is important to note that our fill rate data (i.e. our ability to assign occasional staff to replace the number of absent staff) was markedly better prior to March Break as well; even though these levels were still at unprecedented levels. This could, at least in part, be attributed both to the level of discomfort of occasional staff to work in schools now that masks are no longer mandated, as well as their own increase in absenteeism due to exposure/contraction of COVID-19.

When staff absences cannot be filled, it has necessitated other measures such as combining classes, and even cancelling classes when all available options have been exhausted. This is obviously less than ideal.

Disruption to Families and Student Learning

As Public Health Units are no longer tracking positive cases in schools, we do not have an accurate sense of student absences due to COVID-19. Some families choose to share this information voluntarily, and schools have seen an increase in self-reporting since the return from March Break.

Student illness due to COVID-19 is disruptive to learning for children who are attending in-class instruction, and onerous to families who must take time off work or make arrangements for childcare, which presents another staffing impact due to associated staff absenteeism.

Protecting Our Vulnerable Students, Families and Staff

Although the protective measures that were in place up until the March Break did not eliminate all cases of COVID-19 in our schools, they helped mitigate the risks by decreasing exposure and helping to minimize the spread. This is especially important for the students, staff and family members in our community who are at greater risk of infection and serious illness.

As noted by Dr. Meghani, Medical Officer of Health for Halton Region, *"we need to be mindful that the risk of infection and severe disease is greater for some individuals than others, including those who are immune-compromised, those with underlying health conditions, and older adults."*

Public Health Ontario recently noted:

"The uncertainty around the prevalence and severity of post- acute COVID-19 syndrome (PACS) and its longer term impacts warrants consideration of strategies to mitigate high levels of population infection. In particular, those at highest risk of severe disease (e.g., immunocompromised, elderly, and racialized and low income populations), ineligible for vaccination (i.e., children less than 5 years) and those impacted by disruptions in educational settings can benefit from population-level interventions.

Masking with high-quality masks (i.e., good fit and filtration) at a population level is a public health measure that can be effective at reducing transmission, while enabling community settings and activities to continue functioning."

Current Public Health Evidence and Recommendations

On April 8, 2022, Public Health Ontario published their most recent brief, COVID-19 Omicron Variant Sub-lineage BA.2: Evidence and Risk Assessment.

As the brief indicates, *"Close monitoring of epidemiological trends since March 21, 2022 suggests a corresponding temporal association with a subsequent increase in confirmed COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations. Confirmed case counts and the test positivity rates are increasing and currently higher than during the pandemic to date and indicative of Ontario being on the upswing of a sixth pandemic wave."*

The brief goes further to say that *"Optimizing layers of prevention in K-12 schools, including improved ventilation/air quality, masking indoors, avoiding congregation of large unmasked groups, and access to well-fitted, high quality masks can reduce the risk of in- school transmission and related disruption."*

We encourage the use of masks by students and staff while indoors at school, however, in the absence of a mandate, we have witnessed a marked decrease in the use of masks that has limited our ability to stop the spread of COVID-19 in our school communities and its associated impacts to student learning. We expect these concerns will only be exacerbated in the coming month as, according to our Chief Medical Officer of Health, the resurgence is expected to peak at the end of May.

It is for this reason that we write to you today. It has been a very long and challenging two years, and our students, families and staff have sacrificed so much throughout this pandemic. We all want a return to a more normal learning environment and we very much look forward to the time when we can safely relax all of the protocols that have been implemented to keep our schools and community safe. The evidence shows we are not there yet.

Please help us keep our school communities healthy and safe by reinstating mandatory masking as a temporary measure to help mitigate the risks to our school communities as the next wave of COVID-19 resurges.

We look forward to your response. Thank you, in advance, for your careful consideration.

Sincerely,



Marvin Duarte
Chair of the Board