

February 4, 2021

To parents and guardians in Simcoe Muskoka:

Children in the County of Simcoe and District of Muskoka are set to return to in-class school and school-age child care on February 8, 2021. You may welcome this news, while at the same time feel worried about sending your children to school while being told to stay-at-home and to only interact with household members. We understand that this seems to be a contradiction. The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) supports students returning to in-class learning because it's good for their learning, good for their mental, emotional and physical well-being, and supports family well-being. To date, although there have been COVID-19 cases and outbreaks in schools in Simcoe Muskoka, they have been well managed with class and high risk contact exclusions. Importantly, schools have been proven to be a place in which safety protocols and public health measures have prevented or reduced the spread of COVID-19.

### **New School Protective Measures**

On January 12, 2021 the Ministry of Education introduced new protective measures, in addition to other measures already in place to support this current return to in-school learning:

1. Mandatory masking requirements are now in place for all students in Grades 1-12.
  - SMDHU also strongly encourages masking for JK/SK students who are able to tolerate it. SMDHU is supportive of schools/school boards/child care operators who choose to mandate masking in JK/SK.
  - Masking requirements apply to before and after school programs, as well as on school vehicles.
  - Masks are required indoors at all times, and outdoors where physical distancing cannot be maintained. Periodic mask breaks will still be important, and schools will plan for this.
2. Daily on-site confirmation of self-screening prior to or upon arrival to school for secondary students (effective February 10), and for all staff and visitors (effective Jan 25) to schools and child care.
3. Enhanced asymptomatic testing for schools, where warranted, in consultation with the health unit.

### **What can families do to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19?**

As you are aware, the health unit follows up on all cases of COVID-19 in schools and works closely with school boards and schools in Simcoe Muskoka to ensure staff and student safety. In order to reduce community transmission it is important to ensure that we all do our part to stop the spread of COVID-19. These measures are especially important now that variant strains of COVID have been identified in Ontario including locally. While variant strains of COVID-19 may be worrisome, attention to preventive measures are the same. You and your family members should:

- Stay at home except for essential reasons such as:
  - going to school or essential work;

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- going to the grocery store or pharmacy;
- accessing health care services; and
- for exercising.
- Ensure your child(ren) complete their daily screen before attending school and that you follow the advice provided, including seeking testing if indicated.
- Limit close contact to only people in your household (the people you live with).
- Limit outdoor organized public gatherings and social gatherings to five people.
- Wear a mask outdoors when you can't physically distance more than 2 metres (6 feet).
- Wear a mask when visiting businesses or organizations.
- Individuals who live alone and single parents may consider having exclusive, close contact with one other household to help reduce the stress of social isolation.
- Follow the advice of the health unit if you or a family member have been identified as a case or a contact of a case.

We know that students want to get-together with their classmates/friends outside of school and may think it is safe because they were in class together. Please discourage this and only maintain close contacts to your immediate family/household. In schools, there are protective measures in place to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. These measures are more difficult to ensure in social settings, and so spread of COVID-19 has been more commonly seen there.

Virtual visits are a safe option for your child(ren) to see friends they don't live with. If you, or your child, do choose to spend time with others who are not a part of your household, it is safest to do so outdoors following public health guidance.

### **Supporting You**

We understand that the first months of 2021 have continued to be difficult for families. You have been supporting virtual learning while maintaining work and family responsibilities. It is normal to have emotional, mental or physical reactions to ongoing stressful situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. You are not alone if it is affecting your mental health and ability to cope. If you or anyone in your family needs support, many free mental health resources can be found on our [website](#).

Visit the health unit's website for more information and regular updates about COVID-19 at <https://www.simcoemuskokahealth.org/Topics/COVID-19> or call Health Connection at 705-721-7520 or 1-877-721-7520.

Sincerely,

### **ORIGINAL Signed By:**

Charles Gardner, MD, CCFP, MHSc, FRCPC  
Medical Officer of Health

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