

August 28, 2020

To the Directors of Education in Simcoe Muskoka:

Re: Grade requirements for face coverings in schools

At this time boards of education across Ontario are planning for the safe return of students for in-class instruction (as well as remote learning), applying the provincial direction to this end. One of the key issues of concern for boards is the use of face coverings or masks by students, and the grades to which this should apply. A number of boards in the province (including some in Simcoe Muskoka) have chosen the application of a requirement on this to grades that differ from the Ministry of Education direction (mandatory for grades 4 and above, and encouraged for kindergarten to grade 3), with differing approaches among these boards. ¹

As the Medical Officer of Health for the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU), and as a member of the Public Health Measures Table (advising the Chief Medical Officer of Health on key policy matters related to the control of COVID-19) I have participated in provincial discussions regarding the approach ultimately taken by the Ministry of Education. The province’s approach has been provided in order to achieve a balance between the reduction in transmission of COVID-19 achieved with mask use, versus the potential to undermine the educational, social and emotional development of young children.

A [report from the World Health Organization](#) recommends that masks not be used by children 5 years of age and younger, and expresses caution for their use in children between 6 and 11 years of age; for these older children, a risk based approach is recommended regarding mask use, taking into account factors such as the degree of COVID-19 transmission in the local community, the ability of children to comply with mask use, and “the potential impact of mask wearing on learning and psychosocial development”. It notes that the effectiveness of mask use in younger children is substantially less than in older children and in the adult population. In addition, research to date has demonstrated that disease rates, and severe outcomes in particular in young children, are much lower than the adult population, and that younger children play a less active role in COVID-19 transmission than do older children (teenagers). ² The [report from the Hospital for Sick Children](#) indicates that with the present incidence of disease, mask use in middle school and high school students is recommended but not in elementary school children. ³ They also note that it is impractical to expect most children and youth to wear a mask properly for the duration of the school day, and that younger children in particular would need close monitoring for this to occur, including in regards to appropriate procedures for putting on and taking off the mask and storing it appropriately when it is removed in order to prevent infection spread.

¹ [Guide to reopening Ontario’s schools. Ontario Ministry of Education](#)

² [Advice on the use of masks for children in the community in the context of COVID-19: Annex to the Advice on the use of masks in the context of COVID-19. 21 August 2020, World Health Organization](#)

³ [Update COVID-19: Guidance for School Reopening JULY 29, 2020: Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Ontario](#)

□ Barrie:
15 Sperling Drive
Barrie, ON
L4M 6K9
705-721-7520
FAX: 705-721-1495

□ Collingwood:
280 Pretty River Pkwy.
Collingwood, ON
L9Y 4J5
705-445-0804
FAX: 705-445-6498

□ Cookstown:
2-25 King Street S.
Cookstown, ON
L0L 1L0
705-458-1103
FAX: 705-458-0105

□ Gravenhurst:
2-5 Pineridge Gate
Gravenhurst, ON
P1P 1Z3
705-684-9090
FAX: 705-684-9887

□ Huntsville:
34 Chaffey St.
Huntsville, ON
P1H 1K1
705-789-8813
FAX: 705-789-7245

□ Midland:
A-925 Hugel Ave.
Midland, ON
L4R 1X8
705-526-9324
FAX: 705-526-1513

□ Orillia:
120-169 Front St. S.
Orillia, ON
L3V 4S8
705-325-9565
FAX: 705-325-2091

I have gone on public record supporting the [provincial direction](#) regarding mask use in schools. I understand that some of the boards of education in Simcoe Muskoka have chosen to require masks for students under grade 4 or are considering doing so. I recommend that these boards take into consideration my position. I would be happy to communicate further on this matter as would be helpful.

At SMDHU we highly value our collaborative relationship with our school boards and our schools, as we work together in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, protecting our students, staff, and communities.

Sincerely,

ORIGINAL Signed By:

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

CG:cm