

# FAQ's- RETURN TO SCHOOL FOR FAMILIES

Revised September 4, 2020

## REDUCE THE RISK OF SPREADING GERMS AT SCHOOL

### Should my child and family be tested for COVID-19 before school starts?

No. Currently, COVID-19 infection rates across Simcoe County and the District of Muskoka remain low. For that reason we are not recommending testing for people without symptoms at this time. A COVID-19 test only shows whether or not the person has an active infection on the day of the test. It would be possible to have a negative test result but be in the incubation period (the period between when you are infected and when you start showing symptoms, which can range from 1-14 days with an average of 5-6 days). It is more important that you, or your child, stay home if you are unwell.

### REVISED- Will students and school staff have to self-screen for COVID-19 prior to coming to school?

Yes, all students, staff and essential visitors MUST complete a daily COVID-19 symptom screen (online: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/self-assessment/>) or (PDF) before going to school, which is simply a checklist of questions you ask your child. Parents must screen an elementary aged child. A secondary student can self-screen before going to school, but as their parent/caregiver you need to check that the screen is done.

### REVISED - Why are students in Grades 4 -12 being required to wear masks/face coverings to attend school?

There is limited data available to date specifically on the usefulness of masks in schools because only a few areas have returned to school during this pandemic. What the limited evidence to date does tell us is that transmission of COVID-19 from young children to others appears less likely than from older children/youth to others. Also, for face coverings to be effective, they need to be worn and handled correctly. This includes not touching the mask, eyes, nose or mouth, and properly taking it on and off with proper hand hygiene, which for younger children can be difficult. Older children and youth will likely be more able to follow the best practices independently, and tolerate a mask for longer periods. The Ministry of Education has instructed schools and school boards that students in Grades 4 to 12 will be required to wear face coverings indoors on school property, and that it will be encouraged for students in Kindergarten to Grade 3.

### What kind of mask/face covering are students required to wear?

Students are required to wear non-medical or cloth masks indoors in school, including in hallways and during classes.

Non-medical masks or face coverings should:

- fit securely to the head with ties or ear loops
- maintain their shape after washing and drying
- be made of at least two layers of tightly woven material (such as cotton or linen)
- be large enough to completely and comfortably cover the nose, mouth and chin without gaping

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## **REVISED - Will my child be required to wear their mask/face covering all day?**

Mask-wearing is not required while:

- outdoors, provided physical distancing can be maintained;
- eating snacks or lunch (students can remove masks once seated and remain seated while their mask is removed); and
- participating in physical activity in health and physical education class (the Ministry of Education has instructed schools to hold these classes outdoors if at all possible, and to only use the gym if physical distancing measures can be followed).

## **REVISED - What about students or staff who cannot wear a mask even though they are required to?**

According to Ministry guidelines, reasonable exceptions on the requirement to wear masks will apply. Such exceptions may include:

- individuals with medical conditions rendering them unable to safely wear a mask, including those with breathing difficulties or cognitive difficulties or difficulties in hearing or processing information.
- anyone who is unable to remove the mask without help.

The school principal, guided by school board policies will review all exemptions. School board policies may require recommendations from a health care provider in regards to your specific circumstances.

## **Should I send my child to school with their own hand sanitizer?**

Schools will have hand sanitizing stations available for their staff and students to use regularly. Check your school board's website for further information about sending hand sanitizer to school. For more information about using hand sanitizer at home see [Proper Hand Sanitizing](#).

## **Will class groupings/cohorts consider families, social bubbles, and students who travel together on the bus?**

Please check with [your local school board](#) to get specific information about how groups/cohorts will be created.

## **NEW - If my children are attending school should they get undressed immediately upon returning home or leave their school bag outside of home?**

There is no evidence to suggest that changing clothing at the end of a school day or leaving clothing bagged outdoors will lower risk of COVID-19. You can change your child's clothing as you would regularly and launder as usual.

## **NEW - Will drinking water fountains be available for use?**

Your child's school will provide detailed information about using refillable water bottles. However, students are encouraged to bring their own refillable water bottles to school. Re-filling water bottles from fountains, taps or filling stations that are cleaned and sanitized regularly is preferred. Water fountains may be available as filling stations, with appropriate cleaning protocols in place.

## **NEW - Is there any special way to dispose of personal protective equipment (PPE) that is used in schools?**

There is no special way to get rid of used PPE for the purposes of COVID-19. Used PPE can be thrown into general garbage. Hand hygiene should always be practiced before and after taking off PPE.

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## OUTBREAK MANAGEMENT

### **NEW - When would my child be excluded from school?**

Students and staff cannot attend school in the following situations:

- They have even ONE new symptom of COVID-19 that lasts more than a few hours
- They are self-isolating due to a high-risk exposure to a confirmed case of COVID-19;
- They are self-isolating due to travel outside of Canada;
- They are sick with COVID-19 symptoms and have been tested but are still waiting for test results
- They are sick with COVID-19 symptoms and have declined to be tested
- They have a positive laboratory test result for COVID-19.

If your child has had a COVID-19 test because of symptoms, but has tested negative, your child may return to school when they have been free of symptoms for at least 24 hours.

If your child is sick with something other than COVID-19, as diagnosed by a health care provider, your child may return to school when they have been free of symptoms for at least 24 hours.

### **NEW - What happens if a student becomes sick or has COVID-19 symptoms at school?**

If a child becomes sick while at school, the school will follow the [Ministry of Health COVID-19 Guidance: School Outbreak Management](#) to ensure that the child is separated and cared for while waiting for their parent/guardian to get them. Public transit, taxis and/or school buses are not suitable transportation methods to return the student home. All students who develop COVID-19 symptoms are encouraged to be tested.

The health unit investigates all probable and confirmed COVID-19 cases, and will be working with the school and families involved to determine who, if anyone, needs to self-monitor, self-isolate or be tested.

### **NEW - If a student or staff member is symptomatic but chooses not to be tested, when can they come back to school?**

For easy reference, please see our document: [My child has COVID-19 symptoms, now what?](#)

Because [COVID-19 symptoms](#) can be mild and resemble other illnesses, the only way to know if the symptoms are being caused by COVID-19 is to be [tested](#). If a sick student or staff member believes their symptoms are due to other health reasons, they should see a health care provider as soon as possible. If a sick student or staff member chooses not to be tested they cannot go to child care or school and have to [self-isolate](#) for up to 14 days from the start of their symptoms, unless they receive a clear alternative diagnosis from a health care provider. [Household members of ill individuals](#) who have not been tested will need to [self-monitor](#) for 14 days. These household contacts of the sick individual can continue to come to school, as long as they have not developed symptoms themselves.

### **NEW - What happens if a student/educator tests positive?**

The health unit receives notification of and investigates all positive COVID-19 test results. A case investigator is assigned to each positive case. The case investigator will work closely with the individual, their family and their school to determine who, if anyone, needs to self-isolate or be tested. The individual and their household contacts should self-isolate while awaiting further guidance.

### **NEW - How will contact tracing work if there is a positive case in a school?**

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All contacts of a probable or confirmed case of COVID-19 will be contacted by the health unit, and next steps determined. Cohorting is helpful for contact tracing, as well as being a measure to reduce the spread of the virus.

## **NEW - If my child is excluded from school am I excluded from work?**

Children who have one or more symptoms of COVID-19 and who have been tested cannot go to child care or school until the results are known. Household members are to self-monitor for 14 days. These household contacts of the sick individual can continue to go to work as long as they have not developed symptoms themselves, and the sick individual has not been diagnosed with COVID-19.

If you decided not to get your child tested they cannot go to child care or school and have to self-isolate for up to 14 days from the start of their symptoms. All household members are to [self-monitor](#) for 14 days, but can continue to go to child care, school or work as long as they have not developed symptoms themselves.

If you feel there is another reason for your child's new symptom(s) contact a primary health care provider. If your health care provider decides that your child has another condition (an alternative diagnosis), and that the condition is NOT COVID-19, your child may return to school when they have been free of symptoms for 24 hours. Household members with no symptoms can return right away to child care, school or work.

## **NEW - If a student or staff member has one or more symptoms on the daily self-screening tool what should they do?**

They are to stay home and report to their absence to the school. Staff and students with COVID-19 symptoms should get tested. The Ministry of Health's [online assessment tool](#) or [SMDHU's PDF version](#) can be used by parents and school staff to determine next steps.

## **NEW - Will the health unit be working with schools to conduct on-going surveillance (i.e. sick/absenteeism rates)?**

There is both provincial and local planning occurring to monitor illness and absenteeism rates in local schools.

## PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR SCHOOL

### **NEW - How can I prepare my child for return to school?**

Please review [this section of the SMDHU website](#) for more information on preparing your child for school.

### **NEW - Are there any recommendations/guidelines around packing lunches?**

Eating at school will be different this school year as some cafeterias may be closed, and school lunch programs may not be offered. There will likely be no access to appliances like microwaves, toasters or kettles at school. New practices will likely be put in place regarding access to water fountains. Students should have a reusable water bottle labelled with their name that can be refilled throughout the day. There may also be new policies or protocols in place about leaving school for lunch, or bringing home garbage and waste. Yet, healthy eating remains an important part of staying well and able to fight off illness and infection. [These guidelines](#) will help you pack [healthy and safe lunches and snacks for students](#).

### **NEW - I'm concerned about my child's emotional coping. Where can I get help?**

There are a number of resources available to help, depending on the age of your child. You can learn more about children's mental health at [Children's Mental Health Ontario](#).

Talk with your child's teacher, so they are aware and can work with you and your child to get the supports they need. There are also services in the community that can support your child's mental health and help your family.

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Visit [Raising Children Help and Support](#) for links to a variety of services.

[Children's Mental Health Ontario](#)

[Wellness Together Canada](#)

[Kids Help Phone](#)

## COVID-19 CONSIDERATIONS OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL (transportation, before and after school care/activities, social bubbles)

### Revised - Can a student who has a parent who travels outside of Canada attend school?

Certain individuals who travel internationally for work (such as airline pilots and long-haul truckers) are exempt from the mandatory quarantine when entering Canada because their work is defined as essential under the Quarantine Act. In addition, certain professions, such as health care providers, do not need to quarantine following international travel, even if travel was recreational. Exemptions are reviewed at the border by a border services officer and do not apply to anyone who has signs or symptoms of COVID-19. Their children are required to self-isolate only if their parent has travelled outside Canada in the previous 14 days AND is sick with COVID-19 symptoms. Therefore, students of parents who travel internationally and who are exempt from the Quarantine Act may attend school as long as their parents are healthy and have no symptoms of COVID-19.

### Where can I find more information about school buses and COVID-19?

Information on school transportation is located [here](#) under transportation. School bus drivers can refer to the [Health and Safety Guidance During COVID-19 for Student Transportation Employers](#) released by the Public Services Health and Safety Association. The Simcoe County Student Transportation Consortium also recently released Student Transportation Guidelines for Fall 2020 (found on their [website](#)).

### NEW - Will children who are in separate cohorts in school be mixed together in buses or in before/after child care?

Yes. It may not be possible to limit students in the before and after school program to their groups from the core day. Children will likely have more than one cohort when returning to school. Their classroom will be a cohort, their bus will be another cohort and their before and after school program will be another cohort.

### NEW - What are the recommendations for before and after school care?

As before/after school programs are run by licensed child care operators, they are required to follow [detailed guidelines](#) issued by the Ministry of Education. In addition, as partners with schools, there is specific [direction](#) that has been provided to school boards regarding school-age child care.

### NEW - How does going back to school affect our family's/child's social circle?

Older children and youth have a responsibility to keep social circles safe. As we continue our shared fight against coronavirus (COVID-19), social circles are a way to safely expand the number of people with whom we can come in close contact. People in your social circle are those that you can hug and touch, or those who can become part of your daily and weekly routines. A social circle is a group of no more than 10 people and includes everyone living in the same household. People need to be in agreement to join one circle only. Physical distancing, and wearing a face covering when we may not be able to maintain distance with those outside our social circle is required.

### NEW - Can those who are vulnerable still be in our social circle if my child goes to school in person?

Families can maintain their current social circle for the time being. All members of your social circle should continue to practice physical distancing with others (outside of your social circle), wash hands frequently, wear a face covering when physical distancing outside of your social circle is not possible, and self-isolate if they become sick. As schools reopen, the situation across the province will be monitored carefully. You will need to stay

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up to date on the number of active cases in your community and take into consideration the health of everyone in your current social circle on an ongoing basis.

## GENERAL QUESTIONS

### **Why are schools opening when adults in many cases are not attending work in person?**

The role of children in transmission is not well understood. To date, few outbreaks involving children or schools have been reported globally. However, the small number of outbreaks reported among teaching or associated staff also suggests that spread of COVID-19 within educational settings may be limited. There is evidence to suggest that younger children may be less likely to get and pass COVID-19 to others compared to older children and youth. Children only make up 5-10% of cases in Canada and tend to have no symptoms or very mild symptoms. Whereas, long periods of isolation at home, away from peers and others and the familiar environment and routines of school, is showing to have a negative effect on children's overall mental health and physical well-being. Unfortunately, what may work well for adults (working from home for instance) does not always translate into a good practise for children, especially over the longer term.

### **Why are schools opening when physical distancing cannot be maintained and not everyone is required to wear a mask/face covering?**

The Ministry of Education determines which school boards can open and under what conditions. Even with low level transmission in the community, it is important for the mental health and well-being of children to be back in school. The safety measures which have been put in place in schools by the province have attempted to balance the risks and benefits, while acknowledging that certain measures (e.g. young children wearing a face covering) may not be feasible.

### **Is SMDHU working with school boards to provide/review all recommendations?**

SMDHU is in communication with all seven school boards within the health unit catchment area, providing support and feedback on school reopening plans. Communication and collaboration between health units and school boards takes place on an ongoing basis.

### **What will 'school' look like if I choose to keep my child at home to learn?**

Please check [your local school board website](#) to get specific information about what in-person and online learning will look like at your school.