



Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board
Believing, Achieving, Serving

August 28, 2020

Dear Parents/Guardians,

We hope that you and your family have had an enjoyable and safe summer.

We are writing to provide an update on a number of recent developments pertaining to the school reopening, including the recent mandating of masks for all students, the staggered reopening of our elementary schools, reduced class sizes, and the provincial outbreak protocol, released this week by the Ministry of Education.

As you may be aware, at our Board meeting of August 20th the Board of Trustees voted unanimously in favour of recommendations to mandate masks for all students, JK to Grade 12, subject to reasonable exceptions, and to stagger the reopening of elementary schools over the first two weeks of school. The recommendations were made in support of the Board's priority to do all it can to ensure and promote the health and safety and well-being of students and staff as we prepare for the return to school amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The decisions, which build on the Ministry's guidance on the reopening of schools first released on July 30th, were based on new guidance from the Ministry of Education in its memo of August 13th which described the original mask mandate for Grade 4-12 students as a minimum requirement for school boards. The memo also authorized school boards to adopt a staggered start beyond the first week of school where boards felt the practice would contribute to students learning new routines and for new health and safety practices to be reinforced.

Flexibility and Adaptability

While the new measures expand on and, in some cases, revise information shared on August 14th in our *Nurturing Hope: Parent Guide on the Reopening of HWCDSB Schools*, one of the guiding principles used by the HWCDSB in developing our school reopening plans was to remain flexible and adaptable as new information becomes available and as our own understanding of COVID-19 and health & safety protocols evolves. Information from the Ministry of Education and other sources has evolved throughout the summer, creating the need for central changes. It is in this spirit that the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board has implemented these additional, enhanced health and safety measures for the September reopening of schools.

Staggered Reopening of Elementary Schools

A [staggered entry plan](#) was finalized this week and provides different reopening models for Kindergarten, elementary and secondary students. Under the plan, Tuesday, September 8th

will be a preparation day for staff. September 9-14 will see Kindergarten students return in staggered sub-cohorts and elementary students by grades. Grade 9 students will return on September 9th for an orientation session; instruction will begin for Cohort B secondary students on September 10th and Cohort A secondary students on September 11th. Online instruction will begin on Monday, September 14th. **The schedule is attached and provides a breakdown of the staggered entry model.** The rationale behind the staggered start is to limit the number of students in schools while health and safety protocols and routines are being learned. This will ensure that students and staff are properly educated on the use of masks, hand hygiene, physical distancing and other practices that are being implemented to keep our students and staff safe. Please note that the schedule does not include start dates for our Virtual/Online School. Information on the Virtual/Online School, including dates, will be shared in a forthcoming communication.

Mandatory Masks for All Students

The Board of Trustees also approved mandatory masks for all students, including JK to Grade 3 students who, in the original guidance, were exempt. The decision to mandate masks for all students was made in consultation with Hamilton Public Health Services and aligns with the city's [mask/face covering by-law](#) that requires individuals to wear a mask or face covering in enclosed public spaces to reduce the transmission of COVID-19, especially when physical distancing may not be possible. According to Public Health Services, face coverings and masks today are more important than ever: "The risk of spreading COVID-19 is greater indoors where there is less air flow and ventilations, more crowding, and greater chance of touching surfaces contaminated by respiratory droplets. Wearing a face covering or mask indoors helps prevent spreading germs to others."

While opinions on the matter vary, the Board believes that the mandatory use of masks will not only provide another layer of protection for our students and staff, but ease of mind as we work toward the safe reopening of our schools. Visit [Hamilton Public Health Services](#) to learn more about how to properly wear a mask, how masks can reduce the transmission of COVID-19, and other protective measures you can take to stay healthy and safe.

Provincial Outbreak Protocol

On August 26th, the provincial government released an [Operational Guidance: COVID-19 Management in Schools](#) document which outlines protocols for school boards in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak. The plan provides guidance on prevention, record-keeping/contact tracing, the importance of home screening, the role of local public health, infection control measures, and appropriate steps to take should a student or staff member test positive for COVID-19. In addition to the provincial guidance, the HWCDSB has been working with Hamilton Public Health Services (PHS) to develop procedures and protocols, based on the most recent data and evidence, to monitor and respond to reports of COVID-19 symptoms. Details of our system action plan are outlined in our *Nurturing Hope: Parent Guide on the Reopening of HWCDSB Schools*.

During the pandemic, the HWCDSB has made every effort to respond in a timely and effective way to the numerous and complex challenging issues that have arisen. The province's newly

released COVID-19 Management Plan for school boards is a welcome added resource that will assist the HWCDSB in our commitment to make our schools as safe as possible.

Elementary Class Size

A review has been undertaken by the Board to look at elementary school class size in order to alleviate overcrowding and to ensure as much physical distancing between students and staff as possible. From this review, a plan has been developed to reduce class sizes for Kindergarten and Grade 4-8 classrooms for the upcoming school year. Through the use of reserve funds and provincial funding, class sizes will be reduced from 23.3 to 18.7 students in Kindergarten, and from 24.51 to 22.68 in Grades 4-8. Primary (Grade 1-3) classes, which were already capped, will remain the same at 20 students. The reduced classes have created the need for approximately 50-55 new classrooms and approximately 50 additional classroom teachers and 15 DECEs for September.

Secondary Adapted Model and Virtual/Online School

The secondary adapted model outlined in our *Nurturing Hope: Parent Guide on the Reopening of HWCDSB Schools* is being revised to fulfill the Ministry of Education requirement of 300 instructional minutes per day. Information on the revised secondary in-school model and the Virtual/Online School will be shared in an upcoming letter and will include sample weekly schedules, course selections for online learning, and in-school re-entry points.

Please be reminded that elementary students who opt for at-home learning may rejoin in-school learning at three intake periods: after Thanksgiving, after Christmas and after March Break. Secondary students may also re-enter at the start of the next in-school course.

As we fast approach the start of the 2020-2021 school year, we would like to take this opportunity to thank the many dedicated individuals – trustees, employee group representatives, system and school leaders, teachers and support staff – who have worked so tirelessly to plan and prepare for the safe reopening of our schools and the safe return of our students and staff. While it is not the return we or our students would have wished, we can assure you of our complete commitment to the health, safety and well-being of our students and staff as together we maneuver through the current landscape and all of its presenting challenges. As our theme for this year, *Nurturing Hope*, reminds us, “Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31).

We look forward to welcoming our students back to school in September and pray that our Lord Jesus Christ continues to bless and strengthen you and your family in the weeks leading up to the school reopening.



Patrick J. Daly
Chairperson of the Board



David Hansen
Director of Education