

January 26, 2022

# Important COVID-19 Update for Schools

Dear Students, Staff, and Families:

Thank you for all you are doing to protect yourselves, your families, and your communities from COVID-19. With the surge of cases we experienced late last year, the return to in-person learning can come with mixed feelings for students, staff, and families. While individuals aged 5 to 19 years appear to be at lower risk of severe disease from Omicron compared to other ages that risk could be further reduced through immunization.

As we know, the Omicron variant can spread very quickly and the way we manage COVID-19 in the school setting had to change to reflect that reality. **Intensive case and contact follow-up with cohort dismissal is no longer an effective strategy for the virus that moves very fast.** Instead of focusing on where the virus is, we need to predict where it will be going and minimize transmission with public health measures. These measures in schools remain extremely robust and transmission in schools has been very low.

This change in our approach is not only better suited for a virus like Omicron but it also minimizes unnecessary disruptions to in person learning. **In person learning remains the best choice for healthy child development and significant health benefits of children remaining in schools outweigh the risks.** As we see widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the community, it is not surprising to expect a higher rate of absences in the school setting, as well as other settings, particularly this time of year as other respiratory viruses frequently circulate. This higher rate of absence is not indicative of increased risk in the school environment. Classrooms remain lower risk settings in terms of transmission compared to most other community settings including households.

With the changes to the provincial testing strategy, we know that the number of cases and contacts no longer has the same value as it did last year. We are supportive of the changes in provincial guidance as well as the operational systems which are in place to support this framework. We also recognize this is a shift where we are less focused on individual case versus population-based approach which is using absence from school as an indicator. Whether an individual knows for certain they have COVID-19, or another respiratory illness, it does not change the outcome of having to stay home when you are sick to avoid spreading illness to others.

## Here are some important changes:

- KFL&A Public Health will no longer be dismissing cohorts.
- Any dismissals or closures of a school will be based on operational requirements (e.g., staffing shortages) determined by the school and/or school board.
- Parents/caregivers will NOT receive a letter from public health to advise them of a case of COVID-19 at school or that their student was a high-risk contact.
- Due to the change in testing availability and the rapid spread of Omicron, it is not possible to know about or follow up with every confirmed or presumed COVID-19 case.
- Molecular testing (PCR or rapid molecular testing) has been prioritized for certain high-risk groups. In general, students and school staff are not eligible for a molecular test at this time.
- Anyone who tests positive on a rapid antigen test is considered to have COVID-19. They do not need to get a confirmatory molecular test or notify Public Health, but should notify their high risk contacts of their exposure. More information can be found at [Ontario.ca/exposed](https://ontario.ca/exposed) and [kflaph.ca/SelfIsolation](https://kflaph.ca/SelfIsolation).

# Update on Absenteeism Reporting

- Staff and students are asked to inform the school of absences regardless of the reason.
- To support ongoing monitoring and transparency related to COVID-19, schools will report student and staff absences to the Ministry of Education, daily through the Absence Reporting Tool (ART). You can find information about COVID-19 school closures and absenteeism at: **COVID-19: school closures and absenteeism | ontario.ca**.
- Schools will monitor and report defined levels of absences (**approximately 30% or higher above their baseline**) to the School Board.
- KFL&A Public Health will support the school with any necessary steps to improve health and safety at the school.

## Enhanced Public Health Measures

The Ministry of Education, in consultation with the Ministry of Health, is responsible for providing operational guidance for school boards and schools. To best protect students, staff and our community, Ontario's **COVID-19: Health, safety and operational guidance for schools (2021-2022)** provides minimum return to in-person learning guidance for all Ontario schools that is to be applied consistently across the province.

In KFL&A, most school-related cases up to the end of 2021 were acquired in the community. While the risk of exposure in schools cannot be completely eliminated, our experience so far has shown that transmission within school is lower than (or equivalent to) levels of community transmission. In other words, we all need to control community transmission to prevent COVID-19 from spreading into schools.

With the increased transmissibility of Omicron, it is even more important that we all continue to follow public health measures such as:

- screening,
- masking,
- maintaining physical distance,
- limiting our number of contacts,
- staying home when symptomatic, and
- getting vaccinated.

This approach is more similar to how we manage other respiratory viruses, such as influenza, RSV, or rhinovirus.

The KFL&A area has been a leader in vaccination, to date with over 63 per cent of children 5 to 11 years of age vaccinated with first dose. KFL&A Public Health is continuing to work with school boards to provide additional vaccination opportunities for students, families, and staff.

Vaccination remains the best defense against the highly transmissible Omicron variant. High vaccination rates help to keep schools safe. In the KFL&A area, there are a variety of community vaccination clinics, including larger clinic sites, mobile and pop-up clinics, and clinics at pharmacies, schools, and in primary care offices. For more information on locations, times, and opportunities to walk in or book an appointment, visit **kflaph.ca/Vaccine**.

For more information on COVID-19, including fact sheets, symptoms and screening, self-monitoring, self-isolation, testing, and vaccines, visit **kflaph.ca**. If you have questions, please call 613-549-1232 and follow directions to the call centre.

Sincerely,

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KFL&A Public Health