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May 28, 2021

Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier Ford:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the questions raised by the prospect of a return to in-person learning before the end of this school year.

At Toronto Public Health, our preference is that the restoration of in-person learning should precede the lifting of any other restrictions implemented to reduce COVID-19 transmission, in order to allow for further vaccinations and create conditions for further decline in rates of COVID-19 infection.

During the pandemic, Toronto Public Health participated in genetic fingerprinting studies with Sick Kids (The Hospital for Sick Children). These studies showed that there are usually multiple strains of COVID-19 virus in school populations. This suggests that students and staff who had COVID-19 in a school setting most often acquired their infection in the community.

Studies have also shown that transmission risk appears to be low where there are comprehensive measures to support infection risk reduction. In Toronto, infection prevention and control measures include wearing a mask, daily symptom screening, cohorting, testing, physical distancing, ventilation and enhanced cleaning. Toronto Public Health has resources in place so that where required, staff and students can be tested in a timely manner. At current levels of community transmission, we also have sufficient capacity to conduct timely case and contact management. However, an increase in community transmission would negatively impact this capacity.

It is established that school-aged children have suffered from the suspension of in-person learning, despite the necessity of this course of action. It is also accepted that infection rates in the school population broadly mirror infection rates in the general population. In this context, a return to in-person learning must be measured against the current levels of infection in the province, the anticipated risks of infections driven by variants of concern, and the timing for restoration of any other activities that will increase interaction between Ontarians of all ages.

In summary, reopening schools should occur before other restrictions are lifted. Currently, in Toronto, public health and infection prevention and control measures exist to support in-person learning. The decision whether or not to re-open schools for in-person learning is a complex one. In any instance, Toronto Public Health will be ready to support the direction the Province chooses to pursue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Eille". The signature is cursive and stylized.

Eileen de Villa, MD, MBA, MHSc, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health