



To the Minister of Education and School Boards,

We are Masks4Canada, a grassroots volunteer group of physicians, media, data scientists, marketing specialists, technologists, business leaders, lawyers, engineers, students, teachers, parents, and concerned community members. Our group of citizens has been advocating to all levels of government for face-coverings and masks to be made mandatory in high-risk settings such as enclosed public spaces, crowds, and public transportation. As we know from evidence to date and experiences from other countries, in addition to physical distancing and hand hygiene, masks are effective in further helping reduce the transmission of COVID-19.

Thanks to informational campaigns and consultations, many local governments have mandated masks for indoor public spaces. However, the safe reopening of schools continues to be a major concern for many parents, educators and healthcare professionals. We understand there are many challenges to reopening schools, and so we are writing to you to recommend some safe practices that can help protect children and educators. We recommend including parents, caregivers, educators, school staff, and teachers' unions in this important discussion as they have helpful perspectives and many questions, concerns, and suggestions that may not be addressed in this letter.

Reopening schools is not only important for the education, socialization, and mental health of our children, but it also helps parents/caregivers return to work sooner. Therefore, in order to avoid any future outbreaks and subsequent school closures or community lockdown, it is imperative that everything is done to decrease the chance of any significant spread when schools reopen. There is still much to learn about COVID-19 transmission through children and how the disease affects the pediatric population. However, it is known that children can have mild to severe infections, and can also be asymptomatic vectors that spread the virus to family members who may be vulnerable or elderly. We ask that the Ministry of Education and School Boards review our attached letter of response to SickKids' recent publication [COVID-19: Recommendations for School Reopening], along with our attached open letter to the government regarding mandatory masking, which has over 1500 signatures from Canadian healthcare and scientific professionals. We have also attached a letter written by another colleague who has excellent suggestions regarding safety in school reopening.

To help promote a safe learning environment within schools, students and academic staff need to practice (1) physical distancing, (2) hand hygiene, and (3) masking. Other staff who also come in close contact with others, i.e. bus drivers and cafeteria workers, should also follow the same recommendations.



Physical distancing:

There have been many good suggestions by public health, governments and school boards on how best to physically distance. Online education, phased return, and smaller class sizes/split classes will help. Additionally, using other spaces such as parks or community centres can provide further distancing if needed. For all this to be successfully enacted, we hope all stakeholders, including parents and educators, are consulted and involved.

Hand hygiene:

Educational videos on the proper hand washing method (i.e. disinfecting all surfaces of the hands and wrists with soap and water or sanitizer for 20 seconds) could be sent to parents and students before school starts to ensure that children are already equipped with this skill prior to returning. Hand sanitizers should be made readily available and should be used in case there are not enough hand washing stations.

Masking:

Children are very quick learners and we have no doubt that they will adapt quickly to new routines, but as with all new skills, practice makes perfect. We encourage children to practice wearing reusable cloth masks or face coverings at home, to ensure that it fits their faces well, and to let them slowly learn how to properly wear them before school restarts. Let children choose their own colours and designs on the cloth masks or face coverings so that they are involved and feel ownership over this. Adolescents and older elementary school children should be able to learn how to wear a face mask properly and independently. Younger children may need more assistance but with time and practice, they should also be able to learn how to wear masks properly and independently. For those who are unable to wear a mask properly or those who have medical exemptions, face shields could be considered as an alternative. Clear masks, which are preferred over face shields, can also be used by educators in situations where facial expression is important for communication.

When returning to school, masks or face coverings should be required and we recommend using reusable cloth masks or face coverings that students would bring from home (just like they bring their own extra sets of clothing, coats, and shoes), but masks and face shields should be readily available and accessible for those who need them and cannot afford them or do not have access to them.

Masks can be taken off during meals or if students are outdoors and physically distanced. Again, educational videos or resources to help students learn how to properly put on and take off a mask, how to ensure it fits well around the face (covering both the nose and mouth), when to wear one, when to change out a damp or dirty mask, and how to clean the reusable mask would be beneficial.



Below are some photos of post-Covid19 classrooms from around the world to help visualize what the new learning environment could look like.



Fig 1: Here are examples of how some schools are applying physical distancing for students.



Fig 2: Teachers, educators, and staff could wear clear masks like these for students with hearing impairment, as well as allowing for more facial expressions.



Fig 3: Encourage and teach children to sanitize their own workstations/desks.



Fig 4: Masks can be fun and creative! Don't all superheroes wear masks?



Fig 5: Face shield hats could be an alternative to masks for younger children, those who have difficulty wearing a mask properly, or those with medical exemptions to masks.

Together, we can protect our children, educators, and their families - and in doing so, our communities as well.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further with you and or answer any questions you may have. We may be contacted at admin@masks4canada.org

Thank you for your consideration,

Masks4Canada