



December 31st, 2021

Dear Waterloo Catholic Community –

I hope that you have enjoyed a pleasant, restful and healthy Christmas season with your family. While generally a time of celebration and joy, it has been a time of concern for many due to the increase in cases that we have been witness to in the media and our communities. The omicron variant has become the dominant strain of COVID with unprecedented speed and we have seen case counts grow at an exponential rate – faster than any wave before. The good news is that both globally and here in Ontario – the greater majority of all cases are relatively mild and the percentage that lead to serious illness seem to be very few. With that said – the need for caution is very real, given the sheer volume of cases. Our care and concern for our vulnerable population and our health care workers who have done so much to serve our communities must remain one of our highest priorities. As a result, the Provincial Government, through the Chief Medical Officer of Health, have updated a number of points of guidance and procedure. **This letter provides very important updates about the return to school this new year.**

Return to School:

The return to in-person learning for all students will be delayed to **Wednesday January 5th 2022**. (This includes *St Isidore and St Louis*) Students should continue to use the Rapid Antigen Tests you received before the break and any positive result should be considered a final result, confirming COVID. Please see the note below regarding timing of last two tests. No staff or student should attend school after a positive result. Instructions on their use have been provided by your local school before the break, along with instruction videos in multiple languages.

Testing:

In Ontario PCR tests will no longer be available to staff and students or the general public, so screening for symptoms and treating any symptom as confirmation of omicron is the recommendation. The ministry hopes to provide more rapid tests for staff and students in the weeks to come. **With the start of school moved to January 5th we would ask that you use the last 2 tests on January 3rd and the morning of January 5th.** This will ensure the best chance of a safe return for all. Please make a best effort to honour this request.

Screening:

It is more important than ever before, that anyone feeling ill should not attend school. All children, students, staff, and visitors must be screened for symptoms of illness every day before attending school or childcare. Any student or staff member with **any symptom** should **not** report to school. To help meet this requirement, you may use the provincial screening tool found here: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/school-screening/>. Confirmation of self-screening will still be a requirement when we return to school and we will continue to reinforce masking and hand hygiene, as well as cohorting and physical distancing with students and our staff.



Case and Contact Management:

Public Health will no longer support case and contact management for schools. Therefore – if you or your child believe that you are dealing with a case of COVID, (because you have one or more symptom) it is up to you to ensure household contacts remain isolated and to ensure you remain isolated until the positive case is both symptom free for 24 hours and it has been **5 days since symptom onset for vaccinated individuals (2 vaccines)** and **10 days since symptom onset for unvaccinated or partially vaccinated individuals**. Household contacts should also isolate for the duration of the isolation of the positive case. We hope to receive further guidance from Public Health and will share it as it becomes available.

Learning Continuity:

We know that many of the doctors and experts believe that the best place for a student is in school and we know that our students and staff have been very pleased to return to in person learning this school year. We do agree that for most students it is where they learn best. We will not be entertaining new requests to switch to St Isidore at this time, as this would necessitate a full re-organization of the system. We will be reviewing learning continuity options in the days to come and when students are absent they can check on their class Google or D2L site for their learning. We will offer more updates in the days to come.

Masks:

Students will be provided with expanded access to free high quality three-ply cloth masks. We encourage our students to use these masks and to wash them on a regular basis. The use of these specific masks is not mandatory but encouraged as they may be more effective than some of the current one- and two-ply cloth masks being used. In addition, the Ministry will also provide education staff with the option to use either the current medical grade masks or a non-fit-tested N95 mask.

Socializing:

The holidays are typically characterized as a time to gather. There are only a few days left but please consider if all public health guidelines are being observed and ensure you do not gather if you are not well. Our children will rely on us to guide them and to make strong responsible decisions on their behalf.

Vaccination:

Vaccination for children ages 5 – 11 is currently underway. Booster shots for anyone over 18 years of age has been possible as of this Monday, December 20th. Vaccination remains the best defence against COVID-19, as endorsed by experts at the Ontario Science table, the Chief Medical Officer of Health and our own Waterloo Region Public Health. The omicron variant is highly transmissible and so consideration for vaccination for yourself and your child is very important in stopping the disease spread **and also** in ensuring that if COVID is acquired, that symptoms remain mild and



manageable. Stopping its spread is important so that everyone can spend more time in school and so the most vulnerable amongst us are not negatively impacted.

Extra-Curriculars:

With the updated guidance from the government, there will be a pause to high contact sports such as basketball and wrestling, as well as to multi-cohort choirs and wind instrument ensembles. We will be reviewing our Operational Guidelines to ensure they are consistent with all updated guidance from the province and encourage you to review it here next week: [Operational Guidelines](#)

We know that it may be challenging to be navigating these times. We understand that many of you will be concerned and will only want the best for yourself and your children. We encourage you to follow the guidelines as outlined to the best of your ability and to trust that our schools still remain largely safe. I have been doing a fair bit of reading over the break and many experts have reflected that it is sometimes darkest before the dawn. Let us continue to be people of hope that brighter days will lie ahead, and perhaps in the not-too-distant future, the days will be significantly brighter. Let's us hold to the promise of the nativity and the message of love, hope and joy that it offers.

Sincerely,

Loretta Notten
Director of Education

