



January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Dear Waterloo Catholic Community –

We hope that this letter finds you well. We offer each of you sincere thanks for your collaboration and partnership as we moved student learning virtual over the past 2 weeks. We know it has not been easy and we are grateful to our staff, students and parents alike. As you have no doubt followed in the media, schools will be re-opening to in-person learning beginning on Monday January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022. As previously noted, 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. The approach to how cases are managed and the various safety protocols and strategies are all adapting to our new reality. 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 on Monday January 17th.**

#### **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 should use the provincial screening tool found here: [COVID-19 school and child care screening tool](#). Using the screening tool will lead you to the right process for family/household contacts as well. Please use the screener and review your full outcome carefully. 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.

#### **Testing:**

In Ontario PCR tests are no longer 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 government is providing 2 rapid tests for each staff person and all elementary students. We hope to also have sufficient supply to share with secondary students, though that supply has not been fully promised by the government. **They are to be used when an individual feels symptomatic.** Please make a best effort to honour this request. 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. The Rapid Antigen Test will evolve to become the standard for testing in school settings.

#### **Case and Contact Management:**

Public Health will no longer support case and contact management for schools. Per the new provincial school guidance, principals will not be routinely notifying the class or school community



when there is a suspected or confirmed positive case in the school. 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 you/your child remains 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 will be monitoring school absenteeism rates and will work with Public Health if concerning thresholds are reached.

### **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. As previously shared, 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. If a student is in isolation or chooses to learn remotely (which we would generally discourage), we will provide strategies to keep students connected to their core class.

For a limited period of time, during this Omicron surge we will be allowing the option of learning remotely. A student who chooses to do so will be committing for blocks of 2 weeks (10 school days) at a time, with the option to repeat for a 2<sup>nd</sup> 2-week block. (Potential for a maximum of 4 weeks and we will re-evaluate if this strategy needs to continue beyond the Family Day Weekend.)

While we should be able to accommodate a hybrid (live/synchronous) class in secondary, in elementary that will not be possible. There will be brief check-ins twice a day (early morning and early afternoon) and students will find their work on their class Google or D2L site for their learning. We will offer more updates in the days to come through your local school. For those students that are working remotely this may lead to disruptions in delivery. In this circumstance, students are asked to work asynchronously on preassigned work or on materials posted on their LMS system.

### **Semester 2:**

Throughout the pandemic many staff and students have been keen to return to a full 4 period a day semester model. We now have the support of both the Chief Medical Officer of Health and local Public Health to move back to our traditional model of delivery for our secondary students. Therefore, beginning in February all secondary students will return to a traditional 4 period day.

### **School Closures:**

One of the challenges that will be present in the next short while is managing and maintaining our full staffing levels in our schools. Given the requirement to isolate as a household contact or if symptomatic, we could have high levels of staff absenteeism. We will be monitoring schools on a daily basis, and while it will be a last resort, parents should be aware that on short notice we may have to temporarily close a school or pivot a class to remote due to operational safety concerns.



**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 highly 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.

**Vaccination:**

Vaccination for children ages 5 – 11 is currently underway. Booster shots for anyone over 18 years of age continues, and our education staff are currently being prioritized for boosters. Waterloo Region Public Health will soon start operating school based clinics to deliver second doses to interested families. Further the government announced yesterday the intention to sponsor school based clinics during the school day, for parents who have **previously given permission** for their children to be vaccinated. 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:**

As previously reported, 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 continue reviewing our Operational Guidelines to ensure they are consistent with all updated guidance from the province and encourage you to review it here.

[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 do pray that this will be the last significant hurdle for our community as we navigate this pandemic. We are very grateful for your support and partnership as we do our best to keep our students learning, healthy and engaged. 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.

Sincerely,

Loretta Notten  
Director of Education

