



Pediatric Chairs of Canada Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada

January 25, 2022

Council of the Federation
Suite 630, 360 Albert Street
Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 7X7
Phone: 613 563-4066

Re: A sustained return to in-person schooling for Canada's 8 million children and youth

Dear Premiers,

We are writing to offer our collective advice regarding the importance of maintaining and sustaining an open and accessible return to school for Canada's children and youth. We know that decisions about a return to in-person learning have been challenging and are made with careful consideration of the many benefits and the evolving risks. As Canada's Premiers, we need your help to ensure no child, youth or family falls behind as a result of disruptions in education.

As Chairs of the Departments of Pediatrics across Canada's seventeen medical schools, we recognize the tremendous efforts of teachers, administrators, school staff and public health leaders as they have diligently worked to protect children and youth from COVID-19. After nearly two years, we have a better understanding regarding the impact and outcomes of school closures, and what is needed to mitigate risks within schools.

Consequences of School Closures: At a time when schools across the country having been shuttered, here are some of the health impacts we see in children and youth:

- Children's hospitals across Canada have experienced a measurable increase in visits and admissions related to mental health, in particular, eating disorders. A recent Canadian study (Agostino et al., 2021) found that compared to pre-pandemic rates, diagnoses of anorexia and atypical anorexia increased by more than 60% and monthly hospitalization nearly tripled.
- Wait lists for access to community and outpatient mental health services continue to grow, outstripping our health systems' ability to deliver timely access to care during important phases of child and youth growth and development which increases the risk of chronic (mental) health conditions.
- Students with learning delays, developmental disabilities, other cognitive impairments, medical complexities, and those from Indigenous and racialized populations have fallen through the cracks. Healthcare services that were once delivered through schools are often inaccessible when in-person learning is suspended.
- When in-person learning is suspended, as many as 20% of children are not receiving healthy breakfasts or lunches. Many children rely on nutrition programs delivered through schools.

Strategies to Minimize Disruption in In-Person Learning: Across jurisdictions, for the vast majority of children the current dominant variant, omicron, often resolves quickly without need for hospital admission. We have identified a number of lessons learned that can help avoid future disruptions in children's in-person education:

- Improve timely access to vaccination, which we know helps protect children, youth and their families from COVID-19, and lessens the risk of serious complications. Leveraging education partners as champions of vaccination can help improve vaccine confidence and immunization uptake in children, youth and families.

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- Pursue a communications approach that begins with a solid understanding of vaccine hesitancy to inform public health messaging.
- Provide schools with sufficient resources and tools including access to vaccination for educators and PPEs to follow necessary public health and safety protocols.
- Should virtual learning be necessary, families need to be provided rapid access to technology and accessories (e.g., earphones) to allow children to pivot to virtual learning.

Recommendations Going Forward:

- Create and implement targeted access strategies for families and their children to be vaccinated in schools (learn from the Newfoundland experience).
- Make investments now to ensure schools are safe today, and for the future.
- Create or expand Provincial Child and Youth Advocate services to champion and protect the health and wellbeing of children and youth.
- Consult pediatric experts in your Province to guide best policy around schools and health during the pandemic.
- Convene a national meeting post pandemic with healthcare leaders, educators, social service sector, children's advocates and policy makers to catalogue lessons learned, areas for improved collaboration, data collection and communication.

As leaders in pediatric academic medicine, we hope to work together with our elected leaders in the best interests of Canada's children and youth, to ensure a sustained, low-risk return to in-person learning.

Respectfully,



Emily Gruenwoldt
Executive Director, Pediatric Chairs of Canada

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