

# COMMUNITY EFFORT NEEDED TO KEEP SCHOOLS OPEN: HALTON'S MOH

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As schools prepare to welcome students back to in-person learning, Halton's chief medical officer of health is urging a collaborative community effort to keep them open.

"We all know how much our students and families have been through because of the pandemic. School is so much more than academics, and in-person learning is key for emotional and social skills development," said Dr. Hamidah Meghani in an information session for families hosted by Halton District School Board last Thursday (Aug. 26).

During the 2020/2021 school year, Halton public health investigated 1,197 school exposure cases and 41 school outbreaks.

"With Delta as the dominant variant of the virus circulating in our community now, I fully expect that there will be more student cases and exposures to come this fall. That's why it is so impor-

tant to have layers of protection at our schools and within our community, including in your own homes to ensure that we are doing everything possible to reduce the spread this fall."

Because the threat of COVID-19 remains a reality, school routines will be similar to last year's with students from JK to Grade 12 expected to wear masks in the classroom, hallways and on school buses.

COVID cases declined in the region over the summer from an all-time mid-April peak because of the "enormous vaccination campaign that has been underway as well as enhanced public health measures," however since late July, they are again on the rise.

The new wave is driven by the Delta variant which has significantly jumped from one per cent of Halton cases in April of this year, to 67 per cent of cases in July and the proportion of Delta cases has likely climbed higher in August, said Meghani.

Because the Delta variant is more contagious, higher vaccination rates are needed to protect the community at large, she said.

As of August 18, all Halton youth born in 2009 or earlier are eligible for the Pfizer vaccine.

"Vaccines work. For cases reported in June to August among 12 to 17-year-olds in Halton, 100 per cent of these cases were among unvaccinated individuals or those who had only received one dose of the vaccine," said Meghani.

The most recent data shows that the COVID-19 vaccination rates among 12 to 17-year-olds in Halton who have received first doses is 87 per cent and 77 per cent for those who have received two doses.

"This is amazing; and interestingly, Milton is outpacing the rest of our community with over 90 per cent of this age group with one dose, and 80 per cent with two doses. While this is extremely encouraging, I know we can do



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Masking, distancing and screening are all part of HDSB's back-to-school plan.

better. It is critical that we have a very high vaccination rate; as close to 100 per cent as we can get it."

School closures and remote learning have negatively impacted the mental health and behaviour of children and youth, said Meghani.

Based on recent Halton data, parents of young children have reported more behavioural challenges, while adolescents were

more likely to report anxiety and depressive symptoms.

"These trends are seen not only in Halton but across Canada. In order to keep schools open this year and avoid worsening child and youth mental health outcomes, we'll need to work together."

Along with masking and physical distancing, one of the key features of the back-to-school plan is screening.

All students teachers and staff must continue to self-screen for symptoms every day before attending school or childcare using the Ministry of Health's School and Childcare Screening Tool.

Halton public health will also be resuming routine school-based immunizations for Hepatitis B, HPV and Meningitis. Information is available at halton.ca/immunize

"Returning safely to school is a community effort based on individual actions and we all have a role to play in helping to keep our numbers low."

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