February 1, 2021

Premier Ford, Minister Lecce, Minister Elliott and Dr. Williams,

As representatives of the Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) and our membership of over 3,600 paediatric experts across the country, we are writing to express our serious concern over the extended school closures in parts of Ontario and to formally endorse the Updated Guidance for Operation During the Pandemic released by paediatric health experts at SickKids in partnership with six other paediatric academic health science centres in southern Ontario on January 21, 2021.

Children and youth have a fundamental right to education that must be respected even under difficult circumstances. As such, as you develop and implement public health measures to mitigate the pandemic, school doors should be the first to open and the last to close. School closures have precipitated a mass of unintended consequences, as thousands of children and youth in Ontario rely on schools for physical and mental health services, nutritious food, safety, security and support. Risk factors for child/youth maltreatment have increased significantly during the pandemic. As a result of school closures, teachers and other school personnel are less able to identify or assist those experiencing maltreatment.¹

We are especially concerned about the detrimental mental health impacts of school closures. In Ontario, approximately 70% of children and adolescents have reported a worsening of their mental health since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.² Demand for Kids Help Phone skyrocketed to 4.2 million calls and messages in 2020, compared to 1.8 million the year before, with a doubling in conversations around eating/body image from young people in Ontario.³ In-patient admissions to the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario’s eating disorder unit has seen a 63% increase during the pandemic.⁴ Our paediatrician members across the country are reporting a sharp increase in youth presenting with mental health problems, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, self-harm, and problematic substance use. Such negative impacts are only further exacerbated for children with disabilities and children from racialized, marginalized and low-income families.

⁴ Ibid.
As Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director has stated, “If children are faced with another year of school closures, the effects will be felt for generations to come”.

A year is a very long time in a young person’s life, and Ontario’s youth entered this second lockdown much less resilient than they were when schools first closed in March 2020. The uncertainty about when schools will open, and whether they will remain open until June, only exacerbates anxiety and pessimism about the future.

Public health measures to address the spread of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected children and youth. The preliminary data we have is troubling, and we are concerned about what is to come. Attending school is one of the only near-universal measures we have to help protect the mental health and well-being of children and youth.

We therefore urge you to make children and youth a priority by:

1. Taking every action to ensure the safe re-opening of all schools across Ontario without delay, with a view to ensuring the 2020-21 year is not further disrupted.
2. Implementing and enforcing strict preventive measures—such as restrictions on gatherings and travel—to ensure that Ontarians’ behaviour during the upcoming March break does not result in another extended school closure.
3. Committing to greater transparency in decision-making criteria used to justify school closures and ensuring appropriate consultation with child health and mental health experts.
4. Recognizing educators, school staff, mental and physical health support workers and child protection workers as essential, and prioritizing them within vaccine rollout plans. This is a critical step to ensure that the 2021-22 school year can proceed as normally as possible, without delay or disruption.
5. Providing schools with the necessary supports to effectively implement infection prevention measures including physical distancing, cohorting, enhanced hygiene, masks and other PPE and improved ventilation.
6. Funding research and data collection to provide a clear picture of the mental health and well-being of Ontario’s children and youth so that appropriate measures can be taken to support them now and into the future.

Ontario’s schools and educators need targeted support and creative solutions. Ontario’s families need transparent and evidence-based decision-making. And Ontario’s children and youth need the educational, social, physical, emotional and developmental connections of in-person schooling. We therefore fully endorse the SickKids guidance document and urge you to commit to ensuring school doors are the last to close and the first to open.

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Sincerely,

[Original signed by]

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CC:
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