



Sandra Turco
Chairperson

Rose Burton Spohn
Director of Education

January 8, 2021

Dear Parents / Guardians:

I am writing today with important information about some recent announcements that affect how the elementary and secondary schools in the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board (HSCDSB) will be supporting all students in the next little while.

Background

- **December 21, 2020** – Premier Doug Ford announced that the province of Ontario would shut down on Saturday, December 26 for a two-week period in Northern Ontario.
- **January 7, 2021** – Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. David Williams, announced that Ontario's shutdown period would be extended in Northern Ontario for a further two weeks because of a significant increase in COVID-19 cases and serious concerns about the spread of the virus. This extension of the shutdown means that many businesses (e.g., restaurants, salons, offices) throughout the province will remain closed to in-person customer visits until at least January 23, 2021. During the same announcement, the Ontario government announced that all schools in Northern Ontario would reopen for in-person learning on Monday, January 11, 2021.
- **January 8, 2021** – Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Jennifer Loo, issued additional instructions and recommendations to all school boards within the geographical area served by Algoma Public Health (APH). These instructions direct our board to delay the provision of in-person teaching or instruction to students in Grades 9 – 12 in Sault Ste. Marie until at least January 25, 2021. Exceptions will continue to be made for secondary students with significant special education needs who would not benefit from remote learning. Dr. Loo also strongly recommended that all elementary schools in the board provide both online and in-person learning options to all students.

We recognize that these many announcements may have raised many concerns and questions, and we acknowledge that some families will want their children to return to in-person learning, while others will feel more comfortable keeping their children learning at home. What follows is intended to assist families in making a sound and informed decision.

In-Person, Remote, and Virtual Learning Options for Families

The Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board remains committed in the long term to providing distinctly in-person and distinctly virtual learning options for our students and families. However, the board recognizes that an interim, short-term solution is required for this situation.

Thus, in accordance with the various recommendations and guidance that the HSCDSB has received over the past 24 hours:

- All elementary students in the board who are currently enrolled in in-person learning may return to their physical schools beginning Monday, January 11, 2021, provided they have completed and passed the self-assessment at <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/school-screening/> and are committed to following the board's health and safety protocols.

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- Any elementary students in the board who are currently enrolled in in-person learning who are not able or comfortable returning to their physical schools may opt to learn online from home. Such students will remain in contact with their current teachers and classmates through a variety of asynchronous and synchronous learning activities. More direction and information about this unique delivery model will be provided within the next several days.
- All secondary students in the board who are currently enrolled in in-person learning will continue to learn remotely until at least Friday, January 25, 2021. As is the case now, secondary students will receive a minimum of 225 minutes of synchronous instruction and 75 minutes of asynchronous instruction each day. Those secondary students with significant special needs who do not benefit from synchronous instruction will continue to learn in person at their school.
- All elementary and secondary students who are currently enrolled in our virtual academies will continue to learn remotely with their assigned teachers.
- Student transportation services will continue to operate as usual for students attending in person.

COVID-19 Cases in the East, North, and City of Sault Ste. Marie

Our board's most recent communications with the Algoma, Porcupine, and Sudbury Public Health Units confirm that the number of COVID-19 cases in Blind River, Chapleau, Elliot Lake, Espanola, Hornepayne, Massey, Wawa, and White River remains very low.

The same does not hold true for Sault Ste. Marie, where there has been a relatively recent increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. This spike in cases has many people worried. Therefore, at the recommendation of Algoma Public Health, **we are strongly encouraging families who have either travelled outside of the Algoma region and/or hosted / received / interacted with visitors from outside of the Algoma region over the past 14 days to delay their children's return to in-person learning for a 14-day period starting from the date of return to Algoma or from the last point of contact with an out-of-region visitor.**

Although Chapleau, Espanola, Hornepayne, and Massey are not located within the jurisdiction of the Algoma Public Health Unit, the board believes that this public health advice is prudent for all communities to follow, especially those where case numbers are increasing.

Health and Safety Protocols

The health and safety of all our students and employees is a key priority for our board. It is a testament to the diligence and cooperation of all students, families, employees, community members, and health officials that HSCDSB has not, to date, had to close any classrooms or schools because of COVID-19. Our board is eager to continue this trend, and accordingly, we will be continuing to reinforce strict health and safety precautions in all our schools. These precautions include, but are not limited to:

- Implementation of daily self-assessments for students, employees, and essential visitors.
- Daily cleaning and sanitization of all board facilities, with additional daily cleansing of high-touch surfaces (e.g., door handles, stair rails, washrooms).
- Provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) for all employees (e.g., masks, face shields) and implementation of risk-mitigation strategies (e.g., extra masks for students who forget them).

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- Separation and monitoring of students into cohorts, which are maintained while students are on school property (e.g., different play areas in the school yard, staggered supervised recess times).
- Strict limits on non-essential visitors to our buildings.
- Arrival, departure, and washroom schedules for students.
- Installation of signage and physical barriers (e.g., Plexiglas shields in high-traffic areas).
- Wearing of masks for students in Grades 4 – 12, except for those with an exception as outlined by the province of Ontario.

In addition to continuing these existing protocols, effective immediately, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board is:

- Strongly recommending that all students in Kindergarten to Grade 3, excluding those who have an exception, wear masks inside board facilities.
- Mandating that all school employees wear medical masks and eye protection at all times.
- Mandating that all school employees wear masks during outdoor supervision.
- Encouraging principals and vice-principals to reinforce health protocols strictly.

Technological Devices

Since September, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board has deployed over 1,100 digital devices to families in need. If your child requires access to a Chromebook in order to continue learning from home, please contact your local school via phone, email, or other means as soon as possible. **Alternatively, if your child is returning to in-person learning, please ensure that s/he returns any board-issued devices loaned to them on the first day back, so that these devices can be redeployed.**

Mental Health Supports

As always, we recognize that these fluctuations in learning can be a source of anxiety for many students and their families. With that in mind, should you find that your child(ren) require mental health supports, please contact your local school or feel free to access the mental health resources at www.smho-smsso.ca. Alternatively, students can also access around-the-clock counseling and referral services through the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868, or text CONNECT to 686868.

Thank you once more for your understanding and cooperation. Should you have any questions about your children's learning that are not addressed in this letter, please contact your local school and continue to check for updates at www.hscdsb.on.ca. Thank you for continuing to do your part to keep our schools and communities as safe as they possibly can be.

Wishing you and your families a very safe and happy 2021,

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