

August 19, 2021

John Dance
Interim Director of Education
Simcoe County District School Board
170 Highway 26
Midhurst, ON L9X 1N6

Dear Interim Director Dance:

Re: Mandatory Masking for Students in Kindergarten

I am writing today to advise that the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) is **recommending that school boards and private schools mandate students in kindergarten (JK and SK) to wear masks** while attending school in-person during the 2021-2022 school year.

Reasonable exemptions on the requirements to wear masks continue to apply (e.g. students who have trouble breathing or are unable to wear a mask for medical reasons, temporarily removing the mask when eating, etc.). I make this recommendation based upon several factors including:

- The highly transmissible Delta variant is the dominant strain in Simcoe Muskoka necessitating the implementation of more conservative infection prevention and control approaches in schools this fall.
- A review of declared school outbreaks from September 2020 to June 2021, whereby ~16% of all Simcoe Muskoka school outbreaks involved full-day kindergarten (JK/SK) classes.
- There is an anticipated increase in other respiratory viruses this fall/winter and universal masking will provide protection against these other viruses as well.
- A statement from the [Public Health Agency of Canada](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/communicable-diseases/covid-19/faq-frequently-asked-questions.html) that children aged 2 to 5 may be able to wear a mask if supervised, depending on their ability to tolerate it, as well as put it on and take it off.

While this recommendation goes above and beyond the provincial guidance requiring students in Grades 1 to 12 to wear properly fitted non-medical or cloth masks indoors at school, the province also indicates that “at the advice of the local public health unit, schools and school boards may choose to implement additional masking measures based on local circumstances”. I believe this additional measure, in addition to the existing protocols, is necessary to further prevent transmission of COVID-19 in Simcoe Muskoka during in-person learning.

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In-person learning in schools is vitally important in providing children with high quality education, supporting student mental health and wellbeing, and serving as a key support to health care and essential workers. To that end, we continue to work with you, and all County of Simcoe and District of Muskoka schools, to balance the benefits of in-person learning and risks of COVID-19. As SMDHU continues to monitor the local COVID-19 picture, we will revisit and adapt such recommendations accordingly.

Thank you for your ongoing partnership in the pandemic response and your continued efforts to support the health and safety of the students and school staff across our region.

Sincerely,

ORIGINAL Signed By:

Charles Gardner, MD, CCFP, MHSc, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health

CG:JB:cm