



October 12, 2021

The Honourable Stephen Lecce
Ministry of Education
5th Floor, 438 University Ave.
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

Re: Decision Making Regarding the Return to Traditional Semester Model

Dear Minister Lecce,

Secondary Schools in the Halton District School Board (HDSB) are currently operating with a modified semester model to satisfy both the Ministry of Education and Public Health COVID-19 related Guidelines. This model has students taking four courses during the semester, however, they attend only two courses per day for a week and then attend the remaining two courses the next week. This alternates week by week. This model was chosen due to its flexibility to quickly pivot back to a traditional four-course per day model within a maximum of two weeks' notice. The modified semester model is not optimal for student achievement or student and staff well-being. For example, students with learning challenges who take a General Learning Strategies course are not as consistently supported in this model as they would in a traditional semester course. In addition, learning time is adjusted daily to allow for outdoor mask and refocusing breaks as students spend two and a half hours in each class. All students would benefit from the return to the traditional semester model as it would support their academic and social and emotional well-being.

During the summer, the Ministry indicated that the use of modified semester models would be temporary, as it focussed on controlling COVID in schools at the beginning of the school year with the assumption that it significantly reduces student contacts. The reality is that teenagers are currently congregating and mixing before and after school, at lunchtime, for co-curriculars, and evening activities; be it jobs or recreational activities. There is very little benefit to continuing with modified semester schedules when all of these other factors are at play, given that the other COVID prevention measures in place appear to be working well over an extended period of time.

Halton's COVID-19 vaccination rate as per the Region's website for 12-17 year-olds is exceptional. The rate for this age group is 93% with a single dose and 87% that are fully vaccinated. Additionally, Milton's rate for vaccination for this age group is 98% with a single dose and 91% fully vaccinated.

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The COVID-19 vaccine along with protocols and PPE set out in collaboration between our school board and local health authorities is working exceedingly well as demonstrated by the extremely low transmission rate seen in our secondary schools. Out of 19,390 students learning in-person in HDSB secondary school facilities over the past month, we have had COVID-19 transmission to only two students out of a total of nine student cases. Considering the increased transmission rate of the Delta variant, our defences against in-facility transmission are outstanding.

When Trustees asked HDSB staff if a vaccine uptake threshold or other criteria had been shared with the school boards to determine when the modified semester could be adjusted back to the traditional semester model, staff responded that no such information had come from the Ministry. This is disheartening as everyone is seeking positive news, especially related to the efforts to date.

As the recently announced rapid antigen testing program focuses on the local Public Health Unit as the decision-making authority, the Trustees of the Halton District School Board request that the decision-making around the return to the traditional secondary school semester model also reside with the local Public Health Units in collaboration with School Boards. They most clearly understand their local contexts with regard to vaccination rates, organizational adherence to IPAC protocols and COVID-19 outbreak data.

We look forward to hearing from you on this matter.

Sincerely,



Andréa Grebenc
Chair of the Board of Trustees
Halton District School Board

Cc: Hon. Ted Arnott, MPP
Stephen Crawford, MPP
Hon. Parm Gill, MPP
Hon. Jane McKenna, MPP
Effie Triantafilopoulos, MPP
Gary Carr, Halton Regional Chair
Dr. Hamidah Meghani, Halton Region Medical Officer of Health
Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) President and Member Board Chairs
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