

# The Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders

## Leading the Way for Public Health Nursing

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August 12, 2020

Hon. Christine Elliott  
Deputy Premier  
Minister of Health  
C/O Ministry of Health  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor, 777 Bay St.  
Toronto, ON, M7A2J3

Dear Minister Elliott,

On behalf of the Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders (OPHNL) and the Public Health Chief Nursing Officers (CNOs) from across the province we wish to congratulate you on your announcement of \$50 million to hire up to 500 additional school-focused nurses in public health units, and to express appreciation for your recognition of the contribution Public Health Nurses make in Ontario's school communities. Increasing public health nursing support in school communities is a critical step in the safe and successful re-opening of schools during this time of uncertainty and instability.

This is a time to leverage our collective strengths, enhance existing models that work, anticipate challenges and innovate as needed in this ever-changing context, in order to maximize the benefits of this provincial investment and minimize the risks inherent in our current COVID-19 reality.

We commend your decision to **embed these school-focused nurses in local public health units**. Existing partnerships and lines of communication between local public health and school boards can be leveraged to ease onboarding, maximize the response to COVID-19 and its related impacts, and effectively implement the school health standards. Public health nurses in local health units can be quickly mobilized to take action. Easily-accessible, local support will ensure that school administrators and parents can secure the information and support they need when they need it. Local public health nurses are very familiar

with the myriad of local resources that can be accessed to address school, family, child, and adolescent needs during this time of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty.

To ensure the success of this initiative, we are pleased to note the focus on **leveraging the expertise and competencies of Public Health Nurses**, as per the Health Protection and Promotion Act, R.S.O. 1990, c.H.7 and the [PHN Discipline-Specific Core Competencies](#). When assessing client, nurse, and environmental factors as outlined in the three-factor framework in the College of Nurses of Ontario's Practice Guideline, [RN and RPN Practice](#), it is clear that baccalaureate-prepared Public Health Nurses are best-positioned to effectively assess and address the needs of students, parents, teachers and school communities. Population health nursing in school settings is inherently complex and unpredictable; it will even more so now and in the foreseeable future. Additionally, students and families are facing complex and numerous challenges that impact student learning and wellbeing. School-focused nurses require significant leadership, planning, implementation, evaluation, critical thinking and decision-making skills. They function autonomously without quick access to consultation and practice support. The risk for negative outcomes, should school communities not be effectively supported, extends from individual students and families, the school community, and to the community at large. During the initial and ongoing experience of school re-opening, school-focused nurses will engage in educating, training, facilitating, interpreting, and communicating COVID-19 related information to students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. Public Health Nurse knowledge and expertise in communicable diseases, infection prevention and control, child and adolescent health, and comprehensive school health approaches are all needed to support our local school communities. OPHNL and the CNOs are confident that each health unit and its respective Chief Nursing Officer can effectively use the three-factor framework, their knowledge of local context and needs, as well as risk assessment results to inform their autonomous decisions about hiring and managing nurses in these roles.

We firmly stand behind a **comprehensive approach to health and wellbeing** in students, parents, teachers and school communities to optimize student learning and development. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of infection prevention and control, and the ongoing needs in addressing the risks in this area are critical. It has, however, also resulted in additional emerging issues that have a negative impact on our students and school communities. Concerns such as increased mental health issues, substance misuse, poverty, and domestic violence are certain to impact our school communities. Public Health Nurses have the expertise and competencies required to understand the complexities facing students, parents, teachers and school communities as a whole during this time, and to engage in ongoing problem-solving to address the myriad of risk factors that are influencing the health of our school populations. Some initial data has highlighted that those influenced negatively by social determinants of health

factors are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. The well-established and evidence-informed collaborative comprehensive school health framework and broad population health promotion approaches must be utilized to achieve the province's desired outcomes.

In addition to the role of the school-focused nurse as per your recent memo, **further clarity on the role** in public health units is needed. The CNOs and OPHNL recommend that the Public Health Nurses in this role engage in the following, at a minimum:

- Understand, apply, interpret, and communicate infection prevention and control information, COVID-19 related information, and information regarding public health measures to students, parents, teachers, and school administrators, and provide advisory and problem-solving support
- Support schools in screening for, monitoring of, and responding to reports of COVID-19 symptoms
- Facilitate reporting for appropriate case and contact follow-up, and mobilize a rapid outbreak management response
- Facilitate testing as required
- Support COVID surveillance efforts as needed
- Work with school staff, parents, and students to build resilience, manage stress, and build positive relationships
- Provide referrals as needed and enhance student/family/school connections to mental health and other community resources and supports
- Conduct school assessments to identify and work collaboratively with school communities to address various risks, with attention to trauma-and-violence-informed and culturally safe approaches
- Promote health using the comprehensive school health framework, in alignment with the Ministry of Education's Foundations for a Healthy School resource

We appreciate the acknowledgement of the need to **leverage the expertise and role of the CNO** to support the implementation of this initiative. Across the province, CNOs are committed to the success of this initiative, and as such, are prepared to contribute by developing and implementing a provincial orientation in collaboration with RNAO; supporting recruitment, onboarding and retention processes; providing mentorship to nurses who may be new to public health nursing; assessing and mitigating potential risks through development of a risk management strategy; identifying a priority-setting model to support nursing resource distribution across schools; working with Ministry to develop, strengthen and/or revise existing guidelines and resource documents to support school nursing programming; and engaging with the Ministry in evaluation plan development and implementation.

Hon. Christine Elliott  
August 12, 2020

OPHNL and the CNOs are grateful for the Province's decision to enhance public health nursing resources in our school communities. For the health and wellbeing of parents, teachers, the broader school community - and most importantly for our children and youth - we look forward to working together to ensure school re-opening success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Groulx".

David Groulx RN, BScN, MPH, CCHN(C)  
OPHNL President  
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heather Lokko".

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