

2012

School Absenteeism Surveillance  
Program Evaluation Report:  
Executive Summary



Public Health

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health  
Health Analytics Team

# WELLINGTON-DUFFERIN-GUELPH PUBLIC HEALTH SCHOOL HEALTH ABSENTEEISM PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2012

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## Evaluation Description

In winter of 2012, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health conducted an evaluation of its School Absenteeism Surveillance Program of secondary and elementary schools in both the Upper Grand District School Board and the Wellington Catholic District School Board.

The goals of the school absenteeism surveillance program are:

- To monitor and collect information about illness in the community, using school absenteeism as a possible early indicator of illness in school-aged children in order to improve early detection of outbreaks before they reach their peak level of infection (“syndromic surveillance”).
- To utilize the information collected to identify unusual trends or clusters of illness within the community, including enteric and/or respiratory illnesses.
- To utilize school absenteeism data to target prevention strategies (i.e. proper coughing and hand washing practices) and/or deploy treatment resources.

The goal of the evaluation was to answer the question “How can the delivery of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health’s School Absenteeism Surveillance Program be improved to better serve the needs of schools and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH)?”

To accomplish this goal, two separate surveys were designed for participating and non-participating schools using Fluid Surveys software. Participants in the survey self-identified whether they belonged to a participating or non-participating school and filled out the corresponding survey.

## Recommendations

As a result of analysis of the survey responses Public Health will consider implementing the following changes to the program:

- Public Health will investigate how to make the response emails and phone calls, and the year-end report, more helpful to schools.
- At the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, principals will be asked to indicate whether they would like to receive a customized report on their school’s attendance at the end of the school year. Public Health will provide these reports based on interest.
- Public Health will review their response protocol for the program to ensure that:
  - The submitted data on illness from schools are closely examined prior to the distribution of emails to schools with reported absenteeism rates of 10% or over. If a school has indicated that most of their absenteeism is not due to illness, but rather class trips or vacations, Public Health will not send the school an email.

- No more than one email a week is sent to a school with repeated daily absenteeism rates of  $\geq 10\%$ .
- Public Health will consider providing school boards, office coordinators and principals with more information on syndromic surveillance and its importance in disease prevention. To make the program more meaningful to schools, it may also be helpful to share any success stories that the system has had to date in local schools, or examples of successes from other syndromic surveillance systems in schools.
- Since principals and office coordinators change schools frequently, it is important to inform schools about the program and the processes involved on an annual basis. In order to ensure that this is done, Public Health will consider sending the end-of-year reports directly to principals of participating schools.
- Public Health may contact schools that have ceased participation in the program to help determine how to better support office coordinators with respect to the time required to participate in the program.
- To meet the needs of an effective syndromic surveillance system and to respect the time of school office coordinators, Public Health will discuss the feasibility of making the following changes to the web-form used for absenteeism reporting:
  - Introducing an autofill function for the 'total school population' field
  - Adding a field or fields that will allow schools to indicate whether increased absenteeism is mainly due to illness or not, to the current optional fields reporting exact number of students absent due to gastrointestinal, respiratory, and other illness.
  - Removing the section on the web-form that asks office coordinators to report on staff illnesses. Office coordinators have indicated that it is difficult to gather the reasons for staff illness. Because of this and the low numbers of staff compared to students in schools, it is difficult to use the numbers of staff absent for the purpose of syndromic surveillance.

## Next Steps

- Public Health will share the results of the evaluation with external stakeholders, including the Upper Grand District School Board and the Wellington-Catholic District School Board and principals and office coordinators from both school boards.
- Public Health will share the results of the evaluation with relevant internal staff.
- Public Health will, in consultation with the School Boards, and if feasible, implement the changes listed above prior to or during the 2012-2013 school year.