



NEWS

Elementary students plugging in for two more weeks of learning

Health unit says delaying return to school for elementary students is necessary given the continued rise in COVID-19 cases locally and across the province

By **Catherine Whitnall** Kawartha Lakes This Week
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As a result of rising COVID-19 cases across the province, local students will remain home and learning virtually until at least Jan. 25.

The measures are being taken to help ensure all Ontarians stay home as much as possible to minimize transmission of the virus and prevent hospitals from becoming overwhelmed. Elementary students were to return to in-class studies on Monday (Jan. 11) with high school students continuing to learn virtually for two more weeks.

"With the public health trends where they are across the province, our priority remains keeping students, teachers, school staff, and all Ontarians safe," stated Premier Doug Ford.

Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board director of education Joan Carragher is confident local students and staff will be able to manage the extension to distance learning positively.

“We know all families are experiencing this lockdown differently and many are balancing challenges at home that make this time period particularly difficult,” stated Carragher, who expressed appreciation to students, parents and guardians for their work in making the transition period to virtual learning successful. “For many of our students and families, virtual learning is new to us, and we need to develop our skills together.”

Although targeted testing done among students and staff in December 2020 confirmed schools are not a significant source of transmission, with students having been at home for several weeks and reports of concerning behaviour over the holidays, the positivity rate among school-aged children has increased sharply. Most troubling, the positivity rate for children aged 12 to 13 years old increased from 5.44 per cent in late November/early December to nearly 20 per cent in early January.

“One thing that we all value is an education,” said Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit interim medical officer of health Dr. Ian Gemmill. “The spread of the virus is way less than I expected since students returned to school in September, but there’s no disputing the fact that, with cases rising significantly . . . extraordinary measures have to be put in place.”

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Gemmill noted the health unit has been logging an average of 10 cases per day since the middle of December.

“But these efforts are not just needed to control the spread [of COVID-19] but to also mitigate pressure on hospitals, particularly ICUs,” said Gemmill, noting the virus is only one health care issue; hospitals deal with many from car accidents and strokes to emergency surgeries.