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## LOCAL : NEWS

# Local health unit will not conduct rapid antigen testing in Kawartha Lakes schools

By **Catherine Whitnall** Reporter

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The province is improving access to local targeted COVID-19 rapid antigen screening by making it available for students, but local public health units are not rushing to put strategies in place.

“The goal is for use of testing to be risk-based and targeted,” said Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit medical officer of health Dr. Natalie Bocking. “We’re seeing quite low COVID activity across the community, which is keeping numbers in schools low.”

Since the start of the current school year, the local health unit has reported 11 confirmed COVID-19 cases in school-aged children. All of these, said Dr. Bocking, are linked to community and/or household exposure. She notes this is extremely encouraging as there is still a sizable number of students who either cannot be vaccinated, due to age or medical exemption, or have not yet been fully vaccinated; only 70 per cent of students aged 12 and older have received both doses.

Dr. Bocking also noted rapid antigen testing (RAT) is “not perfect,” as it has a potential risk of producing false-positive results.

Studies show that rapid tests are most accurate when used by people with COVID-19 symptoms in places with significant community spread. Under those conditions, a rapid test produces correct results 80 to 90 per cent of the time.

However, people who are asymptomatic or in the early stages of infection may not have enough viral protein in their system, which could result in a false negative. Under those conditions, the positivity rate ranges from 35 to 50 per cent.

Anyone with a positive rapid antigen test would still require a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, which are considered the gold standard in testing for COVID-19 as they are highly sensitive and can produce positive results even after a person is no longer infectious. Dr. Bocking said conducting RATs in situations that don’t warrant it would unnecessarily impact testing centres and laboratories as well as time away from school.

An example of situations that would be valid, she said, would be the recent outbreak and closure of Monsignor Leo Cleary Catholic Elementary School in Courtice. A notice on the Peterborough, Victoria, Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board site states students will return Oct. 12 but does not indicate whether the Durham Region Health Department will be conducting rapid antigen testing.

Dr. Bocking stated staff are, however, reviewing procedures relating to rapid antigen testing should the need arise locally at some point.

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