

The recent rise in COVID-19 cases and potential for a repeat of last year's holiday shutdown has local boards hoping for the best but preparing for the worst.

All three area school boards have reported cases in schools including the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, which is listing confirmed cases at 11 schools in the Peterborough area, along with the Peterborough Alternative Continuing Education centre; one school in Bowmanville is closed due to outbreak.

Trillium Lakelands District School Board is reporting five cases (Dec. 14) at Leslie Frost Public School in Lindsay. Director of education Wes Hahn said all recent school cases are believed to be community spread. No cases have been reported in high schools, added Hahn, suggesting this is likely due to vaccinations being available to 12- to 17-year-olds prior to the start of the school year. Vaccinations for those five to 11 weren't approved until Nov. 19.

Peterborough, Victoria, Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board director of education Joan Carragher said the board is monitoring situations closely — St. Catherine's Catholic Elementary School in Peterborough is currently (Dec. 15) in outbreak as a result of a total of eight cases — especially given reports of the highly contagious Omicron variant that has surfaced in the area. She noted, in addition to the rapid antigen test (RAT) kits that will be going home with students whose parents request them, the board is also delivering polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests to a number of schools. The test is required for anyone with a positive RAT result.

While Trillium Lakelands students will also have opportunity to take home RAT kits, the option is currently not available to staff. Hahn said the board is looking into the possibility of getting kits for board employees who want them.

“We want people to have a safe and healthy Christmas and holiday break,” said Hahn adding should there be a repeat of last year, the board is ready. “We will continue on the way we have, but if there are any changes, we are prepared and ready to go.”

Having to switch over to virtual learning — a small percentage of area students continued the practice following the return to in-school learning in September — will have little impact, noted the administrators, as boards have “become pretty good” at instantly pivoting during the pandemic.