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LOCAL : NEWS

School boards given responsibility over closing schools if staff and student COVID-19 cases surge

Information will be provided to parents, caregivers in event of outbreak

By **Catherine Whitnall** Reporter

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Parents and school boards will be taking over responsibility for addressing COVID-19 cases after students return to school on Monday, Jan. 17.

As information continues to roll out, Trillium Lakelands District School Board director of education Wes Hahn is optimistic the combination of stricter screening and rapid antigen tests (RAT) being made available to staff and students will be key to keeping students in class.

Hahn shared a number of COVID-19 updates with trustees during the Tuesday, Jan. 11 committee of the whole meeting. Non-fit-tested N95 masks have arrived and are being delivered to individual schools, and three-ply masks for students are also rolling out. More rapid tests are expected to arrive by Monday and will be given to staff and students if they experience symptoms during the school day.

Superintendent Paul Goldring noted one big change being put in place by the province to ensure a safe return to school is all members of a household will have to isolate even if just one person tests positive for COVID-19, regardless of vaccination status. This relates to both staff and students.

Another big change is that health units are no longer conducting contact tracing, nor will they be declaring outbreaks.

Decisions regarding dismissing classes or close schools will rest with school boards.

“We know we can’t replace the work of multiple health units but will take information as it comes in and take each situation carefully and cautiously ... It’s up to us to ensure the safety and well-being our students,” said Hahn who plans to consult with public health for further guidance if necessary.

Health units will also provide direction if absenteeism rates become significant, similar to what generally occurs during influenza season, said Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit medical officer of health Dr. Natalie Bocking.

While the board will do its best to get information out to families as quickly as possible should a closure happen and students need to switch to virtual learning, Goldring encourages parents to prepare a “contingency plan”.

Parents and caregivers are also encouraged to have their children, especially those aged five to 11 vaccinated as Dr. Bocking said it’s the best tool in reducing spread of the virus, particularly the Omicron variant.

The government has asked school boards to work with local public health units to add school-day vaccination clinics for students. School boards are also expected to work with local health units and share documents and other information with families, such as resources available at <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-19-vaccines-children-and-youth>.

In the coming days, parents can expect to receive a form offering the opportunity to safely and conveniently provide public health units the authority to vaccinate their child at a school-based vaccine clinic.