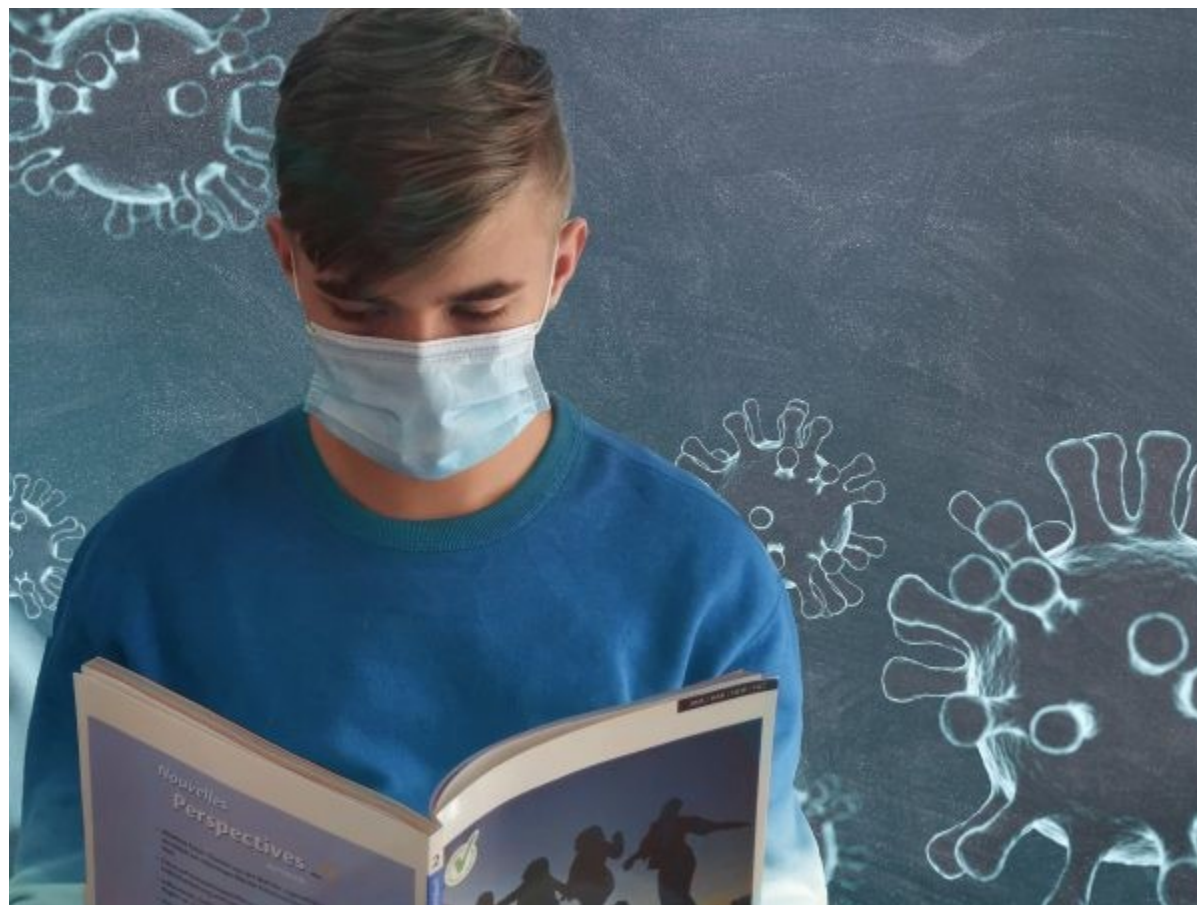


Return to school plan outlined by TLDSB - Lindsay Advocate

By Kirk Winter



Trillium Lakelands District School Board trustees were brought up to speed by senior staff on the steps being taken to hopefully allow for a safe return to school on Jan. 17.

Trustees also learned at their regular committee of the whole meeting that decisions about future classroom and school closings have been downloaded by public health and the province to each individual school board, and that the board is putting contingency plans in place to allow for those closures if necessary due to COVID.

Director of Education Wes Hahn acknowledged there has been “increased anxiety for staff, students and family.”

Hahn told trustees that senior staff and administrators hope for the best possible transition from virtual learning to in-person learning. Hahn said since Jan. 3, decisions have been and will be dictated by the reality of increasing cases of Omicron and increasing cases of hospitalization across the province.

“We want kids back in school,” Hahn said. “Further safety measures have been put in place including the availability of new and better masks and a new screening tool for staff and students.”

“We need people to do the (online) screener every day,” Hahn said. “If people have any of the symptoms they need to stay home.”

Superintendent Paul Golding hoped that the use of the screening tool by staff and students everyday will facilitate a return safe to learning for all.

“The tool is an extremely detailed one,” Goldring explained. “All members of the household are required to isolate if one tests positive regardless of vaccination status. The isolation period will vary by age and vaccination status.”

Trustee John Byrne expressed concerns with the isolation protocol in place that stipulates that the caregiver for someone with COVID needs to isolate for five days after the patient stops showing symptoms. Byrne wondered how that might impact the life of a single parent or lone caregiver trying to return to work.

Hahn told trustees that the board did receive “some” new HEPA filters which are being distributed around the board. TLDSB has also received its shipment of N-95 masks ready for staff distribution. Hahn said Rapid Antigen testing kits remain on back order and the PCR test kits that the board has will only be distributed to those being sent home because they show symptoms.

The director shared with trustees that superintendents have been hard at work preparing a contingency plan in case high rates of illness force the closures of individual classrooms or individual schools. In short, the plan will transition classes or schools to online learning based on the level of absences reported.

“If staff absences become an issue in a classroom or a school that classroom or that school may move online,” Hahn said. “Principals, superintendents and the director will make the decision on a case by case situation together.”

Hahn went on to explain that masking protocols for all students have not changed. At the board’s seven secondary schools the current quadmester will be completed, and the plan is still in place for local high schools to move to a fully semestered system Feb. 7 with students being able to access lockers for the first time in more than 18 months.

Byrne had other questions for staff surrounding the return to semesters at high schools. Byrne wanted to know if the board has to move to semesters in February, and was told by Hahn the board made the choice.

“This new variant of COVID is an airborne virus rather than droplets,” Byrne continued. “Eighty per cent of all new cases are amongst the fully vaccinated. This decision (about a return to semesters) does not appear to be a good thing. We had a system in place that worked before (with cohorting). Why are we going to move to semesters with four classes a day and no cohorting? My concern is staff and students are going to take it home to those under the age of five who cannot be vaccinated. We don’t have to follow the province (on semestering).”

“We need to balance the safety and well-being of students with what is best for students,” Hahn replied. “There are multiple contacts in quadmasters. This is a much more serious virus situation. Returning to semesters is the best learning situation for kids for multiple reasons. We will continue to get input from public health as we move forward.”

Trustee Judy Saunders wanted more information on the strategies the board will be using to determine closures and what role public health will play in that decision making.

“As of now decisions regarding closures will be ours to make,” Hahn said. “We know we can reach

out to public health if we need to. Schools will remain open as long as it is safe.”

Trustees were told that if classes or schools have to move online the board will communicate those decisions with parents as soon as it is made. Goldring cautioned that parents need to have “a contingency plan in place for a return to remote learning because the call could be made first thing in the morning like a snow day.”

Byrne continued his questioning, asking if teachers will receive a new N-95 mask every day. Goldring told him the board was investigating to see if the masks could be cleaned and re-used.

Superintendent Traci Hubbert provided a staffing update to trustees that highlighted that the staff vaccination rate is now hovering around 92 per cent for the board.

“Staff took advantage of the recent clinic at Ross Memorial Hospital in Lindsay with many getting their booster,” Hubbert said.

Hubbert shared concerns to trustees about having adequate supply staff to cover absences of educational assistants and other support staff. She also suggested that the new screening and isolation protocols could have an impact on potential staffing shortages in the future.