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
LOCAL : NEWS

Catholic school board sends letter to province regarding mandatory COVID-19 shots

Province opts to not legislate vaccines for students, but is open to revisiting

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By **Catherine Whitnall** Reporter

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The local Catholic school board has added its voice to the many calling on the province to change its mind and make COVID-19 vaccination mandatory for eligible students.

Peterborough, Victoria, Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board trustee Brendan Leal launched debate on the matter during a recent board meeting via a motion to send a letter — similar to those already sent by a number of Catholic district school boards including Durham Region — to Minister of Education Stephen Lecce in support of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination.

“It’s our duty, as a school board, as caretakers of students, to ensure the environment everyone accesses is safe,” said Leal, who also asked that the letter include the province make considerations to support staff shortages being experienced by boards across Ontario. “I don’t feel the province is doing enough to help address such concerns as staffing shortfalls and the ongoing shortage of bus drivers, which could be a symptom of these mandates.”

The Catholic board’s letter is one of many calling for the province to take immediate steps to amend the Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA). The act requires all Ontario students attending school be fully vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, pertussis (whooping cough), varicella (chickenpox) and meningococcal disease. Proof of student vaccines against these diseases, or a valid exemption provided due to medical reasons or issues of conscience/religious belief, has to be provided to health units. Failure to do so could result in students being suspended from class.

“However, the Ontario government is not moving forward with that plan at this point, as the province’s Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Kieran Moore stated at his (Oct. 28) weekly news conference,” said Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit Medical Officer of Health Dr. Natalie Bocking. “As he noted, the province would revisit integrating COVID-19 vaccination status into the ISPA at a future time if the virus persists and remains a risk for students.”

The province is, however, working with school boards and public health units to compile the COVID-19 vaccination status of students to enable better contact tracing and outbreak management should cases of the virus show up in schools.

“We are very fortunate that so far with back to school this fall, there has not been a significant increase in COVID-19 cases involving local students and only a handful of COVID outbreaks at area schools,” added Bocking, who is very pleased that many families have seen the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination for students and many youth ages 12 to 17 have already rolled up their sleeves to get both doses of the vaccine. “When COVID-19 vaccine becomes available for younger school-aged children (ages five to 11), we are also very confident that parents/guardians will see the benefits and get their children vaccinated; knowing that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective.”