

Teachers urge higher bar for school safety

Teachers' Society calls for K-3 mask mandate

The Manitoba Teachers' Society is calling on the government to act swiftly to restore teacher and public confidence in school safety by mandating masks for all students in the K-12 public school system.

This means extending the mandate to K-3 students since physical distancing is not always possible with this age group.

While the province's chief public health officer says the risk of transmission in schools is low, more than a quarter of public health investigations into COVID-19 positive cases involving children in November, remain outstanding: Public Health has not determined the source of the transmission.

"Extending the mask mandate to kids in Kindergarten to Grade 3 will provide added protection to students and teachers and help in stopping community transmission," said MTS President James Bedford.

K-3 children are already required to wear masks while riding the bus, and everyone, including K-3 children, is now required to wear a mask in public under code red, Bedford said.

Manitoba had recorded 675 cases of COVID-19 in schools as of Nov. 17, according to the province. A total of 513 of those cases were students and 162 were staff members.

In some divisions, principals are being asked to perform contact-tracing duties on COVID-19 positive cases in their schools. Bedford said the Society is opposed to offloading public health work onto principals.

"Asking principals to make public health judgments to advise courses of action outside of their

expertise and training is both unfair and irresponsible,” he said.

He said it also intensifies the workload for principals at a time when they face unique problems in leading staff, students, community, supervision, operations, and in-person and remote programming in this pandemic crisis.

“Teachers will always press for better safety measures,” said Bedford. “The government has a responsibility in making our schools as safe as they can be. Quite frankly, our schools should be the safest place.”

He pointed to the Society’s mid-August call for mandatory mask wearing by all students, staff and visitors in public schools.

“We appreciated the government’s Grades 4-12 mask mandate that flowed from that,” said Bedford. “It’s not enough anymore.”

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