

Teachers union wants universal mask mandate in schools

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The Manitoba Teachers' Society wants a universal mask mandate in schools, citing months of practice wearing masks during the COVID-19 pandemic and growing concerns about asymptomatic carriers in classrooms.

"A child in Grade 3 isn't required to wear a face mask when they're attending class with 20 or potentially 24 or more other students, but when that child accompanies a parent to a trip to, say, the drugstore, a face mask is required," said James Bedford, president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society.

"If it's mandated in the drugstore, mandate it in the classroom."

Before the school year got underway, chief provincial public health officer Dr. Brent Roussin issued a "strong recommendation" to K-12 students to don face coverings at school. Following public backlash and pressure from parents, educators and the Manitoba Teachers' Society in August, the province deemed non-medical masks mandatory for students in Grade 4 and up. Face coverings were also mandated in situations when two metres of physical distancing is not possible, in Grade 3/4 split classes and on the school bus for all ages. Students are eligible for mask exemptions if unable to remove a mask without assistance, among other criteria.

Amid the second wave of COVID-19 in Manitoba, the province has ordered masks to be worn in all indoor public spaces. Anyone who violates this order, which came into effect in Winnipeg in late September, is subject to a \$298 fine.

"With heightened levels and heightened numbers occurring outside school environments, it's only logical to say we should be heightening safety requirements in schools," Bedford said, adding teachers are reporting an increase in voluntary mask use among younger students.

Educators have been teaching students how-to properly wear masks, practise good hygiene and safely remove face coverings for breaks for months now.

"One doesn't want to be an alarmist," Bedford said, but he acknowledged new research that shows youth are often asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19.

A new study of common symptoms in children in Alberta, which was published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* last week, found more than a third of its participants who tested positive for the virus were asymptomatic.

Bedford said MTS, which represents more than 16,000 public educators in the province, wants to see more data collected to determine the extent to which COVID-19 is spreading in schools.

Also Wednesday, the MTS president raised concerns about school principals having to deal with some of Manitoba public health's contact-tracing backlog.

"The idea of having principals do public-health work, that's deeply concerning because they're not public-health professionals," he said.

A spokesperson for Manitoba Education told the *Free Press* a group of principals, school division representatives and education stakeholders met with public-health and department officials Friday to discuss contact tracing.

Participants learned how to identify close contacts within schools and the role of public health in conducting contact tracing once close contacts have been identified.

"This was intended to support existing work on the notification process," the spokesperson said.

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