

Confusion surrounds COVID cases in schools - MTS VP quoted

Chaos, confusion surround COVID cases in schools

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A Winnipeg teacher panicked when first informed by her boss she was a close contact of a COVID-19 case.

The next day, she learned the label had been overturned by public health officials, who green-lit a return to school if she didn't have any symptoms.

To cap off a chaotic 48 hours, she received a positive test result.

During an interview with the *Free Press*, which the early years educator agreed to on the condition of anonymity, she said the news made her feel both disbelief and thankful she had taken a day off to await her results.

"I'm feeling great. That's the scary part — because I could have still been teaching in my classroom, having COVID this whole time," said the teacher, who is currently asymptomatic and self-isolating at home.

The educator of more than 20 years has since taken a leave of absence, citing the confusion, uncertainty, secrecy, and related stress, as well as guilt, that comes with teaching during a pandemic.

Two additional cases have been identified at her school in the span of a week; the most recent one is a student of hers, she said, before tearing up during a phone call.

While she is worried the cases are linked, the province has not declared an outbreak in the building.

Upwards of 1,700 COVID-19 cases have been linked to K-12 schools in Manitoba, affecting 1,312 students and 412 staff members, as of Dec. 10, according to a provincial spokesperson.



Manitoba's top doctor, Dr. Brent Roussin has repeatedly indicated there is low transmission in schools.

Only six schools in Manitoba have been deemed outbreak sites to date. None are active.

The province originally said a school outbreak would be declared when at least two confirmed cases were connected. More recently, it said a school outbreak is declared when there is widespread community transmission in a building.

At health region, division and school levels, timely case reporting and contact tracing protocols have also been inconsistent and unclear.

Teachers aren't always immediately informed if one of their students has COVID-19, while there are often significant delays between when close contacts find out about an exposure and the wider school community and public is notified, if ever.

Between reporting lags and the possibility many students are asymptomatic, the Winnipeg teacher said she doesn't think schools will be safe until everyone has been vaccinated.

Manitoba's top doctor has repeatedly indicated there is low transmission in schools, but epidemiologists and teachers — including the early years educator — question if greater surveillance in schools could yield different results.

A recent targeted testing pilot in a Toronto school located in a neighbourhood with high levels of community transmission found approximately four per cent of the school population had COVID-19, with many individuals being asymptomatic.

Meantime, questions remain about whether school staff are equipped to do contact tracing. It isn't as simple as looking at a seating chart, said one Winnipeg principal, who has been doing such investigations without any formal training. The process is time-consuming and requires finding out all the people who have spent a cumulative 15 minutes with an individual who tests positive for COVID-19 when they were at school during an infectious period, said the principal, who was not authorized to speak on the matter.

What makes matters more confusing, the administrator said, is that parents often call him with questions. "I find myself frequently in the position of having to give advice based on what I've pieced together from conversations with public health," he said, adding it would be helpful if the province encouraged parents to immediately contact their school once they receive a result to avoid further spread during contact tracing lags.

The Manitoba Teachers' Society has made clear its opposition to principals performing contact tracing duties in some school divisions.

"Asking principals to make public health judgments to inform courses of action outside of their expertise and training is both unfair and irresponsible," Nathan Martindale, MTS vice-president, said in a statement Friday.

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