

Premier recognizes need to offer rapid testing to teachers

Echoing the Society's months-long advocacy to make rapid-testing available for teachers, Brian Pallister said, "We need rapid testing in our schools because teachers want to stay and help their kids, but they don't want to give them COVID." Quote highlighted below.

Schools faster than public health officials at sending COVID alerts

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Riverbend Community School in northwest Winnipeg. Staff and students at Riverbend Community School in northwest Winnipeg await a public health investigation into the single positive COVID-19 test connected to the school.

THE phone call principal Ross Meacham had been bracing for since Labour Day came on Wednesday. The caller informed Riverbend Community School that a student had tested positive for COVID-19.

But it wasn't Manitoba Public Health on the other line. It was the student's family, who — as the province grapples with a ballooning virus caseload, and subsequent contact-tracing backlog — gave administrators a heads-up. In the hours that followed, Meacham's team got to work, connecting with public health, the Seven Oaks School Division office, the affected student's cohort, nearby daycares, and the school community at large.

"It's really hard to walk a school community through the thing that's most terrifying right now; COVID is a big scary word, and we've got people that

need to be taken care of," Meacham said. "It's our responsibility to look out for the kids that go to school here, but also their families, also their extended families — that's what a community is."

Wanting to keep their communities safe and informed, more schools have alerted families about a COVID-19 case in their building before public health could do so.

Superintendent Brian O'Leary has overseen three schools — Maples Collegiate, Seven Oaks Middle School and Riverbend — as they sent out such courtesy notices in recent days. It's about taking an abundance of caution and reducing risk, while maintaining trust with families: "part of how we maintain that trust is being upfront and open," O'Leary said.

Last week, Maples alerted families the school had reason to believe a student with COVID-19 attended a high school party. In a notice sent home Oct. 26, students who attended the party were urged to be tested.

Families in the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine can expect similar notices. So far, Superintendent Alain Laberge said École Lacerte and École Saint-Joachim have received preliminary updates from the division while public health conducts investigations.

"It's a way of being proactive, without stopping (Manitoba Public Health) from doing its job. We're not there to replace them and we understand that tracing is quite complicated," Laberge said, adding the hope is such updates reduce anxiety and "gossip tsunamis."

Senior administration at the St. James-Assiniboia School Division echoed those comments in a statement Thursday, saying John Taylor Collegiate's Nov. 4 notice to families was "the right thing to do" to support public health's efforts.

With some alerts about exposures coming as late as 13 days after the fact, Brenda Brazeau, executive director of the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils, applauds all efforts to keep families informed as soon as possible. "Good on the schools for stepping up," Brazeau said Thursday.

The province has said part of the reason gaps exist between school exposures and community alerts is that the latter is issued only after an individual seeks testing and receives a result. (In recent days, two teachers told the *Free Press* they waited at least five days for a result.)

The premier spoke about rapid testing in schools being a "major priority" at a virtual news conference Thursday.

"We need rapid testing in our schools because teachers want to stay and help their kids, but they don't want to give them COVID," Brian Pallister said. Meantime, staff and students of Riverbend continue to sanitize, wear masks and practise physical distancing as they await a public health investigation into the single positive COVID-19 test connected to the school.

The student's cohort has been asked to self-isolate until the school hears from public health.

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