

MB Teachers on the front line, but not the vaccine line

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter By: [Maggie Macintosh](#)

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MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS FILES

Manitoba's COVID-19 immunization list doesn't give special treatment to teachers, who face dozens of students and are connected to dozens of families each day.

Manitoba is recognizing teachers and school staff with a formal week of appreciation, but educators would rather the province acknowledge their work by prioritizing them in the COVID-19 vaccination lineup.

Cheri Chartier estimates she has as many as 40 close contacts daily, given she moves between three cohorts throughout a typical school day.

Despite that fact, the rural Manitoba teacher can expect a vaccine around the same time other Manitobans in the 40-to-50 age range can, regardless of whether they work from home or elsewhere.

"Not only am I exposed to (all) those people, all of them are exposed to me and then they go home to their families each day. If I get COVID right now... I would

feel terrible if I was responsible for infecting any of my students and coworkers," Chartier told the *Free Press*.

The irony is not lost on her that Teacher and Staff Appreciation Week is underway at the very time she doesn't know where she falls on the immunization list.

Chartier added, "I would love to arrive at school in the fall having teachers and staff vaccinated."

Front-line health care workers, residents and staff in congregate living settings, and First Nations people make up the first priority group in Manitoba's vaccination campaign. The public will be cohorted by age, in 10-year-increments, for vaccines.

The current plan doesn't prioritize teachers, but the province indicated a category for essential workers could be added if more vaccine supply is approved. When the initial plan was unveiled two weeks ago, public health officials said they would hold stakeholder meetings and review the epidemiological situation and risks before making a decision.

Chartier said she agrees with the first phase of the program, but doesn't understand why teachers are not next in line if they have so many contacts in comparison to other essential workers.

Not only do teachers gather daily in large groups, but the overwhelming majority of students is too young to be eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine, she said, adding immunizing staff will protect students.

The Manitoba Teachers' Society confirmed Tuesday it had yet to be contacted by the province to discuss the matter.

On Feb. 1, union president James Bedford penned a letter to the health minister, in which he said educators are "extremely disappointed" with the vaccination

schedule, considering they have been putting their health at risk daily to teach students.

Across the country, educators have been praised for making schools safe this year — yet, calls to prioritize their vaccinations after health-care workers and vulnerable populations have largely been ignored, said Shelley Morse, president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation.

Only officials in Ontario and Quebec have indicated teachers will be prioritized, Morse said, although Ontario is the only province to put that in writing.

Following an initial phase similar to Manitoba's, Ontario plans to immunize adults who are 80 and older and front-line workers, including first responders and teachers, among other groups.

The strategy is in line with recommendations put out by the national advisory committee on immunization, which suggest essential workers be part of the second rollout stage.

Morse said priority access to the vaccine is imperative to keep schools open and allow for economic recovery, especially as new variants pose additional threats to school communities. Meantime, as educators await vaccines, she said teachers want universal mask mandates so even the youngest pupils must wear face coverings daily.

maggie.macintosh@freepress.mb.ca