



Local News

Parents in the dark over COVID-19 cases in schools

Parents are using social media to find out how many students are absent

Katherine Wilton • Montreal Gazette
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Schools and school boards have taken it upon themselves to inform parents of COVID-19 cases in the absence of government action. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette files

Miffed that Quebec is no longer informing parents of COVID-19 cases in classrooms, some English school boards and teachers in the French system have taken it upon themselves to get the word out.

Some parents and teachers are communicating through social media to discuss absenteeism among students who have tested positive for COVID-19 during the pandemic's fifth wave.

Since students returned to in-person learning following the Christmas holidays, public health departments are no longer tracking COVID-19 cases in schools or informing parents about close contacts.

"Parents are asking about absences through unofficial channels," said Olivier Drouin, a Montreal father who started Covid Écoles Québec, a website where he compiles data about COVID-19 cases in the province.

"Public health is no longer involved in schools. There's no contact tracing. We used to know about every case in every school."

Education Minister Jean-François Roberge says children will not be kept home if a fellow student has COVID-19. For a class to close, 60 per cent of students would have to test positive for the novel coronavirus, according to new guidelines sent to school boards.

With public health officials no longer informing parents about outbreaks, several English school boards are making it easier for parents to find out how many students have COVID-19 or are in isolation.

At the Lester B. Pearson School Board, a daily summary of absences in each grade will be made available at 4 p.m. each day, via an internal school portal.

Parents will be informed of how many students have tested positive, have symptoms of COVID-19 or are absent because they're in home isolation.

"In the spirit of transparency, our school board felt that parents and staff would appreciate receiving daily updates," said Darren Becker, a spokesperson for the Pearson board.

The English Montreal School Board is hoping to release an app next week that will allow parents to report their child's absence due to COVID-19.

At the Eastern Townships School Board, chairperson Michael Murray said his board lacks the administrative staff to tally all COVID-19-related absences daily.

Earlier this week, Roberge instructed schools to report absences on a centralized platform that the education ministry hopes to publish twice a week.

"The schools have the data, but are being told not to share it with the parents," Drouin said. "They're submitting it to the government, so everyone has the data except the parents."

A lack of information from the schools and public health officials means parents are trying to get information on Facebook and other social media platforms, Drouin said.

Since parents have been complaining to the government and the media, some off-island school boards and private schools have begun notifying parents of COVID-19 cases over the past two days, Drouin said.

About 11,000 students were absent from school last week because they had tested positive for COVID-19, Radio-Canada reported. Another 20,000 students were absent for other COVID-related reasons.

kwilton@postmedia.com

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