

news



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N O V A S C O T I A T E A C H E R S U N I O N

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The following Op-ed is by NSTU President Paul Wozney

Public Health Gaffe Exposes Students & Staff to Needless Risk

While Nova Scotians have worked hard to flatten the curve, COVID-19 remains an ever-present reality in Halifax area schools. In the Central region, school cases are still being announced daily. Parents and teachers tell me they are scared to open their email out of fear of finding a notification from public health about a positive case at their school.

Over the past two days, more than half of new cases (7 out of 12) are children and youth under the age of 19. While these numbers are small in comparison to early May when hundreds of children fell ill, every school case still has a profound impact on students, staff and the communities they serve. Currently there are dozens of children, teachers and school staff in quarantine because they've been identified as a close contact. For them, the promise of three weeks of in-person learning has quickly turned into two weeks of anxiety-filled isolation. New cases identified today and after will mean students, families and staff flagged as close contacts will see their summer compromised after an incredibly difficult year.

Given what's at stake, as this stressful school year draws to an end, parents deserve accuracy, transparency and accountability from public health and government. Unfortunately, they fell well short of this standard earlier this week.

Late on Monday night, public health identified positive cases of COVID-19 at an HRCE elementary school in Halifax's North End. Unfortunately, they errantly closed Joseph Howe School for two days where no exposures had been identified while leaving St. Joseph A. MacKay Elementary (SJAM) open, where the positive cases were actually located.

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This error was acknowledged casually by Dr. Strang in Tuesday's COVID-19 briefing following a question from Tim Bousquet. In his remarks, Dr. Strang also said the error had been caught early on Tuesday morning. It appears that had Mr. Bousquet not asked the question, Dr. Strang and Premier Rankin would not have addressed this situation at all as neither of them flagged it in their prepared remarks.

Dr. Strang's comments about the error being caught first thing on Tuesday morning do not reflect the reality of what unfolded for students, staff and families. To the public, an error being caught "first thing in the morning" suggests that no undue risk was created and proper protocols were followed. This is not what happened.

The failure to close the correct school sent students and staff at SJAM back into a building where no deep cleaning had been conducted, resulting in several hours of potential exposure before contact tracing had been completed.

As the day proceeded, students and staff identified as close contacts were pulled, in real time, from their class, while those remaining in those classrooms looked on and left to wonder whether they were next. One can only imagine the fear children and staff in that position experienced as a result.

Staff and students not identified as close contacts were kept in the building for the remainder of the day in cobbled together groups, violating the supposed protection of cohorting/class bubbles, rather than seeing the entire school closed until a deep cleaning could take place over two days. SJAM parents received notice after lunch that the wrong school had been closed. Many had to leave work on short notice to pick up children identified as close contacts.

School staff were placed in the impossible position of having to communicate with families about an error they were not responsible for and answer pointed questions without having the information or details to address parents' legitimate concerns for the safety and health of their children.

Meanwhile, as all this was happening, families at Joseph Howe were not updated for much of the day, were left scrambling to find child care and book urgent COVID-19 tests. I'm certain they felt a deep sense of relief when the mistake was finally corrected.

The most compelling rationale for keeping schools open to in-person learning is the positive impact in-person learning has on children's mental health and general well-being because of the safety, belonging and range of supports schools provide for students.

In this case, there can be no question that children and staff at SJAM were potentially exposed to COVID-19 to cover for public health's error, nor that the safety and support they rely on their school to provide was violated.

All Nova Scotians are deeply grateful for the work Dr. Strang and his team have done on our behalf throughout the pandemic, and they have been duly credited and thanked for their leadership and successes along the way. While this incident does not shake our greater confidence and gratitude for the work of public health, there is no question that this incident represents an unacceptable breakdown in processes and decision making.

The students, families and staff impacted by this grave error deserve better than an offhanded, impersonal acknowledgement during a COVID-19 briefing.

This situation has created substantial alarm and anxiety for all affected, and many now have doubts about the processes that are in place to keep school safe.

The province owes it to these children, families and staff to relay their accountability and apology directly in a manner that demonstrates the deep care and respect they deserve. And be fully transparent about the steps that will be taken to ensure that the much-deserved summer break on the horizon for all students, families and staff will not be compromised by further mistakes.

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