



Ministerial Statement

To The House of Assembly

By

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Minister of Education

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COVID 19 Impact on Public Schools

Friday March 26th, 2021

Mr. Speaker,

Today I rise to share with my honourable colleagues and the community at large an update on the impact of COVID 19 in our public schools.

Mr. Speaker,

This week I made a decision to close our public schools early for the Easter break, in that it will now start on Monday, March 29th instead of Thursday, April 1st. Let me say that the decision to close our schools is not an easy one and directly affects, distresses and disrupts children's learning, and those parents who must work and who are not positioned to stay home to care for their children. Yet this was a proactive decision that needed to be made out of an abundance of caution to ensure the continued safety and health of students, school staff, and parents.

Mr. Speaker,

As a parent with a child in the Bermuda Public School System, I am well aware of the anxiety our parents are facing. This new variant of COVID-19 has given us a different experience than what we had in December. This variant appears to be transmitted easier and affect our children more. As a parent, I fully understand the concern, as it was only last week I had to explain to my daughter how the nasal pharyngeal test works, as she and all of her school mates of Whitney Institute were tested recently. Thankfully she and all that were tested on that day

were negative. The decision made to start the Easter Break early was a very difficult one, as I truly believe that our children deserve to be inside our school buildings. However, the evidence, the data and the psychological impact of where we as an island were all taken into account when this decision was made.

Mr. Speaker,

In September 2020 when our public schools opened, strict safety and health measures were implemented. The entry to exit safety and health protocols were comprehensive documents, provided for each school level from preschools to senior schools, with the purpose of keeping our children and schools staff safe. The protocols aimed to:

- provide safety and health guidelines for school operations, and,
- keep sick students and staff out of school buildings.

Mr. Speaker,

The concept of ‘bubbles’ was also introduced in the schools as a safety measure, in that students interacted only with the same students and teachers during the course of the school day. I am pleased to say that continuous adherence to these safety and health measures at each respective school have kept our students and school staff safe for the most part. As such **Mr. Speaker**, the recent outbreak of COVID in some of our public schools due to the poor behaviour of adults, is extremely disappointing. We all know that what happens in schools to some extent is a reflection of what’s happening in the community. If there is a COVID outbreak in the community, it’s just a matter of time before this seeps into the schools; which is what has happened.

Mr. Speaker,

As of Wednesday this week, all students and staff in three public schools have been quarantined, these include; Northlands and Purvis Primary schools; and, Dellwood Middle School. Other schools that have classroom students or cohorts, and teachers and/or other school staff in quarantine include Devonshire Preschool West Pembroke, Paget and Elliot Primary Schools, and Whitney Middle School. These reflect for the most part classroom bubbles. As informed by the Ministry of Health, the concept of bubbles allows the technical officers in the

Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit better understand who is at risk, that is, the close versus casual contacts; and, better target actions towards those specific groups to minimize disruptions in schools.

Mr. Speaker,

When a COVID 19 exposure occurs in schools, the 'bubble' quarantines, instead of the entire school. This is based on a risk assessment undertaken by the Ministry of Health. Teachers quarantine with the students in their bubble and this lessens the impact of school staffing. As such, schools are able to remain open and continue with a hybrid-learning model.

Mr. Speaker,

The Department of Education has been strictly guided by the Ministry of Health regarding COVID matters in schools. We all know that COVID 19 is not going anywhere anytime soon. The Ministry of Health is ably leading the Island through this pandemic and has also developed a plan for managing COVID 19 exposure in our schools. We know that their decisions are based on data, science, and a strategy that in the end leads to continued learning and what is best for Bermuda's children. At this time, I acknowledge and extend appreciation for the work of all staff in the Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit (ESU) under the leadership of the Chief Medical Officer. They continue to work day and night keeping us abreast of any developments that occur in our schools.

Mr. Speaker,

Let me say that the Ministry is very much understanding of the heightened fear and concern that arises in the community when there is an increase in the number of COVID cases. The same is experienced in our schools when school staff are informed of a positive case in schools, and the ESU commences an assessment of their respective school. The automatic concern is: "Have I been affected?"

Mr. Speaker, this is a normal reaction for all of us. No one is exempt! As we continue to send communication out to parents and staff, the Ministries of Health and Education will work together to enhance the communication by providing additional information, so that persons understand or are clear if they have been a close or casual contact of the affected individuals. Additionally, Health is

developing an information web page soon to be launched showing which schools have been affected, a list of Frequently Asked Questions, and, also a detailed explanation of the importance and effectiveness of the bubbles.

Mr. Speaker,

You will recall that an Education Emergency Measures Committee (EEMC) was established back in December last year, with the goal to immediately stand in the event of one or more COVID 19 cases or related, occurs in schools. Last week Thursday, March 18th, the EEMC stood to discuss the rise in the number of COVID cases in our schools. During the meeting, a new policy was agreed upon to help alleviate the concerns and fears expressed by school staff. This policy came into effect immediately and stipulated that saliva testing would be undertaken as soon as practicable, and within a day if possible when a COVID exposure had been detected within a school.

Mr. Speaker,

A saliva test is a screening tool used to detect a potential COVID 19 infection. The testing is an extra layer of testing to catch any potential infections within casual contacts, that is those students and school staff who are not deemed a close contact of the affected individual. The saliva testing is carried out as a proactive preventative measure for all students and staff remaining at a school, where a class or cohort of students and school staff have been placed on quarantine. Following the saliva test, any person identified as a potential positive must be tested using a nasal pharyngeal or throat swab to confirm the saliva test results.

Mr. Speaker,

Thus far, saliva testing has been administered at the Elliot (99), Paget (94), Purvis (138) and West Pembroke (117) Primary Schools as a result of confirmed COVID-19 exposure at the schools. Out of a total of 448 persons screened, there was only one potential positive case at Elliot Primary. **Mr. Speaker,** this preventative measure is being expanded as a screening tool and a regime of testing proactively in schools across the system, instead of waiting for notification of a potential COVID-19 exposure. This week, Victor Scott, Prospect, and Gilbert Primary Schools have been scheduled as part of this expanded use of the screening via saliva testing. A schedule to have these screenings done on a

routine basis will be developed over the Easter Break and introduced when in school learning commences on April 12.

Mr. Speaker,

We commend the Government's Molecular Diagnostics Lab Team under the leadership of Dr. Carika Weldon for their swift response to support schools in the organization and administering of these saliva tests within a day of a COVID exposure in a school.

Mr. Speaker,

Let me share additional measures that have been put in place to enhance the safety and health of students and school staff. The EEMC approved a Mask Wearing Policy in schools. The policy details the purpose of the policy, associated risks if the policy is not followed, and procedures that will be followed for non-compliance or refusal to wear masks by students and staff.

Mr. Speaker,

Additionally, stemming from the last Cabinet COVID Committee meeting, the Ministry of Education has developed questions to include on the Ministry of Health's Travel Authorization Form. The questions ask travelers if they have children and/or contact with children, and the schools attended so that follow up is undertaken to determine if the children must follow the Ministry of Health's return to school protocols before being allowed to attend school. The intent is to catch any potential COVID exposure at the front end.

Mr Speaker,

The question of Easter Camps has been brought to my attention after to announcement to extend the Easter Break. Mr. Speaker, I wish to point out the large gather limit is currently 10 which would apply to camps or anything of that nature. While Schools are exempt from this 10-person limit, camps, dance classes, weekend events with children or students and the like are not exempt. The Department of Health has guidelines for the running of camps and I encourage the public to ensure that any camp that may be running during the Easter Break is doing so under these guidelines.

Mr. Speaker,

There have also been reports of persons who should be on quarantine out and about in the community. The current surge in infections we are experiencing is a direct result of persons flouting the rules that have been put in place. I honestly understand the “COVID Fatigue” that people feel due to this pandemic. I urge those persons to think of our island home and all of us here who want to get back to normalcy level just as they wish. However, unless we strictly follow the Ministry of Health guidelines and instructions for quarantining so that Bermuda remains safe, we further move from normalcy. As we have seen from what has transpired in the last few weeks, it takes one person’s actions to set us back.

Mr. Speaker,

As I stated earlier, COVID 19 is not going anywhere anytime soon. If the safety and health measures are followed consistently, the spread and transmission will be reduced. All school staff are considered essential workers but only 625 educators have been vaccinated since the end of February. So we are working collaboratively with the Ministry of Health and the Bermuda Union of Teachers to encourage more school staff to get vaccinated over the extended Easter Break; and, also take advantage of the Ministry of Health’s offer to schools to test school staff on a monthly basis using the Saliva Screening Testing. I also ask parents to be diligent in impressing on their children the importance of handwashing, mask wearing and maintaining the 6 feet physical distancing when in and out of school.

Mr. Speaker,

In closing I extend my thanks to the members of the Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit, the Department of Communications, Commissioner of Education, her technical officers and our school principals of affected schools who have worked diligently during the recent weeks and who have sacrificed their personal and family time during the weekends and evenings communicating to parents, stakeholders and the general public about the COVID 19 impact on our schools.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker.**