



Ministerial Statement

To The Senate

By

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Junior Minister of Education

COVID-19 Update in Schools

Wednesday, December 1, 2021

Madam President,

I rise this morning in this Honourable House to provide an update on the on-going impact of COVID-19 in our schools and the preventative measures that have been put in place in both our public and our private schools to keep our children safe.

Madam President,

You will recall that our Honourable Premier has shared with us repeatedly, and this morning I say it again, the coronavirus is with us and will continue to be with us for some time. We all must accept, and make adjustments for what has become our new normal. In our public and private schools, this has meant finding creative and engaging ways to ensure quality teaching and learning environments for students in the classroom as, this is where our children learn best.

Madam President,

The beginning of the 2021-2022 school year was not without its challenges. Bermuda was in its fourth, and deadliest wave of community spread from the virus. Public school staff were being sent home in unsustainable numbers even before the school buildings were fully open. Our private school partners did begin the school year with in-class learning. However, several schools were hit with positive cases resulting in large numbers of students being placed in quarantine. One school had a delayed start, and another completely closed for a week.

Mr Speaker

The increased number of covid positive cases caused the Ministry of Education to make the difficult decision to begin the 2021-2022 academic year with remote learning for public schools. Despite the setbacks, there has been continued collaboration with the Ministry of Health to put the appropriate safety and health guidelines in place for our schools.

Madam President,

Let me remind my honourable colleagues that towards the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, through collaboration between the Department of Education and Molecular Diagnostic Lab (MDL), a Saliva Screening Pilot Program was implemented in both public and private schools. The pilot program saw staff from MDL visit the various schools to conduct saliva testing on consenting students and staff. Ultimately, students and staff consenting to participate in the programme were tested at least once per month. The program proved to be successful in identifying asymptomatic cases. Resultantly, the saliva screening programme was revised and has continued into the 2021-2022 school year with all public schools testing weekly. At this point I want to extend my thanks to our parents and staff for supporting the programme and providing consent for their children to participate as this will help to keep our schools safe.

Madam President,

Both public and private schools have implemented key COVID-19 preventative safety measures to ensure safety in school buildings. Public Schools introduced a "Pre-Return" testing policy in that all staff and students are required to have a negative COVID 19 test to enter school buildings after a break in school. Private Schools on the other hand have implemented the Lateral Flow Testing for staff and students up to twice a week; which includes teaching staff, administrative staff, janitorial and security staff.

Madam President,

Research has shown that in-person learning is best for our students. The focus of our schools have been to minimize continuous disruption of student learning due to identified positive COVID cases in schools. The Ministry of Health has received input from the Minister of Education, Department of Education and our Private Schools which has resulted in a revised approach to how close contacts and casual contacts are now treated in the event of a positive case has been identified in a school. Instead of a full class of students having to be quarantined, the Department of Health risk assessment now allows persons deemed as a casual contact to remain in school if an initial negative PCR test is obtained. However, close contacts are still required to quarantine as per usual. We are pleased about the change in policy which has allowed more students to remain in school for in-class learning.

Madam President,

Since schools have opened for the 2021-2022 school year, there have been 38 positive COVID cases to date; 14 in public Schools and 24 in the private schools. I am certain that the safety measures that have been put in place have helped to identify positive cases earlier and also have allowed schools to remain open with continuous in-person learning for our children.

Mr. Speaker,

Earlier this week, the Ministry of Health advised that schools could move from Phase 1 to Phase 2 of the School Covid Guidelines which means that our younger students from preschool to P3 do not have to wear face masks while inside the

classroom. The intent is to review this policy in 2 weeks for a possible move to Phase 3. Many in the community have advocated for a quicker move between the COVID protocol school phases as other entities in Bermuda have "opened up". However, **Madam President**, I wish to remind all that our schools are considered high to medium risk locations. Students are in a classroom approx 3-feet apart from 8:30 am to 3:30 pm daily. A relaxation in the school protocols too quickly and leading to an outbreak could cause an entire class or year level to be quarantined. This would negate our recovery and our movement towards a new normal.

Madam President,

Each child sent home typically results in that household being quarantined. A household in quarantine can affect a parent's ability to work and other siblings inability to attend school. Those other siblings may result in fellow students at their school being affected and their respective households as well. If we stop and think about this, it is easy to see the potential knock-on effects of a positive case in a school. We want to, and we will, ease the restrictions, but this will be done with the need to balance the safety of our children and the need for them to remain in school.

Madam President,

In this last outbreak, approximately one-third of cases were children, and to my understanding, a few cases can be traced back to parents sending their children to childcare settings where other children were infected and then returned home to infect household members. While children may not be as affected by COVID as adults, children tend to be around their elders, who may be more susceptible to COVID complications. With our prevalence of multi-generational households, this can be a real issue. The guidelines in schools have allowed us to have schools open, keep them open and at the same time help protect our community.

Madam President,

We will continue to do what is best for our students and their families to keep them in school and learning. While this may inconvenience our adults at times, our focus will remain on keeping our schools safe for in-person learning.

Madam President,

I want to take the time to thank the staff at the Ministry of Education, Department of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Department of Health School Surveillance team, our private school partners, and the Schools Testing team at Bermuda Molecular Diagnostics Laboratory. It is genuinely the collaborative effort of all involved and their hard work and dedication to ensure that our schools have programs that have enabled us to keep our students in school and be protected as much as possible from the COVID-19 virus.

Thank you, **Madam President**