



Ministerial Statement

To The Senate

By

Senator Owen Darrell, JP

Junior Minister of Education

The Impact of COVID 19 on In-School Learning for Children

Friday, September 15th 2021

Madam President,

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.

Madam President

September 9th was the first day back to school for the Bermuda Public School System after the summer break. While we did everything within our power to return to in-school learning, circumstances out of our control pushed us to make the tough decision to start the school year with remote learning. This is less than ideal, and the announcement made this last week Tuesday on September 7th for a Thursday opening only added additional stress to our parents and guardians, and I wholeheartedly apologise for that. It is not lost on us the strain this creates on the broader public when parents and guardians have to change their day-to-day plans with little notice.

Madam President

The Public School System is not alone in making these difficult decisions. Only last Thursday, we saw Warwick Academy announce that their Senior School will be transitioned to remote learning as the following day, Friday. Saltus Grammar School announced they would open the school year for their middle and senior year students via remote 2 days before the start of their school year. Bermuda Institute as well has made the difficult decision to go remote after only just opening in August. Like the public school system, the parents and guardians of both private

schools were only afforded 1 to 3 days' notice. We certainly can appreciate and empathise with our parents and guardians while we endeavour to place the safety of all children and staff at the forefront.

Madam President

Although remote learning is not ideal, I can confidently say that we are prepared. The donated Chromebooks have been distributed to all of our Primary Schools P3, P4, P5 and P6 classes consisting of 1349 students. The professional development that has taken place over the last year and more specifically this Summer was explicitly done to take advantage of Google Technology use by Chromebooks. While we had anticipated more professional training this school Term, like everything else, we will pivot due to the impact of COVID and work our way through. Again, I would like to thank the Hasso Plattner Foundation for their generous donation of this initial supply of Chromebooks. We are actively pursuing additional donors who will enable us to complete our desire to place a device in the hands of all Primary and Pre-school students.

Madam President

The best place for our children is in school because it allows their parents and guardians to get to work and reduce the stress of trying to work and moderate their online learning. Teachers also perform best when they have their students in their classrooms. In-Class instruction allows teachers to form personal connections that help develop individual relationships with their students. Relationships that are critical and that will lead to better educational outcomes for the students. The data shows it is the best environment for effective learning.

Madam President

The American Academy of Paediatrics can be quoted in their Recommendations for Opening Schools in Fall 2021 as saying,

"...We need to prioritise getting children back into schools alongside their friends and their teachers -- and we all play a role in making sure it happens safely. The pandemic has taken a heartbreaking toll on children, and it is not just their education that has suffered but also their mental, emotional and physical health. Combining layers of protection that include vaccinations, masking and clean hands hygiene will make in-person learning safe and possible for everyone..."

Madam President

The Government has done a tremendous job of putting in a testing regime that is the envy of the world. These efforts have afforded our people freedom of movement in relative safety that other countries do not enjoy. For our students, we have worked just as hard. We have worked hard to put a Saliva Screening Program in place to screen our staff and students for possible infection regularly. We have hired more staff to clean and enhanced the cleaning protocols within our schools. Hand Sanitisers, stickers on floors to show 6-foot distances, signage, and the like have been done. However, this is all for nought if no one takes advantage or does what is required outside or inside our schools.

Madam President

As of today, just over 50% of our students have consent from their parents to be part of the Saliva Screening program. An even fewer percentage of staff have consented, although we continue to have staff test positive for COVID-19 resulting from close contacts of other infected persons. It can be easily observed that people, including children, are not wearing masks when required to do so, and at times highlighting on social media and the like when they can avoid using Safekey to enter events and places that require them. I have even heard stories of events and locations that require Safekey yet not adhering to these rules. I cannot stress enough that we as a people must exercise a level of personal responsibility, particularly if we desire to have our children return to in-school learning in short order.

Madam President

Our goal has always been and will continue to be one of using the data on hand to make decisions and guidelines in the interest of the Safety and Health of our students and staff. However, the policies within our school buildings will never be as effective as they can be if people outside of our school buildings are not responsible. To have safe schools, we as a community and as an island need to do our part. Be responsible, follow the guidelines, and do not put yourself in positions to be exposed to COVID-19. Remember, our individual irresponsible behaviours can profoundly affect others when exposed within a school, causing quarantines and closures. The education of our children is put at risk.

Madam President

We are still reviewing the data for all schools to get them back to in-school learning as soon as possible. We are hopeful that we will be able to get some schools back to in-person learning soon. However, several factors will have to be taken into account, such as country status, staff and substitute and testing result status to make those decisions. While we cannot mandate anyone to be tested before returning to school or participate in the Saliva Screening program, we urge our staff, parents and guardians to consider doing so. We hope you are not just thinking of yourself, but we advise you to consider the effect your actions may have on others and our ability to get our children back to school.

Madam President

As I started this statement, our children need to be and deserve to be in school for in-school learning. We, as adults, must do our part to make this happen. I am asking all of Bermuda to do what is required to ensure our students, both in the Public and Private Schools, can go to school, sit in class and learn.

Thank You, Madam President