

Parents struggle to navigate in-person school, child care amid B.C.'s surging 3rd wave ^[1]

Both Toronto and Peel have shut down schools for in-person learning

Author: Slepian, Katya

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EXCERPTS

After news broke this week that two major regions in Toronto would be shutting down schools for two weeks after Easter, many in B.C. wondered if schools here would follow suit.

But as of Tuesday (April 6) morning, as kids in the Peel region of Ontario logged onto online learning platforms, and those in Toronto learned they would go remote as of Wednesday, most students in B.C. went back to class even as the province's daily case count topped 1,000 on multiple occasions.

In many ways, the situation in B.C. is similar to that of Peel. While B.C.'s population is about 3.5 times bigger than that of Peel, both places have seen their positivity rate – the percentage of COVID tests that come back positive – increase by more than three per cent in the past few weeks. On Feb. 27, Peel's positivity rate was 6.6 per cent, while B.C.'s was 6.5 per cent. As of March 31, the last dates available, Peel's positivity rate was 9.6 per cent, while B.C.'s was 9.9 per cent. Positivity rates in some regions of the province, like the hard hit Fraser Health region, were even higher.

On Monday, Peel Public Health issued an order closing schools and moving students to remote learning for a two-week period starting Tuesday.

"Late last week and over the weekend, Peel saw a significant increase in case counts and the spread of COVID-19 variants," the health authority said.

"This closure will allow students and staff at least two weeks out of schools to break any chains of transmission and protect them from exposure."

Toronto, with a 7.6 per cent positivity rate, followed suit Tuesday.

Child care programs will remain open for kids under the age of six, but Toronto and Peel grade school students cannot attend child care centres or day camps during the next two weeks.

One Vancouver teacher told Black Press Media they were concerned about returning to school.

"I am a special education teacher and go to multiple schools a day and cross cohorts," they said. "I work with students in small spaces – the young ones are not wearing masks. I am scared to go to work – the variants are spreading, and we have no idea when we will be vaccinated."

A vaccination program for frontline workers in B.C. was paused when international data showed that the AstraZeneca vaccine could contribute to blood clots. So far, only Surrey teachers have been vaccinated.

A Nanaimo parent told Black Press Media their family had already pulled their son out of his Grade 2 class last week.

"The recent school mask mandate only went down to Grade 4, which means many of my son's classmates will remain unmasked. Additionally, and as predicted, the more transmissible variant cases are currently spiking, even on Vancouver Island," Tom Jackman said in a message. "This not only increases the likelihood that my son will get sick, but that he might get very sick. It also increases the likelihood that if he gets sick, myself and my partner will get sick."

Jackman said that while he feels that his son's teacher has tried her best, he's not happy with the overall situation.

"There have been no improvements in ventilation, no admission that COVID is spread through aerosols, and generally no acknowledgement that the 'layers of protection' as they currently exist aren't working," he said. There are currently two active exposure alerts for Nanaimo schools, and there were six in March alone.

Jackman also has more complications to worry about: a chronic illness. He developed severe Myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue

syndrome (ME/CFS) after what was believed to be a bout of SARS (another coronavirus) in 2004. That leaves Jackman with a higher risk of severe illness or even death from COVID-19.

However, despite his condition, he's not yet eligible for a vaccine in B.C. – even though both he and his wife, as dual citizens, would have been eligible in the U.S. already.

“Ultimately, all these factors combined just became too much to justify the additional risks of having my son in class full-time.”

Another parent told Black Press Media that even though his daughter is in daycare, not school, his family made the decision to keep her home.

Burnaby parent Brett Favaro said he's been watching the child positivity rates released by the B.C. Centre for Disease Control.

“These are a proxy for how good of a job we're doing detecting all the cases,” said Favaro, who is an adjunct professor of biology at SFU. The family first pulled their daughter in November, when they noticed cases were on the rise.

“We applied the same logic in the winter,” he said.

“We have ramped down daycare for weeks prior to pulling her, keeping her only there in mornings which is primarily outdoor play time. Thanks to keeping her home, we actually had our daughter home for most of the exposure period that occurred when our daycare was hit by COVID. We still had to self-isolate for two weeks (well, she did... the letter said we did not have to isolate). We have not returned to daycare, as risk has only increased.”

Black Press Media has reached out to the B.C. government for comment on the school situation. Health officials are expected to provide an update on the province's COVID-19 situation on Tuesday afternoon.

Region: British Columbia [3]

Tags: COVID-19 [4]

closure [5]

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