

Ottawa parents take contact tracing into their own hands ^[1]

Facebook group dedicated to self-reporting at schools, child-care centres grows

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EXCERPTS

An Ottawa woman has taken contact tracing at schools and daycares into her own hands by starting an online group that arms parents with information about positive cases of COVID-19 in child care and classroom settings across the city.

Christie Cowan, a nurse and mother of three children, started the Ottawa Schools & Daycare Contact Tracing group on Facebook last week thinking it would only grow to a couple hundred members, but already membership has surpassed 5,000.

"It's pretty telling that people are not happy with the lack of contact tracing," Cowan said.

We don't want to need it. But there's a need that needs to be filled, so somebody had to step up and do it.- Kristy Simons, Mother and early childhood educator

"Lots of families have immunocompromised family members, elderly family members, small children who can't be vaccinated ... if we're told about lice, and hand, foot and mouth, I think it's also appropriate that we're told about COVID," she added.

Ontario officials say schools will now be monitored for absences instead of specific positive tests for the virus.

Under the new government direction, Ottawa Public Health (OPH) will no longer notify families regarding cases in schools or child-care centres.

The Ottawa Catholic School Board said it will notify parents if the school receives confirmation of a positive COVID case in the school, when possible, but principals will not be involved in contact tracing.

It also said the board was advised by OPH that most school contacts are not considered high-risk and only need to self-isolate if they show symptoms.

Cowan's group is organized into albums that represent the different French and English school boards in Ottawa, as well as child care and before- and after-school programs. Each album has photos with the name of a specific school or child-care centre.

Group relies on 'self-reporting'

Members are asked to comment on the photo with information about people in their household who will be absent from school for COVID-related or presumed COVID-related reasons. Group members are asked to only "self-report" first hand cases and outbreaks at their respective schools and daycares.

When Cowan realized how quickly the group was growing she reached out to members for help adding albums and moderating discussions.

Kristy Simons, an early childhood educator in Ottawa, says she signed up to help right away because she is immunocompromised and also has two children in school.

"When you do not have the full picture, you can't make educated decisions for yourself and your family, and that's just a risk I'm not willing to take," Simons said.

Simons said she's been averaging four or five hours of sleep since the group started because of the high number of messages streaming into the group's inbox.

"That just proves that there's definitely a need for this. I mean, the goal is to close the group. You don't want this group. We don't want to need it. But there's a need that needs to be filled, so somebody had to step up and do it," she said.

Wanted others to know of positive test

Miranda Boyer said she joined the group after she and her daughter both tested positive for COVID-19 on a rapid test on Friday.

"We just kind of wanted to do our due diligence of letting anyone know," Boyer said.

Her daughter's daycare did end up notifying parents, but Boyer said she wasn't sure if they would do that so she wanted to take an extra step.

Cowan said she understands there is a shifting way of handling the pandemic, but she still believes parents have the right to know if their child has been in contact with a positive case.

"I know there's a lot of mixed feelings on if you're doing the right thing [sending your child to school], and I think whatever decision you've made for you and your family is the right one," she said.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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