



January 14, 2022

Dear Pacific Rim families,

One of the things we have been closely monitoring this week is student and staff attendance with a view to identifying any concerning COVID-19 illness trends. As mentioned in my letter of January 12, 2022, we are trying to separate COVID-19 illness from other student absences to get a more accurate understanding of the impact of COVID-19 in schools. This will help school officials and public health officials determine if a school must temporarily close for a period of time.

From the outset, I want to be very clear that my purpose in communicating with you is not to minimize or misrepresent the presence of COVID-19 in schools, or to mislead or misguide you in any manner. We accept the strong likelihood that COVID-19 will have an impact on our communities and our schools. For those who test positive, we hope symptoms are minor, recovery is short, and transmission is minimal, and that individuals are quickly able to return to school. But there is no value in making bold predictions about the extent or length of COVID-19's impact on schools – these predictions are usually wrong and leave a lot of people saying: "but you said." Instead, I prefer to share what we know is going on, what trends indicate, and how we plan to respond, fully aware that plans can vary at any moment based on the circumstances.

Our student and employee absence reports thus far have yet to show any significant increase over historical averages and confirmed COVID-19 illness currently accounts for a small percentage of absences. Yes, it is a small sample size, and I suspect percentages will increase as rumours of COVID-19 cases are confirmed, but for those who wondered what attendance would look like following the winter break, the answer is that it currently looks a lot like it did before the winter break. But we are not naively relying on student attendance data and are very aware of the rumours of unreported COVID-19 cases in schools and of the media stories suggesting a potential surge in community COVID-19 cases. We are constantly scanning and monitoring available information and have functional closure plans in the event we must temporarily close a school.

Parents have told us they have kept a sick child home while they figure out if symptoms are COVID-19 or a cold, others have informed us their children are awaiting upcoming vaccination before returning. This suggests parents are being incredibly proactive, and I am grateful that parents and children are carefully monitoring for COVID-19 and are following appropriate health protocols of staying home when sick – even if it drives up student absence data. We support the proactive monitoring and addressing of individual health issues since a short-term precautionary absence from school could help avoid a long-term functional closure.

Some parents have also adopted a "wait and see" approach where they are keeping their children home while they monitor what is happening in community and in schools. I know that many parents

struggle with the decision to send children to school when they are uncertain or concerned about the COVID-19 health of their child's school. I also appreciate that it is more difficult when public health stops past practice of investigating individual cases, conducting contact tracing, and notifying close contacts, and where the accuracy of our COVID-19 awareness is buried in aggregate student absence numbers or reliant on anecdotal information. This is our reality, however, and we will do our best to assess and monitor COVID-19 in schools. **It is also important to remind parents that public health does not require a student to notify the school of a positive test or to notify others at school, and schools are unable to provide personal contact information for the purpose of parents notifying others of a positive test.**

With so much emphasis on absence, it is important to shift the narrative slightly to look at the importance of attendance. For the past two years I have grown increasingly concerned about student absence and learner disengagement and know that many learners have never fully 'recovered' following Spring Break 2020. In spite of concerted attempts to connect remotely, utilize at-home learning packages, provide outreach to learners and families, and boost Distributed Learning options, our greatest success continues to be in face-to-face, in-person learning. It is neither easy nor preferable to shift from in-person to at-home learning, and we will only consider a shift to at-home learning in the event of a functional school closure. Thus, if healthy, it is expected and preferable that students attend in-person.

For students who cannot attend school due to illness, we will continue to support these learners with learning activities and materials to remain current with classroom instruction. This is not a move to an optional individualized program, a hybrid model, or a virtual instruction format. None of these are practical given the daily demand on teachers to provide regular, in-person instruction and the limits to which daily classroom learning activities can be reasonably 'packaged' and sent home. Instead, it is a commitment to parents that we will try to keep students absent due to illness connected to classrooms and to provide some learning materials in a reasonable, timely manner, and in a way that is also manageable for classroom teachers.

As one school administrator shared today, "all things considered, it's been a pretty good week at school." I echo those comments and hope we quickly emerge from Omicron's shadow.

Stay safe, stay well.

With respect,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Smyth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "G" and a stylized "Smyth".

Greg Smyth
Superintendent of Schools