

For Immediate Release

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NLTA SEEKING DETAIL ON IMPACT OF ONGOING COVID-19 CLUSTERS ON SCHOOLS

St. John's...The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association is questioning why more detailed information is not forthcoming regarding the impact of the ongoing clusters of COVID-19 cases on the school communities in the affected regions of the province.

"Yesterday, we saw 17 new cases, 12 of which are connected to ongoing outbreaks, along with 2 presumptive positives and 1 probable case, and expansion of the Alert Level 4 area in Western NL. At the same time, the government media briefing focussed mainly on reopening the province to travellers," said Dean Ingram, President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association. "Once again we are left wondering why such limited detail has been provided to school communities regarding the prevalence of cases among school staff and student populations. This is information that other jurisdictions are much more open and transparent about."

The Association has heard from members who have been informed by parents, not Public Health, government or the school district, that their children have tested positive for COVID-19. In some cases, these students would have recently been in school and, depending on their age, may not have been wearing masks. Yet the only information NLTA members have received is a general assurance that Public Health sees no reason to change school operations. Some schools have closed for short periods of time for operational, not safety reasons. Teachers are on the front lines of school operations, and they need and deserve further clarity.

"We know that school attendance in the affected part of the Western region has been very low in many instances since the cluster was announced, and this was also the case for the Central region cluster, so clearly parents are not feeling reassured," said President Ingram. "While we agree that in school instruction is the best context for learning and supporting overall student well-being, in a global pandemic, this is not just about schools being open. It is clear that parents are concerned and families should have the information they need to feel confident that schools are safe places to send their children. We understand the importance of confidentiality and that government cannot speak to individual cases, but surely there is a balance to be found in order to provide, at minimum, an explanation of a consistent framework used by Public Health officials in making the decisions upon which their advice on the safety of school operations is based. I think families and those who learn and work in our school buildings are entitled at least to this."

Many students and school staff have had no choice but to spend extended periods of time in crowded indoor spaces with poor ventilation, little or no physical distancing, and weak or no mask requirements. However, since the announcement of the clusters in parts of Central and Western NL, other than general age statistics, briefings have provided no information regarding if or the degree to which the outbreak has spread to students or staff in area schools.

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