



Hello all,

Ey Swayel and welcome to March.

It is two weeks until Spring break when I hope that you will get the rest that you most certainly need. I wanted to take time this morning to update you on our work with COVID and, of course, much of the news has been about the variant. What do we know, what has happened and most importantly, how does this impact you? I want to close with talking about an employee well-being survey that you completed and I want to thank the over 2000 people who filled it out. Your voice and input is extremely important to us.

First, to COVID. Last Friday, we received information that there was exposure to a variant of concern at some of our schools. Since that time, the variant has appeared at more of our schools and we can only guess that this will be a trend that continues. As that news unfolds, here is some important information for you. Testing for the variant takes more time than testing for regular COVID. This means that when we have exposures at schools, you may learn later that this was indeed a variant. I know that this will be very unsettling news, but it is something that you should prepare for. It can occur anywhere at any time. We remain committed to transparency, and when there has been an exposure to the variant, you will know.

While there is no question that there is light on the horizon in terms of a potential vaccination routine, there is still so much work to do and we must remain on our guard and behave as if COVID is with us every day. With the variant, we believe we are seeing Fraser Health taking a much more conservative approach to asking classes to self-isolate or self-monitor and so you may see more notices out in our schools than usual. Their response appears to be heightened and clearly they are taking it extremely seriously and again, asking more classes or individuals to self-isolate.

What can you do? I know it sounds incredibly repetitive, but the basics are the basics and are the foundation of fighting this battle against the virus. Please keep physically distanced at all times where you are able, if you are unable to remain distanced, wear a mask.

Wash your hands, use sanitizer, and don't touch your face. Personal hygiene matters and I know you are already doing this, but it's just a reminder with the new strains out there.

Symptoms. I know all of us are monitoring our symptoms daily and making sure that we're not coming to work or school if you have any symptoms. I realize that we are all dedicated to our work, and that caring for our students is like caring for our own children, but if you are ill, if you have symptoms, please stay home. We are relying on you.

Those "down moments" – we all need a break. There's no question. When you have those moments when you are free, it is our normal practice to sit with colleagues, to make a run to the coffee shop maybe or just to find a place to relax together. When you are together, please remember, there is no replacement for physical distancing and if you cannot physical distance, please wear a mask. The days of jumping in a car with a couple of peers to run to get a coffee may be on the horizon but likely this is not a great idea right now.



Masks. These are but one layer of protection and the lowest level on the hierarchy of controls. We all know two things. For elementary children it is the parent's choice to have them wear a mask and for adults you should be wearing a mask at all times when you are on the move or when you cannot physically distance.

In Surrey, the recent health maps show that since January 2020 through January 2021, we have had over 20,000 cases of COVID in our community. Twenty Thousand Cases.

The hierarchy of controls go from most effective to least effective, from public health orders and physical distancing to wearing personal protective equipment. We are asking you to follow the guidelines all the way from staying distant to making sure that when you're on the move, wear a mask.

We ask all parents to speak to their elementary children, particularly those in grades 4 and over, about their comfort wearing a mask and if you feel it is the right thing for your child, know that we are trying to establish a culture of mask wearing across our district. A culture that is intended to use all levels of prevention measures to protect our staff and all children for whom they care so deeply.

We do not want to pressure any child or family as we work toward a way to keep cases at bay and every classroom and school as safe as possible. Our core message you will hear is, when you're on the move, wear a mask. Again, we ask you to speak to your child and to make the choice that you feel is best. Know that the health advice is for very small children, those in grades K through 3, they find wearing a mask very difficult, it likely will increase the touching of their face, and they may require adults to help them. This is why we talk about grades 4 and above.

Finally, we did a survey of staff well-being over the past two weeks. I want to thank all who participated and who told their story which included close to 1000 support staff and over 1000 teachers. It's clear from the survey, it's clear that people are struggling to manage stress and anxiety and that's likely directly related to the pandemic in many ways whether in-school or out of school. This fact is of great concern to us.

On the positive note, the number one thing that our staff said that is something that they turn to in times of challenge is a colleague at their school or worksite. Part of the extreme difficulty of COVID is that we are not permitted to gather together. This impacts each one of us. For me, it's just extremely uncomfortable that I cannot travel to and from schools as I normally would. I cannot imagine what it's like for the bulk of staff who rely on each other day in and day out.

To our staff. Know that you are deeply appreciated. Regardless of role, we know you are sacrificing to make this work. That sacrifice is in the interest of children and our health and for that, I believe the cause is more than worth it. Please take care, stay well. You are amazing.

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