**From RSS School Council – Omicron and The Recent Directive To Discontinue Covid Exposure Notifications At RSS**

**January 17, 2022**

**To the RSS School Community:**

RSS School Council shares concerns regarding the increased transmissibility of Omicron in Dawson and the recent directive from the ADM of Education to discontinue covid exposure notifications at our school.

Since early January we have been actively working with RSS Administration and TH Education with the collective goal of how to keep RSS as safe as possible during this time.

We have been actively seeking information and clarification.

We would like to share with you the information that we have gathered at this time.

**The decision to discontinue covid exposure notices for schools:**

We understand that due to the rapid spread of Omicron, the covid infection rate in Whitehorse has increased beyond the capacity to test all symptomatic people and therefore, in Whitehorse, low risk symptomatic people are no longer able to be tested or tracked which means that there is no longer the ability to issue specific covid exposure notices at Whitehorse schools in the way it was happening in the past. Therefore, in Whitehorse, moving to a surveillance system (where absentee rate due to illness is tracked) makes some sense.

However, this is not the case in Dawson. In Dawson covid testing of symptomatic people is still possible.

School Council is writing a letter to the Yukon Dept of Education ADM, DM, our Superintendent and our Klondike MLA requesting that, for this reason, covid exposure notifications at RSS be re-instated and continue for as long as it is feasibly possible to do so in Dawson.

We are also requesting that YG make N95 masks available to RSS staff and encouraging YG to make youth and adult sized N95 masks available for our students.

We are also requesting that YG make rapid home antigen testing available for RSS staff for those staff who wish to do regular asymptomatic screening, similar to what is happening at TH.

We are also requesting that at the next upgrade of the RSS mechanical ventilation system, that HEPA filters be included in the upgrade. This will not happen soon enough to help us now. But will hopefully make RSS better prepared in the future.

We will post this letter on our webpage once it has been sent.

**Testing:**

In Dawson (unlike Whitehorse) symptomatic people, even low-risk symptomatic people, can still get tested for covid.

* To book an appointment to get a PCR covid test in Dawson:
	+ Contact the Dawson Medical Clinic (993-5744) during daytime and the hospital (993-4444) after hours
* People who have access to rapid home antigen tests and test positive at home can call the Dawson Community Health Center to let them know their test result (993-4300)
* Note: This situation may change if our case numbers overwhelm our testing capacity in Dawson, as they have in Whitehorse. But for now, these measures remain in place.

**Daily ‘Official Covid Case Counts for Dawson’:**

“Mayor Bill Kendrick” facebook page is posting the daily “Official Dawson Covid Case Count” whenever he receives it from YG, which is often every evening Monday to Friday.

* We recognize that this may be an underestimate of the actual covid cases in town (due to some symptomatic people choosing not to get tested, and due to the fact that these numbers to not include positive home rapid antigen test results that are not confirmed with a PCR test)

However, because symptomatic people in Dawson can still get PCR tested, this number will still reflect a trend and it is the best information we have available to us in Dawson as the Yukon.ca website does not update Dawson numbers daily

**HEPA Filters:**

These are the air filters that can trap particles, including bacteria and some viruses, that are over a certain size. They are used in airplanes and in some schools and are thought to decrease the circulation and transmission of the covid virus.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to add HEPA filters to the RSS mechanical ventilation system. However, Property Management is actively ensuring that the air exchange ventilation at RSS is maximized daily based on what our system and the outside temperature can allow.

**Masks and Omicron:**

As you know, mask use is mandated at RSS including in the classroom. However, there are times when mask use is either not possible (i.e. during lunch) or when mask use is encouraged, but not mandated (i.e. during PE class or Open Gym). To minimize the risk of Omicron transmission at RSS, we encourage you to:

* Encourage your child to continue wearing their mask during indoor PE classes and Open Gym
* If your child is able to go home for lunch, encourage them to do so
* If your child must eat lunch at school, encourage them to eat as efficiently as possible, maintain as much distance from others as possible when their mask is off, and refrain from socializing with their classmates until they have finished eating and are able to wear their mask again. Same for school breakfasts and nutrition breaks.
* Encourage your child to wash their hands before and after eating lunch
* Encourage your child to wash their hands before and after using shared equipment such as balls during PE or Open Gym

All masks are not created equal:

* single layer cloth masks are NOT effective against Omicron
* 2 layer cloth masks can be effective IF they are washed daily and/or if they have a filter between the 2 layers of fabric
	+ Ray of Sunshine does carry these filters for cloth masks with pockets
	+ One type of Youth sized 3 layered cloth mask (includes a filter layer) is available here (adjustable strap fits around head rather than ears): <https://www.canadianshieldppe.ca/products/youth-reusable-cloth-face-mask>
* A 3 ply disposable medical-type mask can be effective
	+ These are available at Ray of Sunshine in both Adult and Youth sizes
	+ Adult sized are sometimes available at Pharmasave at the Dawson Hospital (as of Jan 16th, they are on backorder)
* **A cloth mask over a disposable 3 ply medical mask is more effective that either alone**
* **N95 masks are the most effective (95% effective if they fit well and are an approved N95)**. But there are lots of counterfeit N95’s on the market. Dawson retail stores and pharmacies cannot access N95 masks. They can be ordered online, but one has to be careful to make sure they are Health Canada or NIOSH approved. This can be time consuming.
	+ One type of Adult sized reputable N95 mask – elastics fit around your head (Approved by Health Canada and made in Canada) can be ordered here:
		- <https://www.steripro.ca/collections/n95/products/3m-1870-made-in-canada-individually-packed> 20 for $75, they ship from Ontario
	+ One type of Adult sized ASTM Level 3 mask – a 3 ply mask with elastics that fit around your ears. Not quite as good as an N95 but a close second. (Approved by Health Canada and made in Canada) can be ordered here:
		- <https://innolifecare.com/products/disposable-face-mask-white?variant=41447198949543> 50 for $36, they ship from Ontario
	+ Youth sized N95 masks are in high demand due to students returning to schools. (They may say ‘sold out’ but click on the link and you may find you can pre-order for shipping the end of January) Some sites for these include:
		- <https://canadastrongmasks.ca/search?q=kids&options%5Bprefix%5D=last>
		- <https://www.canadianshieldppe.ca/products/horizon-surgical-respirator-with-horizontal-fold> (Size small suitable for youth aged 9-14)

To check if an N95 mask is approved:

* By Health Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/covid19-industry/medical-devices/authorized/other.html>
* By NIOSH (if made in the USA): <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/N95list1-f.html>

To check for adequate mask fit (Note: at a minimum, it must fit over your mouth, nose and chin):

* <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/covid-19-mask-fit-properly.html>
* <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2018-130/pdfs/2018-130.pdf>

Re-using N95 masks:

According to recent Globe & Mail article from Jan 14, 2022:

“An American Journal of Infection Control [study](https://www.ajicjournal.org/article/S0196-6553%2821%2900741-0/fulltext) has found that N95 respirators can be safely reused after decontamination up to 25 times. Researchers found that the devices maintained their function and effectiveness on human subjects with up to 25 cycles of re-use.

Abraar Karan, an infectious-disease doctor at Stanford University who treats several COVID-19 patients a day, says a 10-pack of N95 respirators could be stretched to last more than three months for the average person. A person could wear a different one each day of the week and get up to 10 days out of each N95, he estimated.

The National Center for Biotechnology Information said a N95 or KN95 mask can be cleaned by steaming it in a microwave. Place 60 millilitres of water in a glass bowl, cover it with mesh such as a fruit or veggie produce bag, place the N95 mask on top of the mesh and microwave for three minutes.”

Note: staff at RSS currently have access to some N95 masks

**What to do if your child has symptoms, has covid or is a close contact of someone with covid:**

Note: In light of Omicron, RSS and the Dept of Education are encouraging children to stay home even if they have the mildest of new symptoms (the yellow symptoms in this link) <https://yukon.ca/en/health-and-wellness/covid-19-information/industry-operating-guidelines-covid-19/can-your-child-go>

What to do if your child has been diagnosed with covid:
<https://yukon.ca/en/what-do-if-you-get-positive-covid-19-test-result>

What to do if you or your child has been told they are a close contact with someone with covid:
<https://yukon.ca/en/what-do-if-youre-told-youre-close-contact>

If your child has symptoms, call the school (993-5435) or email Olivia.Croteau@yukon.ca AND Sonja.Stephenson@yukon.ca to let them know. If your child has been diagnosed with covid, you may let the school know this but you don’t have to let the school know this.

Contact your child’s teacher(s) by email to request work be sent home. Teachers have prepared for this and understand that more students will need to stay home with mild symptoms or with covid.

In other jurisdictions of Canada where school covid exposure notices have been discontinued, we understand that parents of a class are often deciding to communicate amongst themselves, via private facebook groups or in-person, to keep each other informed when their child has tested positive for covid.

**Rapid Home Antigen Covid Tests:**

Currently, neither Ray of Sunshine nor Pharmasave at the Dawson Hospital are able to access rapid antigen home tests for retail. (Although Ray of Sunshine plans to stock them as soon as they become available)

Reputable rapid antigen home covid test kits are difficult to find online from Canada.

If you do have access to a rapid antigen home covid test, it is important to remember that:

* one can be infectious with covid for a day or two before developing symptoms
* a positive home rapid test (even a very faint positive) means you likely have covid, even if you have no symptoms
* a negative home rapid test does not mean that you do not have covid
* a home rapid test is dependent on viral load, so one can test negative on a Sunday night, but positive on a Monday morning as their viral load increases
* anyone with symptoms, even mild new symptoms, should assume they have covid even if their home rapid test is negative
* in Dawson, symptomatic people can get PCR tested at the hospital
* if you have positive home rapid test you can call the Dawson Community Health Centre (993-4300) to let them know of your positive result

**Surveillance System**

YG Education has stated that it is moving to a “surveillance system” for tracking covid at schools. What this means is:

* schools daily report ‘absenteeism due to illness’ per class to their Superintendent. It will not be stated (or necessarily known) if the illness is covid or not
* if the absenteeism due to illness per class reaches a certain threshold, some action will be triggered. School Council is continuing to work to clarify what that threshold is and what action would be triggered

**Operational Disruptions to In-person Learning at RSS**

RSS Principal Brian Lewthwaite has let RSS families know what this means in a recent letter. To summarize, RSS currently has very few ‘Teachers on Call’ (TOC’s) or substitute teachers. Due to staff needing to remain home if they have any symptoms that could be covid, there may be times when certain classes need to move to remote learning due to staffing shortages. RSS is prepared for this. You will be contacted if this is the case and resources for remote learning for your child will be made available.

We hope this information is helpful.

Sincerely,
RSS School Council
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