



Ministerial Statement
To The House of Assembly
By
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Minister of Education

Ministerial Statement
School-Related COVID Update

Friday, February 18th, 2021

MR SPEAKER,

I want to take this time today to provide updates on some COVID Related School Matters as we prepare to return to school next week Monday. Some have questioned the policies currently in place. More specifically, there has been a growing misconception that there is some disparity between Public Schools and Private Schools guidelines. This cannot be further from the truth, as the policies in place for schools apply equally to both public and private schools. Today, I will provide the necessary information to clarify some of these misconceptions hopefully.

MR SPEAKER

The Return to School Testing

It has always been recommended that schools have policies in place to ensure that students return to school is done to ensure safety and limit the spread of COVID-19. As per the Bermuda Public School return to school policy established in October 2021, when students and staff are out of school for five days or longer, we require a negative certified antigen or PCR test as a prerequisite for the initial return to in-class teaching and learning. At that time, our private schools had already introduced a twice-weekly antigen testing regime and continued to use that program when returning from breaks.

MR SPEAKER

The Ministry and Department of Education have a responsibility to ensure the safety of our students and teachers and to keep schools open for in-class learning. When considering the return after the current break for the Public School System, the Department of Education devised three options for return to school testing.

- **Option 1** was identical to what we have always done and would have all students testing the weekend before the return on Monday, February 21

- **Option 2** presented a staggered start to the return from the break with all Pre and Primary schools testing on the weekend for a Monday, February 21 start, Middle Schools testing on Monday, February 21 for a Tuesday, February 22 start and Senior Schools testing on Tuesday, February 22 for a Wednesday, February 23 start. Both Middle and Senior schools will be on remote learning until their respective schools start.
- **Option 3** was to continue the Antigen screening program to allow for students to submit their results on Sunday night and start school on Monday, February 21

During the Education Emergency Measures Committee (EEMC) meeting held on February 4th, after consulting with our union partners, the BUT, BPSU and BIU, as well as MDL and Health representatives, they recommended, and it was unanimously agreed, that Option 2, a staggered return, would be the return to school procedure for Monday, February 21.

I wish to thank our stakeholders for their contribution to this decision, as I believe that everything begins with a conversation. Our collaboration with the EEMC members has resulted in a final decision that all parties have agreed on. MDL has already put together the schedule for testing that has been distributed to all parents and guardians. Again, I want to extend my appreciation to all of those who came forward to ensure we have a plan that would be in the best interest of our school's ecosystem.

MR SPEAKER

At Home Antigen Testing Program

There have been queries received from parents and guardians about why at-home antigen testing was not utilised this time around for the return to school testing for the Bermuda Public System. As I stated, this was a collective decision based on the current data around the antigen program and submissions by our stakeholders.

As a result of the then Omicron outbreak and its effects on MDL testing capabilities, returning to school in January was difficult. Additionally, the weekly saliva screening that was currently in place for students had to be replaced very quickly with an at-home Antigen screening program.

MR SPEAKER

While it was always intended for a pilot program to launch in January 2022 with ten schools, the difficulties with the Omicron outbreak forced the program to be expanded to all schools. While this program was very quickly assembled, critical feedback was received from parents, guardians, and staff via six zoom informational sessions tailored for parents and staff for each of our different school levels.

The features of the At-Home Antigen Testing Programme are:

- It is not mandatory, but all students and staff are encouraged to participate.
- Students and staff were provided with a supply of free antigen tests, which were generously donated to the Department of Education by ABIR, ABIC and BILTIR.
- The acceptance of antigen tests indicated an agreement to participate in the testing programme.
- Tests must be taken twice per week: once on Sunday evening and Wednesday evening.
- Each test result must be reported electronically using a link provided by the Department of Education.
- Positive results must immediately be reported directly to the school and the Department of Health by the parent of a COVID-positive student or by the COVID-positive staff member and not by the Department of Education.

MR SPEAKER

As we have entered the Mid-Term break, the antigen screening data received and the process of obtaining that data is being examined to determine the best way forward. This process will also allow us to improve the receipt of the data more efficiently. To date, I can announce that participation is not at the levels it was at with the saliva screening program, with all schools being over **80%** for the saliva screening. With the Antigen screening program showing a participation rate of approx. **57%** across all staff (**50%**) and students (**59%**) submitting forms twice-weekly, we need those families who are not reporting to do so to ensure the safety of our school families.

Starting with the return to school next week, the following are some of the things being worked on to be implemented:

- All Pre and Primary Schools will return to saliva weekly screening.
- The present antigen online form is being revamped and retooled to be more efficient and allow critical participation data to be more quickly analysed.
- PR campaigns around the need to participate and reminders to submit your results are being developed.

I want to thank those who have worked very hard to get this program up and running at such short notice. While not perfect, it has done an excellent job of doing what was intended and moving forward; I am confident we will see much more participation. I anticipate that by the time we return from the next term break, we will be at a level where these home antigen tests, which are distributed to all students and staff, will be used to report their twice-weekly results at levels that will facilitate using them to return to school.

MR SPEAKER

REVISED SCHOOL GUIDELINES

One of the major talking points of late is the guidelines placed in-within our schools, and if we will see any movement from where we are currently, that is in Phase 1. I have received many emails, WhatsApps and social media posts asking the same.

MR SPEAKER

Since my press conference on Wednesday, I have received many more emails with the common theme of essentially the need to remove all restrictions from schools altogether immediately. In these chambers and in the other place, Honourable Members, please realise that we will be there one day, but tomorrow is not that day. Two emails were particularly disturbing as they gave a glimpse into the mindset of some of our citizens and a lack of understanding that we are all in this together. The recurring theme of these more recent emails is demanding that there be separate guidelines put in place for Public and Private Schools

MR SPEAKER

I now quote excerpts from these emails. One of them had the following:

“...most private school students are ex-pats and don’t live in multi-generational households the DOH is trying to protect. You can’t put public schools and private schools in the same basket, as the demographics are different, the Union issues don’t exist...”

MR SPEAKER

A second email read as follows:

“...The Minister of National Security, Renee Ming, just said recently that children as young as eight years old are being recruited into gangs now. This is not surprising considering they’ve been in Bermuda Public Schools for the last two years of their lives since they were six years old. When you have had no consistent home or school environment for two years, the safety net and belonging of a gang is pretty enticing...”

MR SPEAKER

It saddens me to read comments like this, as it does highlight the 2 Bermuda mindsets some of our citizens harbour and perhaps only whisper when surrounded by like minds. Unfortunately, some in these chambers often dismiss this perspective when this side even raises that concept. For professionals working in our country, to think it was acceptable

to sit down at a computer and send emails essentially trying to claim that only a specific type of student can be found in the public school system is appalling. In any regard, I am confident mindsets like this will not disrupt or dissuade the majority of us from doing what is in the best interests of finding the right balance for our children, our educators and our country.

MR SPEAKER

As I stated, we are constantly looking to strike the right approach to maintaining the safety of our staff and students, with the ultimate goal of keeping schools open for in-class learning. We may not always agree, and we may not always even get it right, but the decisions made are made with the best interests of our students, educators, and the island as a whole in mind. While the decisions may be difficult, it remains my intention and the intention of this Government to provide a safe in-school experience for our students and staff.

MR SPEAKER

As a parent of a student in the Public School System and as the Minister, I am excited about the discussions currently taking place to examine what life with COVID inside our schools can look like. We want our children to have an educational experience that we expect them to have. Things like sports days with parents cheering them on, graduations, field trips, assemblies, end of school celebrations, inter-school sports events and school photographs, to name a few, will be returning soon. In the EEMC meeting held on Wednesday, February 16th, we discussed revising the current phases with most things that are currently not allowed to get going in our schools being allowed to take place. However, it is essential to note that the shift also will come with caveats.

MR SPEAKER

It is aimed to have these revised phases connected to individual school levels of adherence guidelines such as weekly screening, any revised mask-wearing mandates and vaccination levels, to name a few. I was excited for the enthusiasm around the table at the EEMC meeting to embrace this movement to, school as usual, for those schools and school families who demonstrate they are doing all they can to protect our students and staff. I am sure those listening will be excited to know that our schools will soon be looking at how they operate beyond COVID-19.

MR SPEAKER

Barring any more COVID outbreaks, beloved activities such as sports days with parents cheering their children on, inter-schools sports events, graduations and leaving ceremonies, in-class birthday parties, school events and productions, class photographs,

to name a few, will be returning in the near future. Possibly as soon as next week. I can report that the BSSF and Youth and Sport are already collaborating to bring sports events between schools back using the developed guidelines for the return to sports.

MR SPEAKER

CLOSE CONTACT QUARANTINE POLICY

The current requirement for close contacts of positive students to quarantine is also to be revised. It is being proposed that vaccinated students, recently recovered positive students, and unvaccinated students who participate in the twice-weekly antigen or weekly saliva screening programs will not be required to quarantine if considered a close contact to a positive student. This represents a move forward from the previous policy requiring all close contacts to quarantine. Additionally, students or staff testing positive will now quarantine for seven days instead of 10 days to align with the island's current revised quarantine policy. Again, there was enthusiasm for this when discussed in the last EEMC meeting. Discussions are underway on the best ways to implement this at the school level as efficiently and quickly as possible to ensure proper monitoring.

MR SPEAKER

MASK-WEARING POLICIES

There has been much discussion around mask-wearing in our schools. It is possible to search the internet and find a study that supports anyone's view on the topic. The number of emails received linked to studies from the mainstream to the fringe has been incredible. The facts remain, **MR SPEAKER**, the use of masks limits the spread of coronavirus. Our goal to keep schools open not only aids our students in their learning but also aids our parents in their ability to work. There has to be a delicate balance struck, and sorry to disappoint those who sent the emails claiming "...most private school students are ex-pats..." as if these facts do not apply to them. If teachers are positive, they will have to quarantine. If enough teachers are positive and on quarantine, schools cannot open. Then we are back to square one. Regardless of if the school is Public or Private, these facts remain. Without teachers, schools will be forced to close. Therefore parameters such as vaccination uptake and participation in the screening programs have to weigh into these conversations.

MR SPEAKER

I can announce that while we are in the midst of reviewing the mask-wearing guidelines, as of Monday, Feb 21, all schools will be able to revert to the mask-wearing policy of Phase 2. That is, only students from p4 up will be required to wear masks in classrooms. Some will ask why only those younger grades and not everyone else. It was recognised

the critical nature of our younger students learning requiring them to see mouth movement. As I stated, the mask-wearing mandate is currently being reviewed and will be revised as necessary moving forward which should lead to less mask-wearing in certain situations. Additionally, we will continue to listen to suggestions from our parents and incorporate those into moving forward.

MR SPEAKER

MOVING FORWARD

As the country moves towards living with COVID, there will continue to be precautions and guidelines that are necessary to remain in place to keep our schools safe and open. Even though COVID19 remains a relatively mild illness for most children, we cannot pretend it doesn't exist or has no impact on their long term health. We must also be cognizant of the devastating effects on the ability of a school to operate as intended if too many positive test results are detected.

We will always be dependent on our dedicated staff and our families at our schools to ensure protocols are adhered to, and I thank them for their continued efforts as we begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Their sacrifices are not in vain, and our desire to keep our schools safe and open for in-class learning will always be our goal, and with their continued support, we will keep our school doors open.

Thank you

MR SPEAKER