



No more gold stars for perfect school attendance. If you've got the sniffles, just stay home

By [May Warren](#) Staff Reporter

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Dr. Anna Banerji knows how tempting it can be to send kids into the classroom with a runny nose or a little cough.

"I get it," said the Toronto infectious diseases pediatrician and parent. "You're breathing, you're not throwing up. Take some Advil and go to school."

A lack of child care and a culture that praises perfect attendance made toughing it out, from kindergarten on, the norm in a pre-COVID world.

But those days are over. The threat of outbreaks looms over this September, especially as nearly two-thirds of GTA families plan to send kids back to in-person learning. A student with even one minor symptom — from a sore throat to an upset stomach — could jeopardize an entire school. A new zero-tolerance regime will mean many more absences and huge challenges for families as they try to navigate the shift. But it could also bring some unexpected silver linings if school boards, and employers, can be flexible.

Keeping kids with symptoms home is "the most important thing for parents to do," said Banerji. Children often have no signs of COVID-19 or only mild ones, and there's now a long laundry list of them.

If they have an existing issue, like allergies or eczema, that's one thing. "But if it's something new, and the child is saying that they have a sore throat or a parent notices a runny nose, then it could be COVID, no matter how minor."

If a coronavirus test is negative, Banerji still recommends keeping kids home for a week from the onset of symptoms, which she recognizes is "not easy" for some parents. She also suggests getting the flu shot.

The province's plan for reopening schools outlines how some of this new reality will work. All staff and students must "self-screen" every morning. School boards should provide parents with a checklist of COVID-19 symptoms to do this. If a kid or teacher has even one symptom, they must stay home and get tested. If they are positive, they have to stay in isolation at home and follow local health unit advice.

The reopening plan notes that if someone gets sick at school, they will be taken to a special "isolation room" to wait until they can be taken home. These rooms — which could be a spare classroom or health room — will have personal protective equipment and be cleaned after each use.

Asked for details on the plan for monitoring health in schools, Ministry of Education spokesperson Ingrid E. Anderson responded in an email that the "evidence is emerging and our plan is a living document — it's meant to be augmented and adapted to apply the best advice as it emerges."

Boards have already been expanding on the provincial guidelines in their own documents, providing a glimpse of how things will work day to day. At the Toronto District School Board, for example, there will be a "second screening" conducted when students and staff arrive at schools, according to its return-to-school guide.

Before the first day of school, all TDSB staff will get a full day of health and safety training that will include information on screening and symptoms of COVID-19.

Staff or students with a confirmed case can come back to school 14 days after symptoms appear so long as they are "mostly gone." No clearance letter or additional test is needed. The TDSB will track attendance and alert Toronto Public Health to "large increases in absenteeism due to illness."

TDSB spokesperson Ryan Bird said his board is still working out details, taking the lead from Toronto Public Health.

The public health unit announced last week it will dedicate a team of 70 nurses to schools in the city, on the heels of the provincial announcement to spend \$50 million to hire 500 for school reopenings across Ontario.

"The (Toronto nurses) will work in liaison and outbreak management roles to guide schools in COVID-19 prevention measures, mental health and well-being promotion and other public health advice to limit opportunities for virus spread in schools," said Dr. Vinita Dubey, associate medical officer of health. "They will also conduct outbreak management, case investigations and contact tracing when a case develops in a school."

With almost 800 public and Catholic schools in Toronto, there will be about one nurse for every 11 schools.

However, Dubey said isolation rooms will be staffed by schools.

Asked who would do the secondary screenings, she said the province is developing guidance that will be released shortly for schools and public health on the specific roles for each organization.

It's not clear whether entire classes will be sent home if kids test positive, or at what point a school could be shut down. Dubey told the Star last week health units are also still waiting for guidance from the province on those questions.

In Peel, the message that “a safe school is always more important than a perfect attendance record” is a tag line for the reopening plan. Public board spokesperson Kayla Tishcoff said parents must use the Ontario COVID-19 self-assessment online tool every morning.

“When in doubt, families should take extra care and keep their child home from school, including if they have a runny nose or upset stomach,” she said.

Students won't be penalized if they are absent.

If they show a symptom, they will be taken to a room where they can be isolated until a family member comes to pick them up. Schools will identify rooms for this purpose, preferably near an exit, according to Tishcoff. Each room will be supervised by a Peel staff member, who will keep two metres away from the student.

Peel's back-to-school plan indicates these rooms will have PPE kits with hand sanitizer, a gown, gloves, eye protection and surgical masks. All the rooms used for isolation will be cleaned and disinfected as soon as students have left, and signs will indicate if a room is available and has been cleaned.

After a positive case, Peel Public Health will help with contact tracing and may recommend closing a class, a section of a class or the entire school, depending on the situation, the plan adds.

If a secondary school student is sent home but still feels up to studying, they “may be able to access some remote learning while at home,” Tishcoff said. However, the board doesn't plan to offer elementary students the option of dipping into virtual classes when they are home quarantined.

That's something school boards should do, said Alexandra Bal, an associate professor in new media at Ryerson University, because many kids are going to have to stay home without actually being too sick to learn.

The emerging science has shown that children are more likely to have mild or asymptomatic cases of COVID.

There will be a domino effect of absenteeism, “unless both parents and children are allowed to work from home,” said Bal.

Schools are going to need to embrace “blended learning,” letting kids participate in group digital activities from home, for example, or recording classes so they can watch from home. There's some of this flexibility for older kids already. But for younger ones it's still more of an all-or-nothing approach.

“I think they’re missing the fact that yes, indeed, attendance is going to be a huge issue,” Bal said. “And how are they going to support parents?”

The guidance from the Toronto and Peel public boards doesn’t address what parents should do if they can’t stay home from work to be with their kids. Neither does the plan from the province.

A recent report from the Decent Work and Health Network found 70 per cent of low-wage workers don’t have paid sick days, its authors warning of a “public health hazard” that will result in children with COVID showing up in classrooms.

It’s going to be very tricky to implement some other aspects of the back-to-school plan, especially with little kids, said Bal — like the on-site isolation rooms, which sound to her “like jail.”

And “not having a backup plan for the students who will be absent is going to be kind of problematic,” she said, as they will just start falling behind.

But with the right funding from the province for a blended approach, the system could move toward a model that values learning outcomes instead of bodies in seats.

“The entire society’s going to have to transition,” said Bal. “And hopefully schools will adapt to that.”

It’s all part of a shift toward being engaged rather than being physically present, said Glenda Carleton, president of the Ontario Association for Counselling and Attendance Services.

“I don’t think it’s about physically being in attendance. I think we should look at it more from the lens of being present and what does that look like,” she said over the phone from Thunder Bay, where she’s an attendance counsellor.

Assuming each student can be present every day was “not equitable” even pre-COVID, as some students were dealing with issues beyond their control, like addictions, mental health or poverty.

The educational regulations that state students need to be in attendance from age six to 16 still stand, “but how we view that definitely has to change given the climate that we’re in right now,” she said.

This will be an enormous challenge for parents who can’t work from home, especially single parents, said Nikki Martyn, program head of early childhood studies at the University of Guelph-Humber. And the lack of detailed information, and changing plans for the return to school, just make things tougher.

“Part of the reason we historically have gotten to this place is because of child care,” she said. “People who can’t take the day off, what are their kids going to do?”

She agrees with Bal that students at home should be able to dip into an online format.

But she believes, in the long term, this shift away from gold stars for perfect attendance might actually be a change for the better. And not just for public health.

“This might be part of the silver linings that come out of COVID,” she said.

There’s long been a “stigma” around kids taking a day off, “and this push of, well everybody’s sick sometimes, it’s just a cold, it will be fine.”

Encouraging kids to check in and be more aware of their own health will teach them how to communicate their own best interests, she added.

It may even create more room to take, for example, mental health days, and children will develop resilience from adapting to changing situations.

Sick students staying home will help their classrooms and communities stay well.

“But it would be nice if we could teach kids that they too are really important and worth it,” Martyn said.

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