

Staff shortages have Regina Public scrambling, high schools go online temporarily

Regina Public's eight high schools will be moved to online learning from Jan. 20 to Jan. 24 inclusive.

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Jeff Perry, president of the Regina Public Schools Teachers' Association, stands outside the association's office on Hillside Street in Regina, Saskatchewan on April 29, 2021. PHOTO BY BRANDON HARDER /Regina Leader-Post

Jeff Perry knows of more than 40 teachers who were self-isolating with COVID-19 last week, creating what he called “significant shortages” of staff within Regina Public Schools (RPS).

As president of the Regina Public Schools Teacher Association, Perry struggled to find words to describe the messages he has received from teachers in the last week. Frustration, exhaustion and anxiety topped his list.

“Teachers feel a lot like they’ve been ignored with the mandate of the government to keep schools open. They feel like they’ve been put in harm’s way and so have their students,” he said.

There were 526 self-reported COVID-19 cases across RPS last week, according to a letter from education director Greg Enion sent home to all school families on Monday. Those cases included 53 school staff. Seven classrooms had been moved to remote learning.

That letter also warned school families staffing shortages may result in some schools moving online over the coming weeks.

“I’m sharing this information with you to make families aware that, on short notice, we may have to make changes to in-class learning. We want school families to be prepared for the contingency of remote learning,” the letter said.

On Tuesday, the division announced its eight high schools would be moving to online learning from Jan. 20 to Jan. 24 inclusive in the hopes of reducing COVID-19’s impact on students’ final assessments and exams as their semester draws to a close.

No one from Regina Catholic Schools was available for comment Tuesday when asked about its plans in light of the changes at Regina Public.

A letter sent home to Campbell Collegiate families signed by principal Nancy Buisson outlined several reasons for the move to temporary remote learning. These reasons included ensuring teachers are available to do final assessments with students without disruptions from illness or self-isolation and to minimize exposure ahead of final exams. In-school final exams are expected to go ahead as planned, beginning on Jan. 25.

This will also free up substitute teachers who normally work in high schools to fill gaps in elementary schools.

“This temporary shift allows the school division to redeploy substitute staff to other schools that may experience staffing shortages and will further minimize disruption for all students,” Buisson said in the letter. A similar letter was sent to all high school families.

Perry was unsure if redeploying high school substitute teachers would have a large impact on elementary school staffing challenges.

He said librarians and administrators have already been pulled in to teach. Specialty classes have been cancelled so those teachers can lead regular classes. Teachers are losing their prep time to cover for self-isolating colleagues, leaving larger workloads to take home at the end of the day.

Some teachers are also reporting high numbers of students absent, with one teacher telling Perry they had just eight students in class on Monday. He said many students are self-isolating and more parents are pulling their kids out of school as a precaution.

RPS reported Tuesday afternoon another seven elementary classrooms had been moved to online learning temporarily due to high numbers of COVID-19 cases.

“Divisions are looking at things daily. Where are we at and what do we need to do next to try and keep the schools open? And it probably feels a lot to them like they’re fighting a losing battle,” said Perry.

“There’s a lot of things that we’ve been asking for for a very long time in this pandemic, and I think the problem is they’ve just fallen on deaf ears for the most part from the government.”

Kevin Gable, executive director of the Ministry of Education’s programs branch, said the provincial government continues to believe in-class learning needs to continue “as normally and safely as possible.”

“We believe that the measures that are currently in place will support the continuation of in-class learning, but we are aware that there will be disruptions due to COVID due to staff absences,” Gable told reporters during a COVID-19 media briefing on Tuesday.