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From The Kingston Whig Standard: Mother says closing schools in Kingston 'just not warranted'

Article and Photo by [Meghan Balogh](#) /The Whig-Standard

Originally published on January 15, 2021

A Kingston woman has crafted an open letter and petition to Ontario Premier Doug Ford and other government officials after the government announced it would be extending elementary school closures for an additional two weeks during provincewide COVID-19 lockdown measures.

Those closures have been extended even further for some portions of the province, following Ontario's second declared state of emergency, announced on Tuesday.

Lia De Pauw is a single mother of two small children who believes school closures do more harm than good when it comes to the well-being of youth.

The petition begins with a letter on behalf of parents and caregivers who are “strongly opposed to universal closures of schools” and who view the closures as “intervention theatre that is not based on evidence.”

Launched over the weekend and signed by more than 3,100 individuals as of Wednesday afternoon, the petition requested that elementary schools reopen on Jan. 11 as had been planned — a date that has come and gone.

De Pauw outlines some of the reasons she believes shutting down schools will have a greater negative impact on children's lives than the potential risk of exposure to COVID-19 should schools remain open.

De Pauw claims that "schools are not driving transmission of the virus," pointing instead to adults in the community as the drivers of the rise in case numbers.

Low COVID-19 transmission rates in different parts of Ontario and differences in rates of spread among specific neighbourhoods call, De Pauw believes, for a regional approach in partnership with local health units, where schools with outbreaks or within communities experiencing "unsafe community spread" of the virus be targeted with closures.

"Public health has obligations to protect and promote children's health beyond COVID-19, including healthy growth and development, mental health and life promotion," De Pauw said in her letter.

"School closures hurt children and their families. The impacts of these harms will reverberate across this generation of children's lifetime."

De Pauw's letter and petition, which can be viewed online [here](#), said school closures are "intensifying education inequities and cut the most vulnerable children off from essential supports."

She also claims that "forced virtual learning" is increasing the risk of COVID-19 exposure and impacting the economy, the health system and women's rights.

In an interview with the Whig-Standard, De Pauw said she has witnessed her six-year-old son's mental health decline sharply during the transition from in-school to virtual learning.

Having positive, in-person relationships with teachers and classmates is part of a social support system that's important for both her son's well-being and for her own, she described.

"What I see a lot of going on are people calling for schools to be closed because they think schools are the problem," she said. "But what's happening in schools is a reflection of what's happening in communities."

According to provincial government's COVID-19 data, there have been a total of 7,315 cases of COVID-19 linked to Ontario schools since Sept. 5 — 5,133 of those in students and 1,093 in staff, with another 1,089 cases in "individuals not identified."

The number is a relatively small one in comparison to the nearly 225,000 positive COVID-19 cases that have been recorded in Ontario since Jan. 15, 2020.

To date, a total of 56 outbreaks have been declared in provincial elementary, secondary and combined kindergarten to Grade 12 schools.

In the Kingston region, two school outbreaks have been declared to date — two cases at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School led to an outbreak being declared on Nov. 12 and three cases at Ecole Catholique Cathedrale saw an outbreak declared on Dec. 19.

A number of other regional schools have reported isolated instances of COVID-19 in students or staff that were not contracted in the school setting.

"I think the government needs some different markers and to understand our schools here, and our community here, is much safer than what's going on in the (Greater Toronto Area)," De Pauw said. "We should only be harming children with school closures when there's absolutely no other choice. Here, it's just not warranted."

Dr. Tess Clifford is a psychologist and the director of the psychology clinic at Queen's University, where she works with children and youth and their families on a regular basis, in tandem with community mental health agencies. She has a strong interest in early childhood mental health and health promotion.

"I think we already know that the impact of the pandemic, and previous school closures, is associated with a serious mental health crisis across our community," Clifford told the Whig-Standard in an interview. "That includes children and youth, and I'm really worried that people won't be nearly as resilient as they were in the last lockdown, through the last school closures particularly. If this continues on, I'm really worried about the long-term impacts for children and youth and their families."

Impacts that Clifford is already seeing in the people she works with include children being more irritable with higher anxiety, behavioural outbursts that are difficult to manage.

"We don't know exactly what the long-term impacts are going to be from this specific situation, but we do know that living through chronic stress has huge impacts on children's development and well-being and health in the long term," she said. "I would call this chronic stress. I don't think there's any doubt that there are many children who are going to be really impacted by this. It will affect their long term."

Clifford said that while many kids are resilient, the potential impacts of prolonged disruption of education, socialization and access to resources aren't being acknowledged by lawmakers. Taking those potential impacts into consideration will save time and resources in the future, when mental health interventions, the "last stop" in the process, Clifford described, might become necessary.

"I don't think we as a body of decision-makers is really thinking about the role we can play in prevention and mental health promotion," she said.

"We have opportunities to reduce stressors earlier so that they don't have such a long-term impact, so that they don't need that level of intervention. I think we need to spend more time thinking about how we can balance the risks to children's health, that include the risk of COVID and the risk of COVID in our community, but that also needs to include long-term mental health and health risks."

Clifford was lobbying the government in the fall about the creation of a strategic plan for communities to begin thinking about ways of preventing mental health decline.

"There's really no funding right now around planning for or supporting long-term plans for mitigation of stressors for children and youth," she said.

Clifford has two children, ages four and seven, who she said are "struggling through" the experience of first school shutdowns in the spring, and now a transition to virtual learning. Being in school this fall was having a big impact on their well-being, Clifford said. Now the family is struggling through figuring out a schedule that provides the right amount of social contact, learning and opportunities for down time and relaxing.

“The fact that the young children of a psychologist in a two-earner, well-educated family with low risk of COVID and all the resources in the world are struggling is a sign that there’s no one who is safe from this,” she said. “There’s no one who is not being impacted by this.”

Clifford acknowledged the hard work of teachers and the tough situation that parents are finding themselves in navigating the current situation.

“(Teachers) are being asked to do something that is impossible, and so are parents,” she said.

“I think the government needs to backtrack and not make blanket decisions that affect everyone in the province the same way. I think that they need to use local evidence and local data in order to make decisions, and that decisions need to be based in evidence and not fear.

“I think that we need to be thinking about what we are doing to mitigate the impact of these decisions on the long-term well-being of children. That means not expecting families to buffer all that stress alone. It’s not something that can be done, especially when we know how adults are being affected right now.”

The Kingston region’s medical officer of health addressed school closures in a news release on Wednesday in a written statement. He described current at-home learning situation as one that is a temporary, preventative measure that will ideally lead to schools that can be open for the rest of the year.

“I recognize the importance education, routine and socialization to the health and well-being of students. Continued efforts to practise preventative measures will contribute to a successful reopening of local schools once provincial restrictions are lifted.”

The province will reassess schools reopening in the Kingston region on Jan. 20.

In a written statement provided by Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox and Addington Public Health on Wednesday, Susan Stewart, the director for local public health’s Family and Community Health Division, said school closures, hygiene routines and general COVID-19 information and uncertainty can be “anxiety-provoking for children and youth.”

She pointed people to local public health’s website for access to local resources for mental health support.

“KFL&A Public Health shares parents’ and our communities’ concern about the impact of COVID on children’s mental health,” Stewart said in her statement. “The seriousness of COVID-19 demands a strong public health response, and we need to be mindful of the impact of these measures on children, youth and families. While we can’t speak for the school boards, there is regular outreach to families about mental health supports for students. Everyone in our community must work together to find innovative and collaborative means to support the mental health of children and youth at this time.”

[Read the original Kingston Whig Standard story here](#)