

Mom criticizes lack of warnings as son suspended

By Jasen Obermeyer

The mother of one of 191 Orangeville students who were suspended last Thursday for failure to update their immunization records says she wasn't warned of the suspension until the day before it took effect.

Asserting that there was a gap somewhere in the notification process, Jessica Laker said she was not expecting her child to bring home a letter of the pending suspension, especially the day before.

The letter her son had sent home on Tuesday, Jan. 30, stated that the Grade 1 student at Princess Elizabeth Public School would be suspended the following day because his immunization records had not been updated with Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH).

Ms. Laker's son was one of 316 Dufferin County students suspended from non-updated immunization records, with 191 in Orangeville, 82 in Shelburne, 20 in Mulmur, 13 in Grand Valley, and 10 in Mono, while the suspensions in all Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph schools totalled 2000 students.

Ontario's Immunization for School Pupils Act requires students to be vaccinated against measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, polio, meningitis and whooping cough. All children born after 2010 or later also need to be vaccinated for chickenpox.

In an interview with the Citizen, Ms. Laker said her son's immunization records were up to date, but when she contacted WDGPH, the record hadn't been entered into the system. When asked for a record of the letter or for a phone call, none was found that either had been made.

"I do know some people who got letters, so I might have been a rarity in the system that the letter didn't get to my house."

Although her son was suspended for only one day, and she took him to her work, Ms. Laker said it was a very stressful and difficult day.

She explained that she got her doctor to send the record to WDGPH, and personally went to the office to get the clearance for her son to go back to school the following day.

Ms. Laker pointed out that the schools had the opportunity to communicate the notice, and have known about it since November, and should take more ownership. "How often are parents involved with talking to public health? How are you expecting parents to just know?"

She said there is a gap somewhere in the system, and a lack of communication with the schools and public health, the former she suggested should go out of their way and be proactive instead of doing the minimum.

Ms. Laker acknowledged that probably some parents represent a fraction of those who truly didn't get their children's immunization records updated, but there shouldn't be that many (2000) who are not aware.

She noted that some doctors took the initiative to notify public health, but others didn't, but the province is currently working toward making doctors responsible.

Ms. Laker suggested that since immunization is a requirement, the schools should communicate it more, including sending it as part of the package with various forms the parents sign at the beginning of the school year. "They give some fair warning, the number would have greatly decreased."

She added this also impacted her son, who understands the word suspension, and thought he had done something wrong.

Ms. Laker said she is not done though, and is currently dealing with the Upper Grand board.

Chuck Ferguson, communications officer for WDG Public Health, said that as of Wednesday parents of only 139 of the more than 2,000 suspended students had not provided the required updates. The number of students still suspended were 45 in Dufferin, 60 in Guelph and 34 in Wellington.

Mr. Ferguson said the numbers could include cases where the students have not, in fact, been immunized for one reason or another, and parents who have refused to have their children inoculated for religious or other reasons will have to apply to the health unit for exemption a process that will take more than a few days.