

Rolling the dice with kids? lives

by SHERALYN ROMAN

When you read a headline like this, cold and stark, it grabs your attention. Perhaps you're thinking "Now what is she talking about?" or "That's pretty inflammatory." But is it? Maybe we need to think of the current back to school plan in such frank terms in order to get the message across that in fact, to some degree, rolling the dice with our children's lives at stake is exactly what we are doing right now. With Sick Kids making a clear statement to the public that their original recommendations are not being followed and that they are now "too little too late" conducting a study in the coming days on how the virus might spread in the classroom, I think we are right to question just how sound the Ontario government's return to school plan really is. Are we rolling the dice? What kind of odds would a Vegas casino give us on what percentage of children might catch COVID-19, or at the very least, bring it back home to their families?

We have already seen examples in the US of schools that reopened with crowded hallways, limited mask use and zero social distancing. In one Georgia high school it took only a matter of days for nine cases of COVID to be reported and the school to be shut down for 14 days of quarantine. Who knows what the exponential spread of those 9 cases will be? I do realize of course that the US is in a free-fall when it comes to the virus and that, unlike there, mask wearing will be mandatory here at home "but let's not forget, that's only for children Grade four and up. While there is some evidence children may not get the virus at the same rate as adults, there are mounting concerns they can transmit it. I believe we are betting against the house, risking it all on a roll of the dice.

We must also not forget that while COVID-19 is bad enough, there are other risks to children, including the rare but known occurrence of Multi-System Inflammatory Syndrome, a condition similar to Kawasaki Disease that appears to be caused by COVID-19. It can lead to enlargement of blood vessels, possible organ failure and potential heart problems. Again, it's rare and most health experts caution against raising alarm bells but how much of a gambler are you? With large numbers of a particularly vulnerable age group (young children) returning to school without the requirement to wear a mask, will we start to see an increase in MIS-C?

There are so many variables at play. In keeping with the gambling analogy, I have to wonder how, with all of the unknowns, anyone can make an informed decision, based on the odds, about how to proceed. We haven't even spoken about riding the bus to and from school yet. Surveys have gone out to parents asking them to commit to whether their child(ren) will attend school, engage in online learning or be removed from the school system altogether and home-schooled instead. If parents choose not to send their kids to school, they are agreeing to do so until February at a minimum. A lot can happen (as we have clearly already experienced!) in six months and making such a decision now is committing a family to a course of action that may not fit their needs in 3 months time. It's also asking the school board to commit teaching and online resources and staffing both accordingly. By the same token, agreeing to send your child to school is also contracting with the school board to hire an appropriate number of teachers, plan for class sizes the best they can, based on the "known" number of students who plan on returning and then what? One case of COVID causes panic, parents pull children out of school, suddenly class sizes are significantly smaller and now schools are overstaffed? Do we lay off teachers? Do we combine classrooms and/or grades because after all, in elementary school there is no cap on class size as there is in high school? What happens if a combined class contains both grade 3 and 4 students; does half the class wear a mask while the other half doesn't? What happens if it's a Teacher who tests positive? Is the entire class in quarantine? If the child from that class has an older sibling "is that class now also in quarantine? So many questions. Roll the dice and let the chips fall where they may.

This is too important an issue to gamble on. We need to hear more from our government on how they plan to assist school boards with class sizes, protecting staff, protecting students and what will happen if there is a mass exodus of kids after just a few weeks of school. We've heard from many parents (both those who have the flexibility and those who don't but are equally as worried) that they'll send the kids to school but monitor the situation and pull them out at the first hint of danger. Of the parents who choose online learning and this virus by some miracle goes away, what then? Too bad kiddos "you're stuck at home until February. Might it have been better to wait just a bit longer? Universities and Colleges, in large part, have cancelled in person classes for the entire first semester.

This means it will be January at the earliest before those students return to school in-person. Might it not have been better to do the same at the elementary and high school level ? knowing that yes there would be hardships but families could have spent the summer planning for them accordingly. Instead I fear a ?Stop/Start? scenario where, because of the fluid nature of the virus and the number of unanswered questions like those posed here, school will start, school will stop, some families will send kids to school and others will stop sending their kids and the stability that we are all seeking will simply not exist. These are odds that most gamblers would shy away from I'm sure. We're rolling the dice but it's our children's lives that are at stake.