**Letter for Branch Chair to Principal over “exemption” application and the use of RATs**.

Dear Principal

I write in my role as Branch Chair to open a line of communication regarding the potential need for the school to apply for an exemption under the Ministry of Education’s Close Contact Exemption Scheme. We understand that an application may occur should the Covid outbreak result in significant staffing shortages leaving the school being unable to provide onsite education for those students who need to attend kura.

We are keen to engage with you on any need for our school take up this system. We would like to be able to support such a move when it is needed while also considering the health and safety of both Teachers and Students. The PPTA Branch would appreciate being part of such significant decisions and have clear communications on the steps leading to it and the requests that may be made of them.

Our understanding of the exemption scheme and the use of RATs is based on the information provided in the Ministry of Education bulletins sent to schools.

The Feb 22nd bulletin states:

* *Rapid antigen tests* ***should only be used as a last resort*** *where all teachers and staff are required to isolate and there isn’t a suitable person who can supervise children onsite.*
* *The close contact exemption scheme is accessible in instances there are insufficient staff available to come onsite to supervise the children of those who are unable to have them at home.   
  As such, you must first consider other suitable options before accessing the close contact exemption scheme and ensure a range of health measures (outlined below) are also in place.  
     
  Other options may include:* 
  + *using relief teachers*
  + *using unregistered teachers who hold a Limited Authority to Teach (LAT)*
  + *non-teaching staff providing supervision for distance learning*
  + *rearranging classes or timetables.*
* *We also encourage you to contact parents and caregivers to determine how many children must attend (no evidence required) and other care options that may be available to them –* ***the scheme is not intended to enable the attendance of all children****.*

The 1st March bulletin reminds us:

* *If you test positive for COVID-19, everyone else in your household becomes a household contact and you need to isolate together for at least 10 days.*

The 3rd March bulletin reminds us:

* *Any household contacts of the positive case must also isolate for 10 days and take tests on day three and 10 of the case’s isolation period.  
     
  If a household contact tests negative on day three and day 10 and is symptom free, they can* ***return to school on day 11****.*
* *As in our bulletin on 22 February, we have been allocated a supply of rapid antigen tests (RATs) to support the close contact exemption scheme.*
* *If you are seeking exemptions for one or more of your staff, RATs are available through our Te Mahau offices – please do not approach the Ministry of Health.*
* *To make sure you’re eligible for RATs under the scheme, please complete this checklist.*
* *Rapid antigen tests should only be used as a last resort, where you otherwise wouldn’t have enough people available onsite to supervise children who need to be there.*

We note the Government change to the isolation period was announced on 9th March to take effect on the 12th March, reduces the isolation period to 7 days with a return on the 8th.

We would like to ensure that should a teacher be requested to undertake RATs testing when identified as a close contact that this would only be done under the Exemption scheme and therefore only when there is a clear demonstrable need for the teacher to be on site.

In order to support any need for the school to enact this I would like to set up a meeting to discuss what planning has or is taking place around alternatives for our school should staffing come under pressure and at what point we would move into using RATs.

I look forward to hearing from you with a suitable time to meet.

In Solidarity

Branch Chair