

Response to Alberta Education

Regarding

The Alberta Education *2020–21 School Re-Entry Plan*



The Alberta Teachers' Association

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Introduction

The Alberta Teachers' Association (the Association) is pleased to continue to provide feedback on the developing novel coronavirus (COVID-19) situation in Alberta. This response has been informed by our extensive work with teachers and school leaders during this crisis, including an emergent provincial pandemic study and work with a network of professionals in such fields as medicine, psychology and law.

The Association has been leading many aspects of the COVID-19 response in the kindergarten to Grade 12 (K–12) public education system. In particular, the Association developed questions and answers (Q&A) regarding the many challenges faced in schools. This Q&A, posted on the Association website, continues to be used as a resource by many school jurisdictions in the province. Further, in partnership with Harvard Medical School and practising pediatricians at Boston Children's Hospital, the Association developed a conversation guide entitled *Talking to Kids About Coronavirus (COVID-19)*. This guide and accompanying videos were distributed to all school division superintendents and school council chairs by the College of Alberta School Superintendents and the Alberta School Councils' Association.

In addition, the Association launched an emergent provincial teacher and school leader research study on the pandemic to understand the effects of COVID-19 on the K–12 education system. The random stratified sample of teachers and school leaders in this study resulted in a highly representative response across the province. With more than 8,000 responses and tens of thousands of qualitative comments, which are being analyzed by a team of researchers from the University of Alberta and the Association, key themes have been identified. This Alberta survey instrument has now been adopted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation as a pan-Canadian research project.

One of the aspects researched in this provincial study was Alberta teachers' perceptions of a return to public school buildings. The survey has yielded more than sufficient data to have high confidence on the key issues, concerns and questions of teachers and school leaders across Alberta.

Three dominant themes emerged from this large-scale provincial study regarding a return to public school buildings:

1. **Issues and Concerns of School and Teacher Safety**—adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), maintaining physical distancing measures, large class sizes and COVID-19 safety protocols, school cleanliness, managing substitute teaching and teacher illness, etc
2. **Overall Student Readiness to Learn (Curriculum and Assessment)**—student motivation, equity, curricular development following emergency remote instruction, assessment challenges, student skill development, child and youth poverty, vulnerable youth, etc

3. **Mental Health and Trauma Supports (Teacher, Student and School Community)**— Overall psychosocial and physiological well-being; mental health supports for students, teachers, school leaders, school staff, parents and school community; etc

These themes will be explicated further in the response to various sections of the Alberta Education *2020–21 School Re-Entry Plan*.

As the voice of Alberta’s teaching profession, the Association offers this initial response in order to provide advice on issues, concerns, questions, perspectives and key observations related to the *2020–21 School Re-Entry Plan*. It is respectfully submitted with the understanding that further representations will be made to the Minister of Education and the department regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and a return to public school buildings.

I. School Calendar for the 2020–21 School Year

The Association agrees that the health and safety of students and staff must guide all decisions regarding school calendars and a return to school buildings. Consideration must also be given to the need to address subsequent waves of COVID-19. Every Alberta school has the potential to be a venue for contagion requiring rapid response.

It will be important for Alberta Education to provide clear direction to school authorities for each possible scenario that may emerge. Much distress is caused when neighbouring school jurisdictions have divergent practices. Decisions regarding the operations and structure of the 2020–21 school year must be communicated as soon as they are made to enable teachers to begin planning and preparing students for the required transition during the time remaining in the current school year.

Learnings from our colleagues in Quebec, who have started re-entry, indicate that it has been extremely difficult and, in some cases, impossible to keep students physically distant. Anecdotal estimations suggest that a maximum of 10 students per conventional classroom may allow for the physical distancing required by the Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH).

a) Recommendations

- Create readiness checklists to assess whether schools are prepared to open safely.
- Ensure teachers are not expected to teach both face-to-face class and remotely as it would be impossible to do justice to either and would create suboptimal learning conditions.
- Direct parents of junior and senior high school students who request remote learning for the entire 2020–21 school year to [online service providers within their home jurisdiction or within the Alberta public school system].
- Ensure that the work day is contiguous, reasonable and within collective agreement parameters.
- Consider background, training and experience in the placement of teachers.

- Provide teachers additional preparation time to account for the added complexity.
- Modify daily schedules to stagger transitions and other activities within the school building.
- Provide intervention supports and strategies for students who are at risk of dropping out.
- Ensure substitute teachers are available for all three scenarios. There will be absences due to illness and other factors, and instruction for students should not be interrupted.
- Ensure a balance of subject areas outside the core subjects, including fine arts, physical education, wellness, trades, etc
- Provide opportunities for teachers who are unable to be physically present in schools due to underlying health conditions to assume remote teaching positions.

b) Considerations

- Consider alternating classes or grade levels during the week.
- Consider creating smaller groups of students for in-person classes such that physical distancing can be assured. This will require a corresponding increase of teachers.
- Consider additional teaching assistants, particularly to help students comply with hygiene and safety requirements.

c) Questions

- Is it reasonable to assume that young students will be able to maintain physical distancing, even if there are fewer students in the classroom?
- Can we reasonably expect that young students, especially, sit in desks for extended periods of time?
- When students arrive at school sick, is there a space for isolation until they can return home?
- Is post-Labour Day the targeted start for students or staff (or both)?

II. Addressing Potential Gaps in Student Learning

Teachers know their students and must be able to exercise their professional judgment to determine how best to address student learning needs. Smaller classes, as required because of physical distancing, will enable teachers to spend more time with individual students and address any gaps in learning.

a) Recommendations

- Identify critical curricular outcomes within programs of study so these outcomes are the emphases.
- Provide resources to assist with remote emergency learning.
- Continue kindergarten Program Unit Funding and expand into Grade 1, as at-risk students will have missed months of support critical for early intervention.
- Rehire teaching assistants to support students with diverse learning needs in all scenarios.

b) Question

- What role can the ADLC play in providing additional supports for students?

III. Diploma Exams and Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs)

The Association believes that standardized testing provides very limited meaningful information about student learning, particularly during times when significant external factors are affecting students' ability to learn. Student mental health and emotional wellbeing needs to be a priority at this time and standardized testing creates anxiety for many students. Rather than such testing, then, ongoing formative assessment should be the focus.

In the current circumstances, standardized tests have little capacity to inform teachers and even less relevance with respect to school district or provincial performance. Using diploma exams to identify learning gaps, for example, will not be relevant in planning instruction because students tested will have already graduated. Diploma exams are high-stakes tests that have a legacy that affects students long after the test is conducted; therefore, it would be inappropriate to resume diploma exams in the 2020–21 school year. Further, there may be circumstances in which the three scenarios outlined by Alberta Education occur throughout the school year and there may be various school jurisdictions in different scenarios at any given time.

a) Recommendations

- Ensure any testing is voluntary and initiated by students or parents only (eg, to “improve” teacher awarded marks or to provide additional assurance).
- Avoid aggregating or reporting results, since their reliability will not be possible given the realities of remote learning and the focus on literacy and numeracy.
- Suspend mandatory standardized testing through the 2020–21 school year, as there was never an expectation that the full curriculum would be covered—literacy and numeracy were the foci. It would therefore be unfair and unhelpful to assess students on outcomes that have not been taught.
- If Alberta Education insists on the implementation of Student Learning Assessments (SLAs), allow discretion about their implementation. Decisions should be left to individual teachers who are in the best position to determine if and when individual students would be ready to take the assessment or if the SLA will generate any meaningful information for any given student.
- If Alberta Education insists on the mandatory writing of diploma exams, prohibit the use of diploma exams in calculating students' final grades, as this will avoid effects on students' ability to access postsecondary programs.
- If Alberta Education insists on diploma exams and PATs, eliminate the reporting of standardized tests for accountability purposes. Time lost cannot be recaptured.
- Rely on teachers' professional judgment to assess student achievement and learning gaps, while providing time and space in the curriculum and school year for teachers to address such gaps.
- Use formative assessment to understand where students are upon their return to school. Gaps will vary widely from student to student and the most valuable information will be

gained through conducting assessments that are more individualized and responsive to individual students. Time will be better spent on filling the gaps rather than testing for them.

- Consider redirecting the funds and energies of the Assessment branch to create resources for student learning, assessment supports for teachers or professional development opportunities for teachers.
- Provide clear and consistent communication regarding assessment expectations for all school jurisdictions.

IV. PPE, Hygiene and Health Requirements

The first concern when considering approaches to re-entry must be the safety of students, teachers, support staff, and their families and communities. There is no discussion in this section on the need to maintain physical distancing in school settings. Physical distancing is essential and was among teachers' top concerns in the Association's pandemic research. While the health authorities can bring their particular expertise to bear, when considering the application of PPE and hygiene standards, teachers' intimate knowledge and experience of classroom realities cannot be ignored. The Association would very much appreciate a continuing opportunity to be involved in and bring the teacher's perspective to planning and policy development in this area.

a) Recommendations

- Create specific guidelines and standards for safety in schools (eg, wearing masks, schedules and minimum requirements for cleaning).
- Ensure that products such as masks, gloves, hand sanitizer and disinfectants are provided for school jurisdictions and that proper training for their use is provided.
- Provide funding for additional staff to monitor and ensure compliance with safety protocols, such as the use of sanitizer, masks, movement around the school and school property, and social distancing.
- Provide inservicing and specific standards (eg, the frequency and standards for cleaning washrooms) for caretaking staff in schools, as well as supports for school leaders.
- Create guidelines on how to safely deal with students who come to school sick or who become sick during the school day.
- Provide additional staffing required to ensure physical distancing.
- Provide funding to create time for school leaders to coordinate the learning and safety needs of students and staff.
- Secure school buildings, limiting access to schools by having clear procedures for dropping off students and for entering schools on an emergent basis.
- Create consistent guidelines for all schools and jurisdictions.
- Provide access to nursing professionals in each school.
- Access public health officials to support compliance with the CMOH's guidelines and standards for safety.

b) Questions

- Are we anticipating in Scenario 1 that some schools could be closed and others open, depending on number of cases of COVID-19?
- With limited availability of hand sanitizer and the absence of sinks in classrooms, is it possible to ensure student and staff safety?
- Who will provide funding for the additional supplies that are required? The amount will be substantial and would impact school and jurisdiction budgets.
- In the absence of rules and guidelines from the CMOH, how can we plan now and is it possible to implement any plans developed?
- What are the consequences if rules are not followed and who will enforce them?

V. Mental Health/Psychosocial Supports for Students and Staff

This was the weakest section of the plan and it is notable that mental health was among teachers' top concerns in our pandemic research. Supports and resources beyond a collection of web links are essential. Trauma will not be felt in the same way across jurisdictions or schools, or by individual students and staff. Trauma is not a school issue, but rather a community issue; therefore, it is critical that the government takes a leadership role by requiring and coordinating cross-ministry services to bring to schools and communities tangible supports, such as specialized education, and trauma and crisis professionals. Schools will need support to be readily accessible for the inevitable time when a member of the school community dies. Special attention also needs to be paid to mental supports for teachers and other staff, since students will only be as healthy as the adults who surround them.

a) Recommendations

- Secure cross-ministry collaboration to bring to schools and communities tangible supports, and secure specific protocols and teams of professionals to deal with trauma.
- Ensure both mental health supports and career counselling, currently lacking due to funding cutbacks, are available in schools. Association policy specifies that there should be at least one full-time teacher-counsellor per 250 students and, further, there should be at least one per school.
- Provide inservicing for staff to recognize students and colleagues who may be exhibiting signs of mental health issues.
- Provide mental health first aid to students and staff in distress.
- Create clear guidelines for school jurisdictions to accommodate staff and students who are high risk due to underlying medical or mental health conditions.
- Create supports and strategies for students who are not engaging with schools either in person or remotely.
- Waive school and other fees to provide relief and reduce stress for families experiencing financial difficulties.

- Consider encouraging schools to create extracurricular activities that could take place under various scenarios, keeping in mind that extracurricular activities are to be voluntary for teachers.
- Support the creation of remote student Gay-Straight Alliances since students may be caught in unsupportive situations and be at-risk.

VI. Transportation

Physical distancing on school buses is essential. Student transportation will affect the size of in-person classes, should buses not be able to run to capacity.

a) Recommendations

- Coordinate busing between public and separate school systems.
- Provide consistent training for bus drivers, as they will be the first to encounter potentially sick students and there will be exposure on buses during the trip to schools.
- As decisions on busing may have pedagogical implications, involve teachers and administrators in discussions and decisions in order to avoid unintended consequences.

b) Questions

- Will there be PPE for students on buses?
- How will behaviours that affect possible transmission of COVID-19 be prohibited on buses?
- If students are not able to board buses and there is no parent at the bus stop, who is responsible for ensuring students return to their home under adult supervision safely?
- If classes remain remote, can bus drivers be used to support families (eg, for class materials or food delivery)?

VII. Evaluations for Teacher Permanent Professional Certification

The current circumstances create a challenge for evaluation against the Teaching Quality Standard (TQS). A number of options related to evaluation are outlined below.

a) Recommendations

- Make special provisions this year for those teachers who have the required two positive evaluations and were waiting to amass the required number of teaching days (equivalent of two full years).
- For those who do not fit into the guideline above, automatically renew interim certificates that are expiring. This would address the needs of substitute teachers, as well as classroom teachers, whose opportunities for being evaluated might have been negatively impacted by the sudden restructuring of the school year.
- Encourage principals to continue teacher evaluations (the second evaluation) and make recommendations as they typically would.

- In the current circumstances, consider which elements of the TQS can reasonably be evaluated in the remote emergency teaching environment.
- Waive the fees required to extend interim professional certificates for the next year.

VIII. Teacher Preparation Program Student Practicums

A problem was created by universities that failed to follow the direction provided by Alberta Education. Student teachers should not be disadvantaged; however, it may be difficult to assess a student teacher's suitability for classroom teaching without an in-person student teaching opportunity.

a) Recommendations

- Recognize student teachers who have at least 10 weeks of supervised student teaching as having achieved the minimum required for certification.
- Consider adjusting the practicum for student teachers still enrolled and active in their programs to provide an opportunity for them to catch up when school resumes.
- Consider waiving the full practicum requirements for student teachers whose practicums were interrupted in March but who had achieved favourable evaluations prior to the closing of schools or in prior placements.
- If circumstances allow, resume practicums in the next school year, starting in mid-October, and continue as usual.
- Consider placing student teachers so as to provide the experience of emergency remote teaching.
- Should the government waive the requirements for at least 10 weeks of supervised student teaching, establish a well-considered and well-funded mentorship opportunity for those first-year teachers who are affected.

b) Question

- If student teachers are not able to complete at least 10 weeks of supervised student teaching, do they graduate?

IX. Internet/SuperNet Connectivity for First Nations and Rural/Remote Communities

Provision of education at a distance through technology should not be normalized as a result of our recent experience. If anything, there will have emerged a greater appreciation of the importance and value of learning in the presence of a teacher in a congregated setting. At the same time, the potential for a second wave or more isolated outbreaks suggests the need to

ensure that capacity exists to revert to education at a distance if necessary. Some students simply will not be able or willing to access online learning.

a) Recommendations

- Address technical issues (availability of equipment for use at home and access to bandwidth). This should also include undertaking an analysis of lessons learned with the objective of informing policy and practice in similar circumstances in the future.
- Take measures to develop and arrange for delivery and return of “paper packages.”
- Give special consideration to strategies for maintaining student learning in communities that eschew the use of learning technology (eg, Hutterite and Old Order Mennonite communities). This also includes taking into account difficulties for staff teaching in settings where it is difficult to have reliable, high-speed connectivity.

Conclusion

The effects of school closure remain to be seen. For example, do school closures compromise the many ways that students receive support at school, such as health and nutrition activities, and predictability and stability? The next steps for the system are vital not only to the learning of students but also to their safety and well-being.

The Association appreciates the opportunity to collaborate with Alberta Education on re-entry plans, as it is essential to involve teachers at the outset of forming directions and contemplating student and staff safety. We would be pleased to offer names of teachers who could contribute to any future working groups or other advisory activities.

The Association will make further representation when the results of its pandemic study are ready to be shared. Our responses in this document are also dependent on the context and variables known and understood at the time of this submission and are subject to change as guidelines and rules are made clear.