



Office of the Minister

JUL 14 2020

AR112205

Mr. Jason Schilling
President
The Alberta Teachers' Association
11010 - 142 Street NW
Edmonton AB T5N 2R1

Dear Mr. Schilling:

Thank you for your June 25, 2020 letter regarding the re-entry plan for the Early Childhood Services (ECS) to Grade 12 education system for the 2020/21 school year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The safety of students and school staff continues to be our government's priority. Government appreciates the input and support of school authorities across the province as well as education partners, including the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), in developing and refining our school re-entry plan for the upcoming 2020/21 school year.

ECS to Grade 12 education has changed significantly since our government decided on March 16, 2020 to cancel in-school classes for the remainder of the 2019/20 school year to help limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. We know that students, parents/guardians, teachers and school boards did their best to adapt to a different way of learning under extraordinary circumstances. However, we all know that students who attend schools learn best in the classroom with their teachers and peers, and our goal is to get us back to normal learning as soon as possible.

The re-entry plan for the upcoming school year I announced on June 10, 2020, balances the need for provincial direction and standardized approaches in some areas while also providing flexibility and respecting school authority autonomy at the local level. The plan provides clear direction for school authorities to prepare for three possible scenarios in September. School authorities must plan and prepare for all of these three non-mutually-exclusive scenarios as the COVID-19 pandemic may change at any time and school authorities may be required to transition from one scenario to another.

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By August 1, 2020, our government will make the final decision on which scenario schools will be following in September. Based on the information we have right now, we expect that students will be returning to their classrooms under the first scenario, with some health measures in place. However, the reality is that the COVID-19 environment will require all of us to be flexible and nimble throughout the next school year. While we are all hoping for the best outcome – the return of near normal operations – we must plan for the worst.

Supporting the return to in-person classes will take the collective support of school boards, school trustees, school administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents/guardians along with government and Alberta Health Services (AHS), working together to ensure adherence to the public health measures in place.

I understand that the return to in-class learning is not without risk of infection transmission. In addition to seeking input from school authorities and education partners, the re-entry plan was reviewed and approved by Alberta Health, including the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Public health officials will be monitoring the situation closely and will be ready for a rapid response to cases of COVID-19 in a school. Zone Medical Officers of Health will collaborate with school authorities and school administration to identify risks and mitigation strategies, which may include temporarily suspending in-person classes for a group of students.

As I previously indicated, the safety of students and staff is our top priority. School authorities are developing their own plans that follow the safety guidelines provided by Alberta Health. These plans must address health and safety considerations in a number of areas including physical distancing, the provision of hand sanitizers, and enhanced cleaning – while respecting collective agreements and occupational health and safety requirements. While teachers are not expected to act as custodial staff, they are expected, just as every worker is to “take reasonable care to protect the health and safety of the worker and of other persons at or in vicinity of the work site while the worker is working.” (Occupational Health and Safety Act – Part I Section 5). School authority plans must also have provisions for addressing staff absences due to illness.

With respect to the ATA’s concerns, there is no one approach taken alone or in combination that can ensure that there is no transmission. The guidance documents for scenarios 1 and 2 outline a combination of approaches such as staying home when sick, physical distancing, cohorting, hand washing and increased cleaning practices that are to be considered together to limit the spread of COVID-19. In situations where physical distancing is not possible (e.g., busses, classrooms and some sporting activities), extra emphasis on hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, not participating when sick and cleaning and disinfecting on a regular basis before and after activities is strongly recommended. Guidance for scenario 2 outlines considerations to stagger in-school learning on a rotational basis.

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School authorities have the flexibility within their budget to cover, as needed, the cost of hand sanitizers, cleaning supplies and non-medical masks. Scenarios 1 and 2 of the re-entry plan do not call for the widespread use of non-medical masks for students and staff. There are many challenges inherent to wearing masks, especially for young children. That said, school authorities should have a number of masks on hand for staff dealing with students who may be infected until their parents/guardians come to school to pick them up. Please note that parents/guardians can choose to have their children wear masks that they provide themselves, as can school staff.

Before leaving home, staff, children/students, visitors, and volunteers who will access the school for work or education, must self-screen for symptoms each day that they enter the school. A helpful screening tool has been provided as part of the re-entry plan guidance documents. Staff members, parents/guardians, and children/students should not enter the school if they have symptoms of COVID-19. Schools should develop procedures to address staff that become symptomatic during the school day to allow that staff member to isolate/leave the school for the time recommended by the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Alberta Health Services. Staff members should be encouraged to access COVID-19 testing by accessing the AHS Online Testing tool.

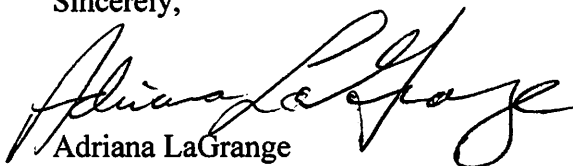
Parents/guardians and staff who have concerns about the health risks involved in a return to in-school classes should consult with their family physician and discuss available options with their local school authority.

With respect to student learning, under scenarios 1 and 2, there may very well be parents/guardians who choose to keep their children at home. Parents/guardians have the option to work with their school authority for their child's learning to be supported at home, including through accessing distance/online programming. It should be noted that school authorities continue to be responsible for ensuring that instructional practices are responsive to student needs and respect privacy laws. Parents/guardians may also choose to home educate their children.

Thank you for sharing the ATA's perspectives and concerns. I have forwarded your feedback to department staff to help inform refinements to the school re-entry plan and its implementation.

I greatly appreciate the ATA's input and support in developing the re-entry plan and thank Alberta teachers for their dedication to student learning in this unprecedented time.

Sincerely,



Adriana LaGrange
Minister