

May opening of elementary schools, daycares 'a necessary decision,' says Quebec education minister ^[1]

Physical-distancing measures include classes limited to 15 students, one child per seat on school buses

Author: Loewen, Claire

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EXCERPTS

Education Minister Jean-François Roberge detailed how elementary schools and daycares will gradually reopen, starting on May 11 outside the greater Montreal region — though class sizes will be limited, and high school students will be staying home.

For daycares and elementary schools on the island of Montreal, in Laval and surrounding suburbs, the reopening date will be May 19.

This timeline will only roll out as planned, Premier François Legault said earlier Monday, if hospitalizations from COVID-19 remain the same or continue to decrease.

"This decision to go back to school is a necessary one for education," Roberge said, citing mental health reasons, access to food and the importance of continued learning for students with difficulties.

All other schools — high schools, colleges and universities — won't physically reopen until late August. But it's legally mandatory for teens up to 16 years of age to be in school in Quebec.

"A teenager who is at home must continue their schooling, and their parents must accompany them in that," Roberge said.

As for elementary schools, classes will be limited to a maximum of 15 students, and the two-metre distancing rule will have to be respected wherever possible. That may mean moving some classes into vacant high schools for the time being to ensure there is enough space, Legault said.

On school buses, the rule will be one child per bench seat and recess periods will be rearranged to minimize the number of kids playing outside at one time.

Students who have health conditions that could put them at a higher risk of developing complications from COVID-19 are not to return to school, Roberge said.

The minister is also recommending that teachers over the age of 60 remain at home, saying they will be able to work from home.

Starting May 4, and upon invitation from their children's schools, parents will be able to come to school to collect their children's educational materials — as well as additional tools for remote learning, such as laptops and tablets with internet access.

Also starting next week, the entire education network will have access to free training on methods of teaching from distance-teaching.

Timeline depends on COVID hospitalizations

For now, the premier said at his daily briefing Monday, the situation with COVID-19 is "under control." There is still space in hospitals that have been all but emptied to make way for an influx of COVID patients, and there is a plan in place to gradually reopen the economy.

The premier said the decision to begin loosening coronavirus restrictions by reopening elementary schools was made, in part, because the risk of younger children developing complications from COVID-19 is very low.

"Children who have health problems or parents who have health problems should keep their children at home," he said.

He also said keeping schools closed for months at a stretch posed considerable risk to the well-being of some children, especially those with learning difficulties.

"I think it's good that they see their friends again, that they see their teachers again. I don't see children cooped up from 12 to 18 months."

Legault said schools now have two to three weeks' notice to make changes that comply with physical-distancing rules.

He stressed that the concept of herd immunity was not on the province's list of reasons to reopen schools since there is no proof as yet that those who have been infected and recovered from COVID-19 are free of risk of becoming sick once again.

Roberge said the Education Ministry worked closely with other ministries and public health to create the plan to reopen schools, and followed the lead of certain European countries.

Daycare services for teachers first

There are 305,000 Quebec children who use daycare services, however, the return to daycare will also be staggered.

Since the pandemic was declared and daycares were all but closed, the priority was to continue to provide services for the children of health-care workers.

Now, the children of school staff will be able to send their children to daycare, starting on May 4.

The occupancy rate in daycares and the ratio of children to educators will gradually be increased over time, depending on how well the spread of COVID-19 is contained.

Legault has said that children will not lose their place in a daycare if a parent decides to keep them at home.

The Ministry of Education will also provide masks to daycare educators, but it won't be mandatory to wear them.

'The plan needs to be very clear': QPAT

Some Quebec teachers say reopening within weeks doesn't give them enough time to prepare to apply public health directives.

Heidi Yetman, the president of the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers, which represents about 8,000 English-language teachers, said she would like to see a gradual reopening of schools in September — and much clearer guidelines from the government.

"The plan needs to be very clear. We need to ensure the health and safety of everybody. There have to be measures put in place," Yetman said. "How are we going to make sure they're social distancing?"

Je protège mon école publique, a parents' group, has also said it thinks more planning needs to be done before reopening.

The group recommends very clearly identifying children with health problems by age group, neighbourhood, type of health problem and family situation, as well as the layout of every school building, to ensure social distancing is possible.

Russell Copeman, executive director of the Quebec English School Boards Association, said schools should reopen only if they meet very clear health and public safety guidelines. His concerns about safety aren't limited to the classroom.

He said lunch monitors and school bus drivers are often older and could be at greater risk.

"Our lunchtime monitors, after school monitors, pre-school monitors — many of those people are retired," he said.

"So all of those things have to be worked out."

Ann Marie Matheson, director general of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), sent out a notice to parents, teachers and staff Monday night outlining Roberge's announcement.

Parents are not required to send their elementary children back to school, she said, and many might choose to keep them home for different reasons. Parents will be surveyed next week to see how many children will be returning to school on May 19, she said.

Teachers and staff are expected to report to work as of May 4 to prepare for the return of elementary students and support high school learning, Matheson said.

Other provinces' paths

Provinces have taken different approaches to schools. New Brunswick, which announced a four-step COVID-19 recovery plan last week, will maintain home learning, opting to close schools for the rest of the school year.

Saskatchewan also outlined a detailed plan last week, but schools weren't mentioned and are unlikely to open soon.

Ontario announced Sunday that public schools will remain closed in the province through May 31.

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