

Karina Roman: Parents, provinces call on Ottawa to help ensure schools open in the fall ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Children, Families and Social Development Minister Ahmed Hussen says that while he understands the burden working parents have been carrying for months since schools closed due to the pandemic, Ottawa's ability to help provinces fully reopen their schools this fall is limited.

In an interview with CBC's The House, airing today, Hussen said that because education falls under provincial jurisdiction, the federal government can only play a supporting role.

But a growing number of newspaper op-eds and online petitions indicate Canadian parents aren't satisfied with that answer.

"I think all parents have been put in a completely untenable situation. They've been asked to home school and be responsible for their kids' education and they've had to parent at the same time as working. Like most parents, I think I'm at the breaking point," Lauren Dobson-Hughes, an Ottawa-based consultant specializing in gender, health and rights, told CBC Radio's The House.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said he expects the Canadian economy to come roaring back as the virus comes more fully under control — but that can't happen if parents can't work, and a lot of them won't be able to work until schools fully reopen. So while education is the purview of the provinces, the economic recovery is a national challenge.

Women have borne the brunt of trying to balance work with parenting and schooling, and they're the ones most at risk of being pushed out of the workforce if the pressure continues. For a federal government that prides itself on its approach to gender issues, that's a problem.

Reopening schools won't be cheap

With September two months away, provinces are slowly revealing their plans for reopening schools in the fall — or, in the cases of Quebec and British Columbia, are explaining how they'll expand their current reopening plans. Some provinces are committed to resuming in-class instruction five days a week, while others are indicating that kids might only get a couple of days a week in class, spending the rest of their school days at home.

New Brunswick plans to at least have elementary students back in class full time. Doing that will cost millions of dollars for safety measures: physical distancing, ramped up sanitation and hygiene, and accommodations for students and staff who, due to health reasons, can't physically attend school.

New Brunswick's education minister said the federal government should play a bigger role in helping to reopen schools.

"Certainly, considering the incredible volume of federal programs that have been rolled out in recent months, that discussion around how the federal government can assist provincial education departments, to make sure that we prepare our next generation despite having lived through this pandemic, is absolutely critical," said provincial Education Minister Dominic Cardy.

"We need all hands on deck with this."

\$14 billion won't cut it, say premiers

For now, New Brunswick is forging ahead without additional federal dollars. But that lack of federal support is playing a role in holding back other provinces, such as Ontario, from committing to fully reopening schools.

Hussen said that the Trudeau government has offered \$14 billion to the provinces and territories to help restart their economies — funds for municipal transit, long term care and child care that could free up money in provincial budgets for schools.

"I think by offering provinces and territories a substantial amount of money to help them in the recovery process, it does enable them to have a bigger capacity to also respond to the needs of parents when it comes to school age children and the school system in particular," he said.

But many premiers have said that \$14 billion isn't going to be enough.

The school boards expected to implement provincial school reopening plans have reported a lack of national guidelines. In the U.S., education falls under state jurisdiction — but that didn't stop the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) from issuing national recommendations on how to safely reopen schools.

"Our association found it a bit curious that the government of Canada did not come out with guidelines," said Russell Copeman, executive director of the Quebec English School Boards Association. He said the association ended up using the CDC's guidelines.

Last month, the Hospital for Sick Kids in Toronto offered **comprehensive recommendations** [3] for school restarts, on everything from screening, masks and physical distancing to grouping of students, cleaning and ventilation.

But the guide's medical experts' main concern was the impact of lockdown measures on the health and welfare of children. Their key message was that children need to return to school full time, to the furthest extent possible, and that the health risks of doing so can be mitigated.

Most provinces are looking at shrinking class sizes; in jurisdictions where classroom space and teacher numbers are limited, children would be on a rotation, attending in-person only some of the time. SickKids says that's the wrong approach and that schools should not reopen in a way that "compromises daily school attendance."

That opinion is shared by pediatric infectious disease specialist Anna Banerji of the Dalla Lana School of Public Health in Toronto.

"Kids need to go back to school ... for their mental health. There's been a huge amount of collateral damage due to COVID. Kids need structure and socialization," she told The House.

Dr. Banerji argued that the science indicates the risk posed by COVID-19 to children is low; they are less likely to catch it, less likely to get very sick and less likely to transmit it.

"We can reduce the risk of transmission to vulnerable populations but ... two days on, two days off (of schooling) just doesn't make any sense if you look at how this virus behaves," she said. "It only makes us feel like we're doing something useful when we're not."

"It just feels like we were holding it together, miraculously, but that can't continue. The issue of reopening of schools has not been a priority for anyone.

"We can open nail salons, restaurants, golf clubs, but we don't have the political will ... to reopen schools properly. It's an afterthought."

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