

Canada's cautious school reopening plans leave moms in the lurch ^[1]

Author: Gordon, Julie

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA (Reuters) - April van Ert should have been relieved when her son's Vancouver school reopened on June 1. For months she had been juggling her busy job and her 11-year-old son's education amid the COVID-19 shutdowns.

But due to distancing requirements, the return was hybrid: one day in class, and online work the rest of the week. The model was "completely untenable" for working parents, said van Ert.

"If that's the plan if there's a resurgence in the fall, then I don't see how I'm going to avoid reducing the hours I work," she said.

Planning is now underway to get Canadian children back into classrooms in the fall and many provinces are eyeing Vancouver's hybrid model: part-time in school and part-time at home with online learning.

It's the same model being considered by New York City, the early epicentre of the U.S. coronavirus crisis, as new cases have surged in that country.

But school boards, teachers' unions, medical professionals, and parents are increasingly rallying against the model, saying the risk of COVID-19 should not outweigh the harm closures cause to the emotional well-being and education of children.

Experts say a part-time return will exasperate an already uneven economic recovery and increase gender inequality, further hurting women who were harder hit by layoffs and reduced hours amid the coronavirus crisis.

"In dual income families ... the conversation becomes, if we have to lose one income, who is it going to be? And the odds are that it's women who will make that decision to step back from the workplace," said Stephania Varalli, co-chief executive of Women of Influence.

NO SCHOOL, NO WORK

Schools across Canada were shuttered in March to curb the spread of COVID-19, impacting some 5.5 million children. With kids at home and parents reducing their work hours, the economic hit was likely about 0.8% off Canada's GDP each month, said Vicky Redwood, senior economic adviser at Capital Economics.

Women, who are more likely to work in the service sector, saw more COVID-19 job losses than men, and childcare issues have made it harder for them to return to work, Statistics Canada data shows. Lower-income women were the hardest hit.

Even as jobs returned, employment levels for mothers of school-aged children remained well below pre-COVID levels in June, though daycare reopenings improved the picture for women with very young kids. Graphic: tmsnrt.rs/3iUL2cc

"Moms got hit with a double whammy of being more at risk of job loss because of gendered patterns in employment and because of the closure of schools and daycares," said Jennifer Robson, an associate professor at Carleton University in Ottawa.

The loss of one parent's income has long-term ramifications for the economy, especially as Canada claws its way out of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. And policy makers are taking notice.

"Parents are nervous, and rightfully so," Maryam Monsef, Canada's Minister for Women, said this week. "We need women to get back to work so that we can restart the engines of our economy."

BACK TO CLASS

In populous Ontario, the provincial government is being urged to look to Quebec rather than British Columbia for its back-to-school plan.

Quebec turned to masks, hand sanitizer and distancing dots when it fully reopened most of its elementary schools in mid-May. That same month, Quebec accounted for nearly 80% of Canada's total employment gains.

But there are downsides. There were 53 active COVID-19 cases among teachers and students the week of June 5th alone, Quebec's

education ministry said. By contrast, there was just one known case at a British Columbia school in all of June.

For many parents the risk is worth it. Ottawa single mom Ruth Thompson said her 6-year-old son has spent too many hours in front of a tablet and needs to get back to learning with friends.

“For me, full-time is the only option ... online schooling doesn’t work,” she told a school board meeting this week.

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