

'It's time to get back to normal': Province announces K-12 schools will reopen for in-class teaching in September ^[1]

Author: Hudes, Sammy

Source: Calgary Herald

Publication Date: 22 Jul 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

It's back to school for Alberta students this fall, as the province announced Tuesday that in-person classes will resume in September following the shutdown that began mid-March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

New measures will be in place to help protect students and teachers, but public health authorities acknowledged that new cases of the virus are likely to be found in Alberta schools.

Premier Jason Kenney said his government made the decision to order classes back in session after watching other jurisdictions closely.

"The overwhelming evidence is that schools can be operated safely with little health risk for children and teachers and low risk of causing serious outbreaks in the communities that surround them," the premier said.

He cited nationwide infection rates in Denmark, which dropped despite its schools reopening in April and May. Kenney said the same thing happened in the Netherlands, while cases remained stable after schools reopened in Finland, Belgium and Austria.

The province had been considering three potential scenarios this fall: classes returning to near-normal, schools only partially reopening, or students remaining at home where they would learn remotely.

But Kenney said young people, especially children, "are at low risk of infection and very low risk of severe health outcomes from COVID-19."

Around 14 per cent of all reported COVID-19 infections in Alberta have been among youth, according to Kenney. He said only eight school-aged children have been hospitalized, including one in intensive care, for COVID-19 in Alberta over the past five months.

"This decision is ultimately about doing what's best for students and parents," Kenney said.

"The vast majority agree it's time to get back to normal, or as normal as we can, and to get kids back to school."

New measure go into place

A variety of protocols will be in place when students return to their desks in September.

The measures include frequent cleaning of washrooms and high-touch surfaces, placing hand sanitizers at school and classroom entrances, grouping students in cohorts by class, and planning the school day to allow for physical distancing.

That could include staggering start times for classes, recesses and lunches. Classrooms will also be reorganized to allow for more physical space.

Students, staff, parents and school visitors will be required to pass a self-screening questionnaire daily to determine whether they can enter the school. Everyone will be required to sanitize their hands when entering or exiting schools or classrooms, as well as before and after eating.

New dropoff and pickup procedures will be in place to limit contact between households. There will be a strict stay-at-home policy when students or staff are sick.

Field trips and activities requiring group transportation will be postponed, while large gatherings such as assemblies will be discouraged.

There will also be restrictions on the use of shared items or equipment and continual messaging surrounding hygiene rules.

These protocols will be reviewed regularly and changes will be incorporated, according to the province.

"Come September, our school days will look mostly the same as before COVID-19, but with some modifications," said Education Minister Adriana LaGrange.

"We will continue to adjust protocols as required on the advice of our chief medical officer of health and in consultation with the education

system. We are confident that our plan will work.”

LaGrange said individual schools and their governing divisions will be able to fine-tune the guidelines and develop specific plans for keeping students and staff safe.

LaGrange said every school authority in Alberta is receiving a funding increase for the 2020-21 school year, totalling nearly \$120 million across the province.

Approximately \$250 million in additional capital funding would be available to school boards, LaGrange said, which some school divisions have relied on for upgrades such as hands-free sinks, touch-free soap and towel dispensers and automatic doors.

LaGrange has also approved the use of school board reserves, if needed, to help cover local COVID-19-related costs. There is currently around \$363 million in school board reserves across the province.

Barry Litun, executive director of the College of Alberta School Superintendents, said most school authorities planned to hire extra custodians to wipe down high-touch areas.

He noted some planned to use additional funds for buying water bottles so students wouldn’t have to rely on fountains, designating doorways as an entrance or exit-only and adding signage on floors to reduce crowding in school hallways.

“The guidelines allow the local school authorities to study their own circumstance and make decisions that work best for their schools and their school communities,” he said.

LaGrange said there wouldn’t be limits on class sizes as part of the province’s guidance.

She said the province was able to test its plan during the summer as various school authorities — including Chinook’s Edge School Division, the Calgary Catholic School District and Medicine Hat Public School Division — ran in-person summer school programming.

Protocols for COVID-19 outbreaks

Should a student or staff member at a school test positive for COVID-19, LaGrange said, a public health team would investigate to determine when symptoms first developed and then support the school to minimize future transmission.

She said parents would be notified if a case occurs in their child’s school, while public health officials would contact those who were in close contact with the infected person.

Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta’s chief medical officer of health, said that if a student is showing symptoms, school staff would separate them from other children and ask their parents to immediately pick them up from school.

“We will almost certainly identify cases of COVID-19 in students and staff in the fall,” Hinshaw said. “I want to stress there is no risk-free approach to living with COVID-19, yet we still have to learn to live with it.”

She noted students and staff will have the choice of wearing a mask in class.

If there’s an outbreak at a particular school, health officials would work with the school authority and Alberta Education to determine whether to transition to partial in-class learning or at-home learning.

A decision would be based on multiple factors, including the number of cases and risk of ongoing transmission.

“And it will be made by your government,” LaGrange said.

She said the government wanted to announce its plan in July to provide clarity to families as soon as possible.

If parents decide not to send their children back to school in September, the province “would absolutely respect a parent’s choice,” according to LaGrange, who encouraged families in that situation to contact their local school division and discuss alternative options.

“We would not be requiring parents to send their children to school if they don’t feel comfortable with the situation,” she said.

Cases continue to surge

Two more Albertans infected by COVID-19 have died, including a woman in her 80s from Alberta Health Services’ Calgary zone.

The other death, of a woman in her 70s, is linked to an outbreak at the Good Samaritan Southgate Care Centre in Edmonton.

There have been 172 coronavirus-related deaths in the province since the start of the pandemic.

An additional 141 cases of the virus were reported Tuesday within the province. The tally of active cases throughout the province has reached 1,193.

Currently, the Calgary zone has 589 active cases of the virus.

There are 93 people infected by the novel coronavirus in hospitals throughout the province, including 16 patients in intensive care.

“I am concerned by the continued rise in active cases,” said Hinshaw, who noted that “COVID-19 isn’t going anywhere.”

“We heard from Albertans a few months ago that they didn’t need formal restrictions to be able to make the right choice to protect each other. Now is the time to show each other that that is correct.”

Kenney said it's evident that many Albertans are no longer observing public health guidelines.

"Whatever the reasons, the results are troubling," the premier said. "Let me be blunt. If you think you can socialize with large groups of people in close quarters, knock it off."

Related link: K to 12 school re-entry [3]

Region: Alberta [4]

Tags: health and safety guidelines [5]
policy [6]

Source URL (modified on 17 Sep 2020): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/07/it%E2%80%99s-time-get-back-normal-province-announces-k-12-schools-will>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/07/it%E2%80%99s-time-get-back-normal-province-announces-k-12-schools-will> [2]

<https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/live-at-3-p-m-province-to-detail-plan-for-school-classes-to-resume> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/20/07/k-12-school-re-entry> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7859> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9037> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/policy>