

Calls to fully reopen schools in September are on a collision course with reality ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The call to reopen schools for millions of Canadian students in only a few weeks' time poses major risks to public health. Educational planning under normal circumstances requires months of rigorous preparation. During a pandemic, this is even more critical.

Even a small miscalculation in school reopening plans could result in undetected community spread, putting lives at risk and setting whole municipalities back months in their economic recoveries. For example, children who are infected with the coronavirus are often asymptomatic. A daily symptom-checking protocol (as some Ontario school boards are proposing) is likely to prove insufficient in flagging cases.

Add to the mix of uncertainties recent moves to reopen bars and indoor dining, plus the beginning of the fall flu season, and public-health challenges could be easily exacerbated in the coming months.

The risks are numerous. First, there is the rush to reopen schools. In the case of Ontario, the Ministry of Education plans to announce its school-reopening plan for the province this week. Earlier this summer, school boards were requested to submit their reopening plans to the province by Aug. 4. Both timelines leave only a few short weeks to turn ambitious infrastructure, scheduling and staffing plans into concrete realities.

Second, there is the requirement by the province to develop separate plans for three possible scenarios: 100-per-cent in-class learning, 100-per-cent online learning, and a hybrid model that combines the two. Planning for just one of these scenarios during a pandemic would be a demanding undertaking, let alone three.

Third, we must consider the financial costs of reopening. School boards are already sounding the alarm that they simply don't have sufficient resources to safely reopen schools.

All of these challenges bring to mind the concept of the "triple constraint," a key project-management term. The triple constraint contends that time, scope and cost are all interdependent, and if pressure is placed on one of these elements, at least one of the other elements will need to give way. Otherwise – and this is critical – the project's quality will suffer.

Currently, we are putting pressure on all three elements. We are running out of time to reopen schools in September. We don't yet have a clear scope for what exactly needs to be done. And there is no commitment to cover the costs. All of this affects project quality, putting the successful reopening of schools at great risk.

Beyond the above, the calls to reopen schools for all students five days a week are on a collision course with reality. At full capacity, schools and classrooms are not physically big enough to accommodate the physical-distancing measures that are key to preventing the spread of the coronavirus. And the ambitious plans that are being proposed to expand school sites to empty community buildings will take time to implement safely.

Schools should plan to reopen for in-person learning in November. In September and October, most students should continue to learn online, although these two months should also be used to retrofit schools and field test the physical return to school for limited numbers of elementary and high school students. Where feasible, priority should be given to students from economically disadvantaged households with limited child-care options that prevent a parent's return to work.

Think of the return to school as a safety product, similar to a new seat-belt design. A manufacturer wouldn't widely roll out a new seat belt without first conducting field tests in order to hone its product. The same holds true for school reopenings. Gradually ramping up the reopening of schools will help school boards refine their pandemic plans and hygiene routines so that these measures can be safely implemented system-wide later in the fall.

To aid fall planning, we should also look outside our borders for school-reopening best practices that have proven successful around the world. Some countries are ahead of us in this respect and there are lessons to be learned from their experiences. The on-the-ground

expertise of teachers also needs to be part of the planning process.

What is required is a graduated return to school. A rushed, “all-in” back-to-school approach is a recipe for failure. From the opposite perspective, sticking with 100-per-cent online teaching for all forgoes a valuable opportunity to field test return-to-school plans early in the fall.

If we have learned anything during the pandemic, it is that prudence is our best ally. We owe it to our children to get their return to school right.

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