

This is what Manitoba schools will look like in September ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

WINNIPEG -- From physically distanced classrooms to staggered recesses, Manitoba students will be heading back to school come September – though it's possible not all students will be heading back to the classroom.

Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen and Dr. Brent Roussin, chief provincial public health officer, released the back-to-school plan Thursday afternoon. The plan will see in-class learning resume full-time, five days a week, starting on Sept. 8 for students in kindergarten through to Grade 8, as well as students with special needs in all grades.

While Goertzen said it is the province's goal to send high school students (Grades 9 to 12) back to class full-time, some remote learning may be required based on the school's ability to implement the necessary public health measures to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

The province said each school division has to ensure students learning remotely have access to technology.

Teachers and staff will be heading back to school on Sept. 2, 3, and 4 for orientation to public health requirements.

Goertzen added there is a total of \$48 million that school divisions have saved, which will be available to make sure schools are "COVID-ready" in the fall. He said divisions can draw on those savings for the additional costs that they may now incur.

"I cannot emphasize enough how much adjustment and how much change and there has been for parents, students and teachers and all those in the education system," Goertzen said. "It would be wrong for me to suggest that the adjustment is over – it is not."

The province said, while it is releasing the back-to-school plan, it is important to know that plans may change based on public health advice in the coming days and weeks. If the public health situation deteriorates or guidelines are not sufficient, the province said it may pause current measures or reintroduce others.

Physical distancing in the classroom

While class-sizes will not be limited according to the plan, the province said classrooms will need to be configured to support physical distancing. It said schools should use alternate spaces, such as multi-purpose rooms, as needed.

Where physical distancing is not possible, the province said students must be in cohorts.

"Cohorts will distance themselves from other groups to limit exposure," the back-to-school plan reads. "In these instances, there must be at least one metre between students as they sit at their desks in classrooms."

Cohorts can be no larger than 75 students, though there is no limit to the number of cohorts allowed – as long as they are all able to keep separate.

The province said in the event of a COVID-19 case being identified in a school, the use of cohorts can "drastically reduce the potential number of exposed staff and students."

The province said lunch breaks and recesses will be staggered, and protocols must be put in place to avoid congestion while teachers and students move through the school hallways and common areas. The province said this will include teachers moving from classroom to classroom instead of students.

Any assemblies or gatherings that exceed public health advice will not be allowed.

The plan encourages classes to be outdoors as much as possible, though contact sports and games and the use of shared equipment is strongly discouraged.

Self-screening required for students and staff

The province said masks will not be mandatory in schools at this point, but students and staff will be required to self-screen at the start of each day. If they are showing any symptoms, they must stay home.

Parents and caregivers are responsible for screening their children before they get on a bus or enter the school.

The province said there will be protocols for screening people entering the schools and there will be limitations for visitors.

"Students will be reminded of the importance of physical distancing and hand washing," the province said, adding staff, students and volunteers will wash their hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

The plan also points out that all school divisions must plan for absenteeism.

Getting to school and using childcare

The province said, for the short-term, parents are encouraged to bring their own kids to school. Those students who have to take the bus may be considered a cohort for purposes of getting to and from school. Physical distancing and/or the use of cohorts are required on school transportation.

The plan also said the province is working with school divisions and the child care sector to ensure families can keep accessing child care within schools.

"The need for child care is top of mind," Goertzen said in a news release. "Both departments are working together to develop learning guidelines for children with special needs, as well as students at risk."

Back to school plans to be finalized by divisions

The province said the back-to-school plans for individual school divisions will be finalized by mid-August and posted on the divisions' website.

These plans will include how each school day will be structured, how public health orders will be followed, how the mental health and well-being of the school community will be addressed, and how information will be shared with staff and families.

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