

Most B.C. students to return to full-time classes in September ^[1]

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Source: CTV News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 29 Jul 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

VICTORIA -- The B.C. government says most students will return to school for full-time in-person classes in September.

The restart will see students from kindergarten through to Grade 12 back in class on Sept. 8.

"The classroom is an essential part of a child's social, academic and mental development, and that's why we are working hard to ensure students can safely spend the next school year with their teachers and classmates," said Education Minister Rob Fleming on Wednesday.

As part of the school restart, students will be divided into "learning groups" which are comprised of a consistent group of students and staff members.

According to the provincial government, the consistency of learning groups will help reduce the risk of transmission spreading quickly within a school and will help health authorities perform faster contact tracing, should a COVID-19 exposure be found.

Provincial health officer Dr. Bonnie Henry says these learning cohorts will have opportunities to interact with one another outside of class during breaks like recess and lunch.

Learning group sizes will range from 60 students in younger grades to 120 students for upper grades.

"We know how important it is for children to be back in school, to both support their emotional and mental health and their ability to socialize and to learn," said Henry.

"Being back in school is also crucial to support many parents in being able to work, but we must do it safely. We ask for families and workplaces to continue to be flexible as we come into the fall," she said.

Meanwhile, the B.C. government plans to spend \$45.6 million to help schools prepare for the school year.

The funding will go towards covering increased cleaning expenses, the installation of more hand-washing stations and for supplies like masks.

Henry stopped shy of mandating masks for students and teachers in school, though she continued to encourage their use at times when physical distancing is difficult, like while aboard a school bus.

As schools reopen to in-person learning, staff, students and their families are asked to monitor themselves daily for symptoms of COVID-19 and to remain at home if they feel at all unwell.

The B.C. government says it is continuing to develop operating guidelines for schools, which are being informed by a steering committee that includes teachers, parents, support staff, Indigenous rightsholders, the public health sector and other relevant parties.

The province says that families can expect to hear from their school district or independent school for further updates on their specific facilities as the summer progresses.

Details on learning groups, schedules and enrolment information is slated to be released on Aug. 26 across the province.

Henry noted that health officials are preparing for "a number of scenarios" should school reopening plans be affected by a potential second wave of COVID-19 cases.

Henry said she has "a great deal of confidence" in the province's school restart plan, saying she believes the return of students will be a safe process.

"We've put a lot of thoughtful work and consideration into reopening schools this fall and in making sure we're supporting children in ways that keep them, the people who teach them and our communities safe," said Henry in a release Wednesday.

Concerns remain among teachers

With B.C. on track to fully reopen schools in the fall, some teachers say they are still concerned about the health of staff and students.

In a release Wednesday, the BC Teachers Federation (BCTF) said that the province’s current school restart plan was not sufficient enough to ensure the safety of everyone involved.

“We all share the same goal—getting students and teachers safely back into class—but there’s still a lot to do before we can say with confidence that September will be safe and successful,” said Teri Mooring, president of the BCTF.

The federation is calling for smaller class sizes to ensure that physical distancing protocols can be met, a scheduled amount of time in September for teachers to prepare for this new education model, and greater testing of safety measures before they are unrolled in schools.

The BCTF says it would like to see the B.C. government delay implementing its current restart plan until the joint steering committee can develop solutions to the federation’s concerns.

Education Minister Rob Fleming said Wednesday that he understands teachers’ concerns and that the B.C. government will “continue to work with them to provide answers” to their questions.

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