

Toronto school board says it needs more space, more time to prepare for smaller classes. The city says it can help ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Toronto public school board wants to create smaller elementary class sizes this fall — a key demand of parents and educators during the COVID-19 pandemic — but in order to do that, school reopening might have to be delayed a week, or the start-up date staggered, says the chair.

“We will probably go for smaller class sizes,” and a vote on the issue is scheduled for early next week, said newly elected chair Alexander Brown, the trustee for Willowdale.

“But the issue is, where do we put all the kids? In my area, schools are at 100, 110 per cent capacity. We don’t have any room. We need time to find space in libraries or community centres or wherever we can to set up those classes.”

The city of Toronto is offering to help with extra space required to offer smaller classes, loaning use of community centres or other city buildings.

On Thursday, Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced new funding for boards’ COVID costs, and also said they could dip further into their reserves to fund more staff.

While the Toronto board is reluctant to fund all the extra staffing using reserves — it would cost about \$20 million for some 200 extra teachers — it is hoping to be able to access some previously promised provincial funding to take as little as possible from its contingency fund.

But Brown said regardless of how the positions are paid for, the board needs about a week to reorganize classrooms and find space, and said the director and previous chair have had discussions with the city about moving into unused public space.

“Our goal is to bring in smaller class sizes for safety first, and that’s what parents are telling us — they want those smaller classes, period.”

However, Brown said, “if (the government) told us this about a month ago, we might have been able to do it for the start of the school year.”

The Toronto District School Board’s plan could see 200 teachers hired and elementary class sizes shrink to 15 to 20 students, depending on the grade. It would mean a shorter school day to accommodate teacher prep time.

After an unrelated event Friday, Toronto Mayor John Tory told reporters the TDSB first approached the city about borrowing space about a month ago, and talks continue.

School board officials have been “non-specific in the sense that they haven’t said, as of yet, ‘We want this community centre or that space,’” Tory said.

The city offer stands, Tory added, saying “we will do our very best,” to help ensure kids get back to school safely.

In a formal letter sent to both TDSB and TCDSB officials Friday, Toronto Public Health repeated its earlier recommendation for smaller class sizes and that schools consider pushing back the scheduled September start date or stagger start times for students “in order to allow sufficient time for public health measures to be incorporated.”

The Aug. 14 letter from Dr. Eileen de Villa, the city’s medical officer of health, said that while TPH is “generally supportive” of the ministry’s back-to-school plan, it also made several recommendations to “build” on those measures.

Physical distancing for elementary school children could be achieved by splitting kindergarten classes into two cohorts, according to the letter, noting that it would require more room and more staff.

It also recommended mandating students and staff fill out a questionnaire as part of an active screening process when entering the school rather than the self-assessment now required under provincial guidelines.

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