

Province pledges to make 70 substitute teachers full time to ease back-to-school concerns ^[1]

New minister Tom Osborne says more changes could be coming

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EXCERPTS

After hearing many concerns about the province's back-to-school plan, new Education Minister Tom Osborne made a big change Thursday morning, and said more changes could be coming.

Osborne met with the school boards, unions, Premier Andrew Furey and the opposing parties' education critics Thursday morning to discuss what they could do to ease concerns as students head back to classes amid a pandemic.

The result: 70 substitute teachers will be hired full time to add more resources to schools in September.

"Substitute teachers went through a very difficult time with the early closures of schools due to COVID, so this provides a great level of security for them, and surety they know they're going to work," Osborne said. "They know what school they're assigned to."

Osborne also announced the formation of an all-party committee on education issues, with the PCs' Craig Pardy and NDP's Jim Dinn, both of whom are former school administrators.

"This issue is far more important than politics," said Osborne. "I want to thank them for being part of this and for putting politics aside."

Osborne assumed the role as education minister Wednesday, taking over from Brian Warr, who was moved to the Department of Children, Seniors and Social Development.

Children's advocate weighs in

The changes come after many complaints from parents, teachers, political figures and others that stemmed from the province's plan to put kids back in classrooms.

The province's Child and Youth Advocate Jackie Lake Kavanaugh told CBC News she would like to see parts of the plan, released Monday, revisited, such as busing. The plan leaves about 6,000 students without a ride to or from school this fall in an effort to cap student ridership to maintain distancing.

"We're looking at a lot of places in the province where there are no sidewalks. There are busy streets, there are busy intersections that children have to cross. So, it's a safety issue," Kavanaugh said.

"I would think that there probably needs to be a Plan B for the busing, and I think that that's reasonable."

Osborne said Thursday that the issue was discussed in the morning meeting, and they hope to have an update within the next seven to 10 days.

With fewer kids on buses, Kavanaugh also has concerns with absenteeism across the province, a chronic issue she highlighted in a 2019 report stating that 6,600 English school district students had missed 10 per cent of the 2016-17 school year.

Physical distancing regulations have played a big role in public health's effort to keep COVID-19 at bay, but Kavanaugh said the school plan is short on specifics.

"The plan speaks to physical distancing but in a fair amount of generality," she said.

"I think that physical distancing is a real issue. If you have large classes and if you have the physical limitations of the walls of a classroom, there's only so many ways you can configure a class."

The issue with home-schooling is also at top of mind for Kavanaugh. She said parents really have to be prepared if they are to take on the role of a teacher. If home-schooling doesn't work out, Kavanaugh said transitioning back to class could be tough.

"For parents, they need to think really, really carefully in taking on such a huge commitment and make sure they have this planned through," she said.

"If home-schooling hasn't worked, then at what point in the curriculum do [the children] come back and what does the transition look like? Are they behind their classmates? What does that catch up need to look like, and how are they supported?"

Kindergarten petition

Meanwhile, parents like Vanessa Baker are upset they aren't allowed to attend the first day of kindergarten with their children, in what will be anything but a normal first year at school.

Baker said the first day of kindergarten will be her four-year-old son's first real day away from her, and he needs the reassurance from a familiar face to get settled in.

"As of right now they're expecting us just to drop our four- or five-year-olds off at the door and walk away.... I don't want to traumatize him by dropping him at the door," Baker said.

Osborne again said it's an issue he hopes to find an answer to, but said it wasn't addressed in Thursday's meeting.

"It's a heartstring issue. I can't make any guarantees but I am absolutely committed to that," he said.

Baker started a petition calling for permission of parents and caregivers to attend the first day of kindergarten with their children. With Kinderstart — a program that gets pre-K children acquainted with school ahead of their first full year — cut short due to the pandemic, Baker said those kids are now under-prepared.

The petition had gathered more than 6,000 signatures as of Wednesday night.

Baker said parents will take any precautions necessary if it means being able to attend the first day.

"They would definitely wear a mask, they would self-screen, the same screening used to get into the airport or long-term-care facility, hand sanitizer, gloves, anything," she said.

"You name it, we'll participate in anything they want for us to be able to enter."

The first day of school is Sept. 9.

Region: Newfoundland ^[3]

Tags: school system ^[4]

Source URL (modified on 26 Aug 2020): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/08/province-pledges-make-70-substitute-teachers-full-time-ease-back>

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