

Alberta's K-12 students return to in-person learning Monday ^[1]

Author: Gilligan, Melissa

Source: Global News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 11 Jan 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPT

Alberta students in Grades K-12 return to in-classroom learning this week.

Students in Grades 7-12 have been learning online since Nov. 30. K-6 students, meanwhile, remained in school until winter break on Dec. 18 but moved to online learning for a week after winter break concluded.

Alberta's UCP government announced the mandatory move to online learning in late November as part of new, stronger public health measures to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 across the province.

Licensed daycares, out-of-school programs and preschools were able to continue operating as long as providers followed all public health orders.

The return to in-person learning doesn't impact those who have been participating in online learning since the start of the school year, who will continue on with their existing schedules.

Education minister addresses parents, students in letter

In a letter that went out to students and parents across the province, Education Minister Adriana LaGrange said the decision to resume in-class learning was "reaffirmed after the careful consideration of the importance of attending school in person, as well as the latest evidence of COVID-19 cases dropping in all school-age groups in December."

"For many students, particularly younger children, learning at home can be challenging from an academic, social and emotional perspective. We know the vast majority of students across all grades learn better in a classroom environment where they can connect with their teacher and interact with peers."

"Understandably, some of you are feeling anxious due to the rise of COVID-19 in our communities around the world," LaGrange added. "I want to assure you that we have a comprehensive plan to continue student learning throughout the pandemic."

"The safety of your children, their teachers and all school staff remains our top priority."

Pediatricians weigh in

Dr. Tehseen Ladha is a pediatrician in Edmonton and an assistant professor of Pediatrics at the University of Alberta.

She's concerned with Alberta returning to in-school learning and would prefer it be delayed given the high number of COVID-19 cases in the community.

Alternatively, Ladha would like to see additional measures put in place.

"Although many schools mandate masking — at least above certain grades — we know that the kids aren't physically distanced and we also know ventilation within the classrooms hasn't been optimized and many, many health organizations have acknowledged that those things are essential in mitigating the spread of COVID."

Her biggest concern is the new UK variant.

"It's at least 50 per cent more transmissible, from what we know, which means it's very, very, very infectious. We've seen in the United Kingdom, we've seen in Ireland, their curves go sky high with COVID once the UK variant gets hold."

"If it is prevalent, it will just spread like rapid fire, and be taken home to parents and elderly family members who live within the home and are at high risk."

Dr. Stephen Freedman is an emergency physician at Alberta Children's Hospital and professor of Pediatrics and Emergency Medicine at the Cummings School of Medicine at the University of Calgary.

He says the decision to return to in-school learning should be a regional one, weighing the pros and cons to children and families, as well as the pressure on the health-care system.

"What are the downsides and the upsides of children being in school?"

Freedman also says studies show in-school transmission remains quite low — an estimated five per cent.

"Although we are restarting in-person school for children, everything else needs to remain the same and we need to remain really, really vigilant on what is going on outside of school.

"The real impact is not on the children themselves when they get COVID," Freedman said. "Children in Canada account for approximately 16 per cent of COVID cases but just one per cent of hospitalizations. And on a recent review of the Public Health Agency of Canada website, there are three deaths to date from the start of the pandemic.

"They are not the reason we are restricting exposures in kids. It's really because of the risk of transmission to adults and the elderly, which is where we're seeing lots of morbidity and mortality."

Freedman believes Alberta was too slow to implement restrictions in October and November when COVID-19 rates started spiking and the province is still dealing with that surge now.

"While the numbers are not as low as most experts, including myself, would like to see in the province, I do think that for the mental health of the children, and for their education, in-school learning is crucially important.

"I've never seen the mental health strain on our children as bad as it currently is," he said. "On any given day, in the emergency department in Calgary, about 25 to 50 per cent of the patients in the emergency department are there due to mental health concerns."

ATA concerned about return to in-classroom learning

As students head back to in-classroom learning, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) is again pushing for more support for educators across the province.

"I have concerns about the return to school," ATA president Jason Schilling told Global News. "Teachers want to be at school with their students (and) we know students want to be at school learning. ... However, I feel like we're sending our students and our staff back into schools into the exact same scenario that caused them to pivot out of school late fall/early winter last year."

In November, the ATA produced a report outlining eight actions it felt would help keep schools safe, including a request to reduce class sizes to assist with physical distancing.

"Twenty-five per cent of our respondents in our last survey said that they had classes over 30 or 40 students," Schilling said. "We need to split those classes, in particular, in order to increase physical distancing within those classrooms.

"We also need to have conversations about how to support teachers with health protocols within those schools — hire extra custodians to help with the health protocols."

Also included in the report was a request for officials to address educational assistant shortages and a "critical" substitute teacher shortage.

"We should be hiring extra educational assistants to assist students as they are doing this cycle of in-class learning then pivoting online because of maybe a COVID-19 case."

"There's a lot of stress and anxiety with being in class and all of a sudden having to pivot online for two weeks," Schilling continued. "We know not every student has access to technology, so teachers are working extremely hard to make sure that they're ready and prepared for when this happens.

"Schools need more support as we go through the remainder of this pandemic."

"There's still a lot of high (COVID-19) positivity rates in the community and we know that the community spread will echo into schools, so we need to make sure we're doing the things with our education plan to reinforce safety factors in schools."

In her letter to students and staff, LaGrange noted that "only 0.4 per cent of students and staff tested positive in total from the beginning of the school year until the winter break."

"The chief medical officer of health confirmed that the protocols in place are protective against in-school transmission, and analysis of all our cases in school-aged children indicated that only six per cent of these cases were determined to have been acquired from school."

Support Our Students Alberta — a non-partisan, non-profit public education advocacy group — is also voicing concern over the return to in-classroom learning.

Speaking to Global News, spokesperson Wing Li said families across the province are feeling a lot of anxiety.

“We need more resources,” Li said. “More funding for more helpers in schools, ensuring that classes are as small as can be, ... more safety measures.”

In a statement to Global News, the minister of education’s press secretary noted the province has provided “every single school authority with an increase in operating funding for this school year – roughly \$120 million across the province.

“We have provided school boards with flexibility to use their reserves, of which there has been roughly \$363 million in taxpayer funding available.”

As of Sunday, the provincial government was reporting 14,116 active cases of COVID-19 in Alberta. In total, 794 people are being cared for in hospital, including 128 people in intensive care.

Provincially, 1,284 deaths have been recorded.

More information on education and child care in Alberta amid the COVID-19 pandemic can be found on the province’s website.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: school-age ^[4]

health and safety ^[5]

COVID-19 ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 12 Jan 2021): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/01/alberta%E2%80%99s-k-12-students-return-person-learning-monday>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/01/alberta%E2%80%99s-k-12-students-return-person-learning-monday> [2]

<https://globalnews.ca/news/7567832/alberta-in-person-learning-covid-19/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7859> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-age> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/health-and-safety> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9040>