

# **Response to Alberta Education**

**Regarding**

**The Alberta Education *Guidance for Summer School  
on Re-entry***

## **Preamble**

It is of the utmost importance that decisions involving K–12 schooling include the input of teachers. The Alberta Teachers' Association (the Association) appreciates the opportunity to provide recommendations on the various and evolving aspects of COVID-19. This response is structured to align with selected sections of Alberta Education's *Guidance for Summer School on Re-entry* (the document) and provides comments only on those specific sections.

## **Overview**

The document asks school authorities to establish their own COVID-19 plans prior to reopening summer school programs. The Association believes that safety cannot be a school authority–by–school authority decision. Clear and specific requirements must be communicated by Alberta Education as opposed to mere “guidelines.” It is essential that plans for re-entry be in accordance with the most recent directives provided by Alberta's chief medical officer of health (CMOH) and informed by local medical officers of health (MOHs). There are far too many “shoulds” and “considers” as opposed to “musts” and “requires.”

It was noted that the document makes no reference to personal protective equipment (PPE) except in the section “Responding to Illness.” While the recommendation in this section regarding the safe donning of masks is sound (we note that there is no reference to the equally important safe doffing of masks), it is only in the context of responding to an illness. The May 2020 Government of Alberta document entitled *Guidance for Wearing of Non-Medical Face Masks for the General Public* states, “Masks, including homemade cloth masks or non- medical face masks, are another way to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 in areas where physical distancing (2 metres distance between individuals) may be challenging or not possible” (p 1). In a school setting, it may not be possible to maintain this distancing at all times; therefore, it is critical that there be a requirement for masks and other PPE in schools. The use of PPE cannot be solely in reaction to illness, but rather should be used as a proactive measure to stop the spread of the virus. Alberta Education should fund, procure and distribute PPE for all Alberta schools.

## **General Building Safety**

The document should specify that division and school maintenance personnel are responsible for general building safety and all safety measures related to cleaning. Specific information on the standards of disinfectants to combat COVID-19 should be included, and/or a link to specific information from Alberta Health Services (AHS) should be provided.

There is another gap in this section that is critically important: a cleaning regimen and schedule must be implemented according to the advice of the CMOH for all common surfaces (door handles, push plates and washrooms). This is key to preventing outbreaks.

## **Screening**

The language in this section is far too weak. Self-screening or parental screening must take place prior to entering school buildings, and the wording in this section must be strengthened from “should” to “must.” “Should” implies that there may be an option not to complete the screening tool and still gain entry to the school building. For example, it says, “parents and students *should* be provided a copy of the screening tool upon school registration with the expectation that it needs to be completed on a daily basis” and that “signs *should* be posted reminding persons not to enter if they have COVID-19 symptoms” (p.2). These steps cannot be optional if student and staff safety and health are at the forefront.

Thinking ahead to future phases, screening must take place not only prior to entering the school building, but also prior to accessing school transportation. Alberta Education should create a digital tool as part of future re-entry phases. Handling hundreds of pieces of paper each day prior to entering a large school is not feasible, and it may create difficulties should students arrive without a complete screening checklist. Students and families could also be encouraged to download the ABTraceTogether app (or a similar application that is apparently under consideration for adoption nationally) and ensure that it is active to facilitate contact tracing in the event of an outbreak.

## **Cohorting**

The language in this section is not congruent with the current information from the CMOH. Physical distancing is not simply a “consideration”; as it is described in this section, it is a requirement. Physical distancing means a distance of not less than two metres must be maintained. As classroom spaces vary in size, it must address the spacing required rather than the number of students. In some settings, 15 students may be too many to physically distance while other settings may be able to accommodate more. Physical distancing may change as the information from the CMOH evolves during various phases of the provincial relaunch strategy, and this provision could be added. Any calculation of physical distancing must also include the teacher, the principal and any support staff who spend time in the classroom (plan for the maximum number).

## **Expectations for Drop-off/Entry Areas at Schools**

This section should also add protocols and requirements for signage regarding physical distancing for students and parents who may gather in parking lots, and should also discourage carpooling, particularly in the case of high school students.

## **Expectations for Visitors and Other Service Providers Entering the School**

An important point missing from this section is that visitors must be informed of all the protocols in place and the requirement to follow them. There must also be a place to sign in and out of the school building to facilitate contact tracing in the event of an outbreak.

## **Mitigations for High Traffic Areas in School Facilities**

Limiting bathroom occupancy will require more than just signage—it will require active supervision by appropriate personnel.

## **Expectations for Shared Use Equipment**

This section highlights the need for PPE, particularly gloves, as they will need to be donned prior to cleaning surfaces. It also will require monitoring and implementing by school personnel other than the teacher, who will not be able to ensure that this happens while also providing instruction, which is their primary function.

## **Ancillary Spaces**

The use of the phrase “avoided whenever possible” provides alternate possibilities and, again, directives are critical. The phrase “unprotected in-person singing” (p.8) is unclear. Does this mean singing without masks? Consideration should be given to providing a glossary of such terms in the document. In future work on re-entry planning, it will also be important to consider how students can participate in arts and wellness activities safely.

## **Responding to Illness**

This section highlights the need for substitute teachers. They are a critical part of the system, whether in person or during emergency remote teaching situations. Students should be receiving instruction, and it should not be interrupted if teachers become ill or need to be away for reasons not related to the virus, or if they become ill with COVID-19.

## **Learnings from the Association’s Pandemic Research Study with Summer School Implications**

From an analysis of the tens of thousands of qualitative comments in this study by researchers at the University of Alberta and the Association, the top three concerns of Alberta teachers about re-entering school buildings are as follows:

### **1. School safety, including**

- Personal protective equipment
- Physical distancing measures
- Reducing large class sizes
- School cleanliness and hygiene

### **2. Student learning needs for school re-entry, including**

- Support for vulnerable populations, child poverty and growing inequity
- Student engagement and motivation
- Curricular gaps when schools “go back”
- Less high-stakes testing and more authentic assessments

### **3. Well-being for all, including**

- Mental wellness and health supports
- Greater focus on relationships
- Social–emotional learning
- More physical activity and play

Consideration should be given to students who need extra attention in summer school. In our research study, 62 per cent of teachers said access to extra help above and beyond classroom support was a top concern, and 64 per cent said technology (access and digital literacy) was a primary issue during the pandemic. The following key groups are being identified as particularly at risk:

- Students living in poverty (77 per cent)
- Students in single-parent homes (71 per cent)
- Students with exceptionalities (diverse academic, physical and behavioural needs) (70 per cent)

- Students with English as a second language (68 per cent)

Note: Male students seem to be struggling somewhat more (38 per cent) than female students (30 per cent).

Reduced scheduling during summer school may also be an important consideration given the rise in fatigue in both students and teachers. Data from this research clearly shows that student engagement is declining and curricular gaps can be expected in a return to summer school.

- Students' overall readiness to learn (ready, willing, able) has declined (79 per cent)
- Students' ability to focus has declined (77 per cent)
- Students' checking in online each day has declined (67 per cent)

Our research clearly shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has *amplified* challenges with inequity and poverty and hit vulnerable Albertans the hardest. It has also *accelerated* new opportunities with digital technologies and collaboration within the school community that will support a re-entry plan. Both trajectories will be evident as students return to summer school.

Association research activities will continue to follow and monitor COVID-19 developments across Alberta in support of Alberta teachers and the interests of public education.

## **Conclusion**

Summer school re-entry is an important part of the return to public school buildings. It will inform the next steps toward more normal operations and, if done well, will provide confidence that students and staff can return safely. We reiterate that such confidence will be derived from clear and specific messaging from Alberta Education that outlines requirements as opposed to “guidelines” that may or may not be adopted across the province. As noted in our previous submission to Alberta Education on the broader re-entry plan, much confusion and anxiety is created when school authority practices are divergent, especially in matters that should be made clear. If there must be different practices, such as during localized outbreaks, then they should be dealt with separately from the requirements provided to all school authorities.

Other aspects of re-entry not directly related to safety must be created in consultation with the teachers and school staff involved and provide consistent and accurate information to the people who will be working and learning in these environments. The Association would be pleased to collaborate on these and other related matters. As with our previous response to the 2020/21 school re-entry plan, our recommendations are subject to change as the situation evolves and the impacts of the various phases of re-entry become clear.