

The Learning Team

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A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education

THE NEXT NORMAL



EDITOR'S NOTE

The 'next normal' is here



Lisa Everitt
Editor
The Learning Team

The COVID-19 global pandemic created a situation where the lives of Canadians have been upended and changed. Over the past 17 months, COVID introduced many changes to our social interactions. We now go to public spaces with masks, we social distance and we limit our social contacts. In addition, our economy experienced significant shifts, with technology emerging as an essential tool for communication and business continuation as well as recognition that some jobs should be considered essential, for example, grocery store workers, health-care workers and those involved in ensuring our supply chains are intact, to name a few. Finally, many families have experienced significant hardship because of illness and death attributable to COVID-19.

The changes experienced over the past 17 months have also impacted schools, students, parents and guardians, and school staff. There have been multiple school closures in Alberta, sometimes provincially declared because of rising COVID numbers, others on a school-by-school basis because staff and students have to quarantine. As more vaccines are being administered to Albertans 12 years and older, there is a confidence that the end of the pandemic is nearing. By June 18, 2021, the premier of Alberta announced that, with 70 per cent of Albertans having received one vaccination, the majority of public health restrictions would be removed and the province would be fully opened to activities that were previously banned. On July 1 the province lifted all public health measures except for isolation/quarantine requirements and some restrictions in health-care settings and public transit.

The prospect of returning to more normal times has created a space for reflection about what our "next normal" should be. We know that we cannot return to how things were before the pandemic. We know that COVID-19 and its variants will continue to be an issue. We are in a time when our future is being reshaped and that consideration can be focused on individual behaviour and societal norms. It is a time when many of us wonder what, as the next normal proceeds, should be continued and what should be changed.

"Instead of simply returning to life before the pandemic, what if we could institute new personal and social norms that are more balanced, just and equitable?" wrote Stanford psychologist Melissa de Witte in March 2021.

Here at *The Learning Team*, changes brought on by the pandemic as well as advancements in technology have presented a re-examination of the way we do our work. After many discussions, we've decided to discontinue the printing and distribution of hard copies directly to schools, beginning in the fall of 2021. This, therefore, is the last printed issue of *The Learning Team*. However, we will continue to publish *The Learning Team* electronically. It will be posted online on the ATA website and *The Learning Team* website (thelearningteam.ca).

This edition of *The Learning Team* reflects on the pandemic and the lessons we learned together over the past year. In addition, this issue looks forward to the new normal with an optimism that parents and teachers will work together to create a bright future for students.

Lisa Everitt is an executive staff officer with the Alberta Teachers' Association.



Parents and teachers team up in advocacy



Brandi Rai
President,
Alberta School Councils Association

Some of us just dragged our weary selves through the thrum of summer with the hope of patching ourselves up from the long school year we just survived. Others bounced along to the beat that is summer break with their children and doled out fun like confetti at a loud, long party. Whether you're a parent on either of those ends, or some muddled amalgamation in between, I want to remind you that your resilience during the past year was forged with the love that parents have for their babies.

Your children made it through a whole year of learning in a pandemic because of you and your ability to show up, even when you're bone tired and spilling anxiety because of the tumultuous landscape around you. Economy woes – yes they're there. The stability of the health-care system – what a worry that has been. Saying goodbye to loved ones with limited closure for grief – that's been a reality for lots of families across our province. Balancing work, home life, child care and your own mental health – yes you did that delicate dance over and over during these last 17 months.

One of the many partners that families have had during this last year has been teachers. Parents and teachers have worked together to help students survive and, in some cases, thrive during a global pandemic.

Even in the absence of a pandemic, parents and teachers are uniquely poised in our children's lives to collaborate so that the whole child is supported and educated in meaningful ways. When parents and teachers work in partnership, individual students benefit but also entire school communities. Individual parents and teachers share common goals, and organizations such as the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Councils' Association advocate for them provincially.

Throughout our province, united voices can be heard, from those who want our children to be successful students in classes that are an appropriate size, with inclusive experiences in a well-funded, equitably accessed education system. Parents and teachers dream together, we listen to each other and work with each other. Who else is listening to our voices? Who else is envisioning a better education

system for our children? Who else is working alongside parents and teachers in authentic collaboration? It is not always our elected provincial representatives, even though it is their role to do so.

It is these missed opportunities for strengthening our education system that have added to the stress and strain felt by families and teachers this year. Packed classrooms, poor ventilation, minimal provincial funding assistance for additional health protocols, the collapse of contact tracing, the additional workloads that fell to teachers and administrators – those just scratch the surface of the strain on our education system this year.

Add to that a funding formula that many districts have found to be insufficient to meet the needs of their local students, and a draft curriculum that is so inept that thousands of Albertans are petitioning for a rewrite – it is a wonder that parents and teachers are still standing in the face of provincial mismanagement.

Yet here we are, still standing, and with the responsibility to walk forward and advocate for change because it is our students, our babies, who are impacted by shoddy policies, racist curriculum and a dereliction of decency.

It is imperative that we continue to build partnerships with other parents, with teachers, with trustees and with community members so that every Albertan has an understanding of what is happening in education.

We, as parents, must not be complacent about the strain added to our teacher partners by an overly ambitious timeline for implementing the refuse that our provincial leaders is claiming as curriculum. We must hold fast to the representative model that holds our elected officials accountable so that the curriculum is adjusted to reflect inclusivity, age-appropriate outcomes and the ethos that our children deserve. We must listen and learn from our trustees (there is an election in the fall, so talking to your candidates now is a must) as they navigate governing local education with inadequate funding and provincial policies that are shortsighted.

As we conclude the summer that was supposed to be the best ever, hopefully parents have refilled their cups with community, connection and determination, and are ready and willing to join with teachers in advocating for all students this fall and beyond.

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The future could be better and more inclusive

“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new.” – Socrates

Lisa Everitt
Editor, *The Learning Team*

On July 1, the province of Alberta lifted the majority of public health restrictions imposed due to COVID-19. In addition, the department of education has released its plan for the upcoming school year, which includes an expectation that schools will reopen in a normal fashion, with in-person learning, extracurricular activities, and the reintroduction of Provincial Achievement Tests and diploma exams. On the other hand, the plan also provides for contingencies in the event of COVID-19 outbreaks.

The lifting of restrictions appears to signal that all is well and we can carry on with our lives as we did before the pandemic. However, returning to normal routines and increased social interaction has the potential to cause some nervousness. This is normal and should be expected, said UBC professor and psychologist Steven Taylor in a May episode of *The Dose* on CBC radio. Taylor also reminded listeners that it's important to be gentle with themselves.

Some people may experience uncertainty and anxiety about the return to school in September. Given that COVID-19 will remain a public health concern going forward, we know we will not be able to return to how things were prior to the pandemic, even though vaccinations are widely available for all Albertans 12 years and older. In terms of schools operating in the fall, the government's plan acknowledges that there will need to be continued health measures, especially in elementary schools where the majority of students do not have access to vaccines. At the time of the drafting of this article, the Association is preparing its recommendations for a safe return to schools in September.



“We have an opportunity to reimagine a better, stronger, more inclusive future for our students and public education in Alberta,” said Alberta Teachers’ Association president Jason Schilling in a statement released July 5.

What would the Association envision as a more inclusive, better future?

There are many aspects of public education that can be made better for students and their learning. As we emerge from the pandemic, the Association is advocating for additional resources to support the well-being and learning of all students. Unfortunately, the education budget for the 2021/2022 school year cut instructional funding by \$27 million. This will mean fewer resources for more students as Alberta's population continues to grow. In addition, there has been no additional funding set aside for the well-being of students in spite of the widespread recognition that the impact of the pandemic on student health has been substantial. Finally, school boards will need to continue to provide resources to pay for health measures and safety in schools, and this means less money will be available to support children's education.

The Association also recognizes that learning opportunities for students should be of the highest quality. Proper resourcing and materials for curriculum are essential, and assessment should be authentically administered in classrooms. Therefore, the Association recommends cancelling unnecessary standardized testing such as the Provincial Achievement Test and diploma exams to allow the system to de-stress. Further, the Association has called on the government to halt the current draft curriculum implementation schedule so it can be reworked in collaboration with the profession to continue Alberta's strong international and national reputation of educational excellence.

There are so many ways that public education can be enhanced for students so they thrive in Alberta's society. Undoubtedly, many of the goals outlined in this article are shared by teachers and parents. As we move forward into a new normal, the partnership between parents and teachers will help assure that the future is a bright one for our students, who have experienced so much change in the past 17 months.

The Learning Team moves to digital-only publication



Cory Hare
Managing Editor, *The Learning Team*

This is the last issue of *The Learning Team* that will be available in print as we're moving to digital-only publication.

This change is a response to media consumption habits that have changed drastically since *The Learning Team* first came into existence. You're no doubt aware that information consumers have been trending away from print and toward digital for the better part of the last two decades. Various studies have shown that people (particularly younger demographics) are increasingly accessing their information from digital sources rather than print. For example, in 2019 the research firm eMarketer forecast that Canadian media consumption had reached a tipping point whereby people were spending more daily time accessing digital content than with traditional media like print, television and radio.

The shift away from print has been particularly difficult for traditional media, such as newspapers, that rely on advertising revenue to remain viable as business entities. Throughout Canada, North America and the world, many newspapers have closed down while countless others have scaled back or ceased their printing activities and shifted to an integrated, multimedia model that is heavily focused on digital.

It's not that print is no longer a viable form of publication. It still has its place and the ATA is sticking with it for many of its publications, such as our newspaper (the *ATA News*) and our magazine (*ATA Magazine*).

However, given the realities of media consumption in 2021 and *The Learning Team's* target audience, we feel it's time to make this switch for this particular publication.

Our decision hinged on two fundamental questions: 1) Who are we trying to reach? and 2) What's the best way to reach them?

The answer to the first question is simple — this publication is aimed at parents of school-aged children. When *The Learning Team* was created in 1997, the concept was that parents and teachers are natural teammates in the education of children, and our content has always been aimed at helping parents be informed contributors to this team effort. When the publication came into being, widespread use of the internet was years into the future and social media was even more distant. At that time, the best way to try to reach parents in a widespread way was to print the publication and distribute it to schools addressed to the chair of the parent council. That's the process that was established and it has remained in place ever since.

However, as you're no doubt aware, the world is much different now, and the reality is that most parents don't spend a significant amount of time in schools.

As a parent, you are busy. You are out there in the world, running errands, taking your kids to sporting and creative endeavours, taking care of your career and keeping your household functioning. As you're doing all this, you have a wireless, two-way communication device in your pocket that you're likely using constantly. You're tapped into social media and newsfeeds. This is how information is disseminated in 2021.



Going forward, *The Learning Team* will continue to publish a new batch of material three times per school year, based on a specific topical theme related to public education. We also have the capacity to produce one-off articles and material as needed to respond to emergent issues of concern to parents. Rather than sending this information to a printer, we'll post it to our new dedicated website at thelearningteam.ca and share it via social media.

The Alberta Teachers' Association has a significant social media presence, and *The Learning Team* will leverage that presence to share its content. We anticipate that we'll be seeking assistance from the Alberta School Councils Association to ensure that this content is shared even more widely and reaches as many parents as possible. As time progresses, we will continue to position thelearningteam.ca as a repository of information that parents can consult to learn about the many issues that exist within the public education sphere.

Please bookmark this website and, if you haven't done so already, connect with the ATA on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. See you in cyberspace.

New guide promotes digital wellness in the wake of COVID

Kristelle Lavallee Collins
Senior Content Strategist, Digital Wellness Lab,
Boston Children's Hospital

The COVID-19 pandemic made us more aware of the presence and power that media and technology have in our daily lives. Everything from consuming news, tracking health data, attending classes, seeing family and friends, working and even attending major life ceremonies from birthdays and graduations to weddings and funerals were all achieved through the safe social distancing that screen media provide. While mask mandates, travel restrictions and quarantine protocols altered our behaviour, so too did our relationship with screens. For many families, the time together allowed for greater awareness of how these powerful technologies and the ways we interact with them shape our feelings, habits and interactions with others.

The spring of 2020 saw the release of the first edition of the Digital Wellness Lab's *Family Digital Wellness Guide*, which saw an increasing amount of global interest and downloads with the spread of the pandemic. As many families found themselves unexpectedly facing a variety of issues, including school closures, remote work, job losses, child care and health insecurities, parents turned to the guide to help them healthfully manage work and life when both were largely playing out on screens.

As we continue to come out of the pandemic, many of us are reflecting on our collective experiences and what we have learned. The question of how to achieve true "digital wellness" is top of mind as we venture from quarantine bubbles to vaccination appointments. Moving forward as individuals, families and society requires integrating the knowledge we have gained, and we find ourselves, again, looking for science-based guidance.

The latest edition of the *Family Digital Wellness Guide* is presented to all as a comprehensive resource for families today, updated with the latest scientific research and expertise from the past year.

Organized by developmental stage, the new guide has added information and adapted recommendations based on the most recent findings from the world's leading experts. This wealth of knowledge has been distilled and packaged into practical "protips" for everyday life. Each of these protips addresses a health-related media topic to help readers recognize areas of concern, alleviate fears and optimize family well-being.

Within each section of the guide is also a most asked parenting question pertaining to the section's specific developmental stage. These questions are paired with an answer by Dr. Michael Rich (the Mediatician) that is drawn upon his years of experience as a father, pediatrician and Harvard professor, and steeped in the latest research from the field.

Lastly, the guide also includes new "ice breakers," that will empower caregivers to address those trickier life situations involving media from a place of knowledge and love – opening the doors to healthy, respectful and empathetic conversations with the people who mean the most.

As our technologies continue to evolve, so too do our relationships with them – and with each other. Although we will never know exactly what our future holds, we can rely on expert advice, along with the best available scientific evidence, to help us make informed decisions for our children.



Family Digital Wellness Guide

What Parents Need to Know
About Media and Their Child



Boston Children's Hospital
Digital Wellness Lab

Where the world comes for answers



The Digital Wellness Lab's **2021 Family Digital Wellness Guide** is freely available online and as a downloadable PDF here: <https://digitalwellnesslab.org/parents/family-digital-wellness-guide>.

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