

B.C. school classes are back, but not back to normal

Catholic students joined their public school counterparts across B.C. June 1 in heading back to school for the first time since their extended spring break.

But it's a far cry from a return to normal. In-class instruction has been suspended since March 17 due to the COVID-19 pandemic when all learning was moved online. The B.C. Ministry of Education is allowing schools to re-open, but with new distancing and sanitary measures in place, a cap on the number of students allowed back in and online learning still up and running for most children.

Manitoba and Quebec are the only other provinces resuming in-class learning in June, with restrictions. Most of the rest of country, including Ontario, won't open classrooms to students until at least September.

The guidelines for re-opening classrooms makes for a particularly complicated situation for teachers and parents, says Deacon Henk Luyten, superintendent for the Catholic Independent Schools of the Archdiocese of Vancouver.

"Our principals and teachers are miracle workers," he said.

Having just adjusted to teaching classes entirely online, teachers are now expected to make another 180-degree turn to a hybrid of the two, offering in-class learning to some students and online learning to others.

This with less than a month left before schools close for the summer June 26.

Luyten said there are some benefits to re-opening schools, even late in the year. Children of essential service workers and children with special or diverse needs can receive some extra help while their parents are at work or with online learning or completing assignments.

Parents have the choice of sending their children back to class on a part-time basis. The ministry's goal is a return to full-time classes in September as long as safety permits.

The ministry's K-12 Education Restart Plan calls for a maximum of 50 per cent of a school's K-5 students, and 20 per cent of Grades 6-12, to return to school. Luyten said a recent survey of parents with children in Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Vancouver shows the numbers of students going back to class will be lower than that.

The ministry also called for only two to three days a week of in-class instruction for children in K-5 and a single day a week of in-class instruction

in Grades 6-12.

Any child arriving at a Catholic school will first be screened for signs of a sore throat, cough, fever or sneezing, and asked if they have travelled internationally or been in contact with anyone diagnosed with COVID-19 in the last 14 days. A positive answer to any one of those will bar a child from entering the school.

Meanwhile, janitorial staff are following added cleaning measures as schools add signage or place tape on floors to mark where to stand, sit, line up and even what direction to walk.

Catholic high schools are also working to find ways to celebrate their Grade 12 graduates in a safe way without drawing crowds of more than 50 people.

How long will this last? Luyten said it is impossible to say what school will look like in the fall.

“For a long time, we’ve advocated ... that people become familiar with technology because it provides us with avenues of communication should something like this happen,” he said.

But, “what we’ve found as well is the big thing that’s missing, and a big part of education, is the interaction between young people.”

In his view, making new friends, learning social norms and attending school Mass with peers are irreplaceable experiences found only in a physical school environment.

“I don’t think that this kind of online model or even the hybrid model is a viable model for normal growth and development of young people – their social and emotional and educational development,” he said.

“Schooling as we know it, with everybody together, is something that I think is going to continue and needs to continue.”