

Edmonton Catholic Schools places 708 staff on temporary layoff

The Edmonton Catholic School Division is temporarily laying off 708 staff in response to provincial government funding changes after classes were cancelled due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

Educational assistants took the biggest hit, with 479 layoffs. Only 134 remain on staff.



Laura Thibert

“It’s an extremely difficult day for Edmonton Catholic,” Laura Thibert, chair of the Edmonton Catholic school board, said after the cuts were announced April 16. “These are very valuable people and it’s been one of our most difficult decisions.”

The layoffs, the biggest in school division history, come a month after classes were suspended across Alberta to slow the spread of the coronavirus. The Alberta government redirected \$128 million in funding from Alberta Education into their COVID-19 response.

As a result, the Edmonton Catholic School Division lost \$5.7 million in provincial funding, primarily for transportation, educational assistants and support services.

“We think this is totally irresponsible and reckless,” said Gavin McGarrigle, western regional director for Unifor, which represents most of the 708 staff

who received layoff notices.



Gavin McGarrigle

“Just as we were trying to discover new ways to teach and support our kids through this pandemic the rug has been pulled out beneath us. Our members are upset for their livelihoods and their families, but it’s also a great loss for the students who needed their support.”

Jason Schilling, president of the Alberta Teachers Association, said the loss of educational assistants will be felt acutely.

“This will have a huge impact on teachers who really need to be able to reach all students right now,” Schilling said. “Educational assistants help put packages together for students who cannot access assignments online. They contact families and students on a direct one-to-one basis to ensure they’re accommodated.

“Especially for students with special needs, they provide an important service. No student should be disadvantaged because of this pandemic.”

Thibert said the school division will ensure the quality of learning remains the same for students.



Jason Schilling

The temporary layoffs also affected support staff in administration, second-language learning, career and technology services and other departments.

“They are taking important jobs away,” said Susan Slade, vice-president of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. The union represents 17 Edmonton Catholic staff who were temporarily laid off, including behavioural specialists, psychologists and youth coordinators.

“Students have these supports for a reason, and taking away these resources of specialized learning will really impact them.

“They’re already struggling with this new system of learning from home and parents having to help home school. The reduced funding by the provincial government is just sacrificing kids’ education. Kids deserve prioritized learning.”

Slade expects some of these layoffs may become permanent, as job losses were already expected following the provincial budget in February. However, Edmonton Catholic Schools has assured staff these layoffs will be temporary.

“The board fully expects the funding will be restored as soon as classes resume and these positions will be reinstated,” said Thibert. “This is all temporary. We do not foresee any additional layoffs in the future because of this pandemic.”

Nevertheless, Schilling believes their impact will be felt well into the future.

“A lot of these layoffs supported students who need a speech pathologist or would meet with a psychiatrist,” he said. “For a student who requires a speech

pathologist, to not have that support for three to four months could have long-term effects on their education and well-being.”

Exactly when schools and classrooms will reopen for students remains unknown. Thibert said it depends entirely on Alberta Health Services and Dr. Deena Hinshaw, the province’s chief medical officer of health.