

Edmonton schools announce preliminary reopening plans for upcoming school year

Edmonton's Catholic and public school divisions have announced joint plans for the upcoming school year to limit the number of students and teachers and the time they are in the classroom, in an effort to protect against the spread of COVID-19.

Starting this fall, students will have a [quarterly schedule](#) instead of the current semester system at most schools. Students will attend school for up to two blocks per day, taking one subject in the morning and another in the afternoon. In-person classes will be about 150 minutes. The start and dismissal times remain as usual.

Students will receive the same amount of instructional time as they did in a two-semester schedule. Diploma exams will be held November, January, April and June for each quarter.



Tim Cusack

"We've tried to maintain as near a normal return as possible," said Tim Cusack, deputy superintendent of [Edmonton Catholic Schools](#). "We're doing this to be nimble and responsive for whatever COVID reality comes in the fall. We're praying that it will be near-normal, in-person, face-to-face, because that's the best way to make connections and relationships."

The plans are preliminary, to be based on the COVID-19 situation in Alberta closer to August and September.

High-schoolers will receive their timetables, and elementary school principals will be in touch with parents, closer to August, outlining when they are expected to be in class. Cusack said the school division will provide public service announcements and videos to show exactly what the return to class will look like.

Cusack said ECSD is examining what the return to classes involve in terms of handwashing and sanitizing, as well as physical distancing.

“You’re planning against the unknown. You’re planning for multiple contingencies and trying to cover off multiple bases, but ultimately we’ll know the position and we’ll be ready for that.”

All of those efforts are contingent on the COVID-19 situation closer to the fall. The Alberta government has asked school divisions in the province to plan for three scenarios: a full return to in-person classes with physical distancing, a partial return, or full-time online learning.

As of June 29, there have been 8,067 active cases of COVID-19 – 559 of them currently active cases – in the province, according to [Alberta Health](#). Forty-one people are in hospital, nine in intensive care. There have been 154 deaths from the virus.

Both Edmonton school divisions have committed to quarterly model for the next school year, and other jurisdictions – including Fort Vermillion and Lethbridge – are looking at a similar schedule.

The quarterly model is better for student learning and for teacher engagement time, Cusack said, adding focusing on two subjects per day instead of four is more manageable for student and teacher.

That was one of the lessons ECSD learned this spring from the move by both Catholic and public school divisions to online learning to protect against COVID-19, Cusack said.

Some students found it difficult and overwhelming to focus on four courses. So did teachers who had to keep track of the work of more than 100 students who were limited by technology or family circumstances.

“We want to do better should we have to be back into a remote learning stance in the fall.”

For students or parents who don’t feel comfortable returning to in-person classes, Cusack noted ECSD has its Revelation Online virtual learning, summer schooling, and other alternative programming.

Cusak noted that an estimated 3,700 high school students are registered for summer school courses, whose classes are similar to the quarterly schedule planned for the fall.

“We know this year has been unlike any other for our students, staff and families,” Darrel Robertson, superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools, said in a June 29 news release.

“By moving to a quarterly schedule next year, it will allow our high schools to be nimble and adapt quickly if the situation with COVID-19 changes during the year. Students can focus on fewer subjects at a time to make the transition to at-home learning easier, if needed.”

Edmonton Catholic Schools has been using the quarterly schedule at Cardinal Collins High School Academic Centre for more than a decade. The centre is designed for students in their fourth and fifth year of high school who require an alternative way of finishing high school or need to upgrade Grade 12 diploma courses.

“The students there have reported that quartermesters have worked extremely well for them,” Robert Martin, chief superintendent of Edmonton Catholic Schools, said in the joint news release.

“Some of the benefits of the quarterly schedule is the ability to focus on fewer courses at one time and having a shorter exam break between quarters.”

Both school divisions note that high schools throughout Edmonton will offer a quarterly schedule except for J.H. Picard Catholic and Edmonton Public high schools that offer unique programming, such as kindergarten-to-Grade 12 schools or a specialized high school program.