

# School infections likely, but Edmonton Catholic officials pledge to manage and mitigate

The new school year starts next week with a fresh set of anxieties because of COVID-19.

“I just think it’s a big petri dish waiting to happen,” said Brigette Pady, one of about 10 parents waving placards and protesting outside St. John XIII Catholic junior high school in Edmonton.

The Aug. 28 protest came as Education Minister Adriana LaGrange visited the school privately to review COVID protocols and just hours before a public tour for reporters. The first day of school is Sept. 2.

Pady said her daughter Madeleine will be taking her first academic quarter of Grade 8 online because she doesn’t feel the Alberta government has provided school districts with enough funding and directives on face masks or limits on class sizes to protect students against COVID-19.



Protesters are seen outside St. John XXIII junior high school on Aug. 28. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

“Reduced class sizes would be a big one so kids can physically distance, because I’ve been in the school; I know how big the classes are,” Pady said.

Provincial guidelines say face masks are mandatory for older students, with some exceptions, but not for those in kindergarten to Grade 3. Additionally, face masks not required when students are seated in the classroom. Pady said that’s a mistake.

“I think they should be having to wear masks in all grades. Young kids can do it as well. I have nieces and nephews who are that age and they wear masks when they go out.”

Pady noted the protest was against the provincial government, not the Edmonton Catholic School Division.

“I think the district has done the best that it can. I love the school that my kids go to here.”

The media tour was a chance for the ECSD – one of the largest in the province – to show its COVID mitigation protocols and online learning options which, according to district officials, have taken months to implement.



**Robert Martin**

“This has been huge. It’s such a massive undertaking and it evolves hour by hour,” said Robert Martin, chief superintendent.

“We’re essentially offering our parents another school division, if you will, online with virtually the same staff, so the logistics in that are absolutely massive. That has been our greatest challenge.”

At St. John XXII school alone, 20 per cent of the 1,000 students are taking their academic year online, at least for the first quarter. Martin said the ECSD continues to add staff for online learning.

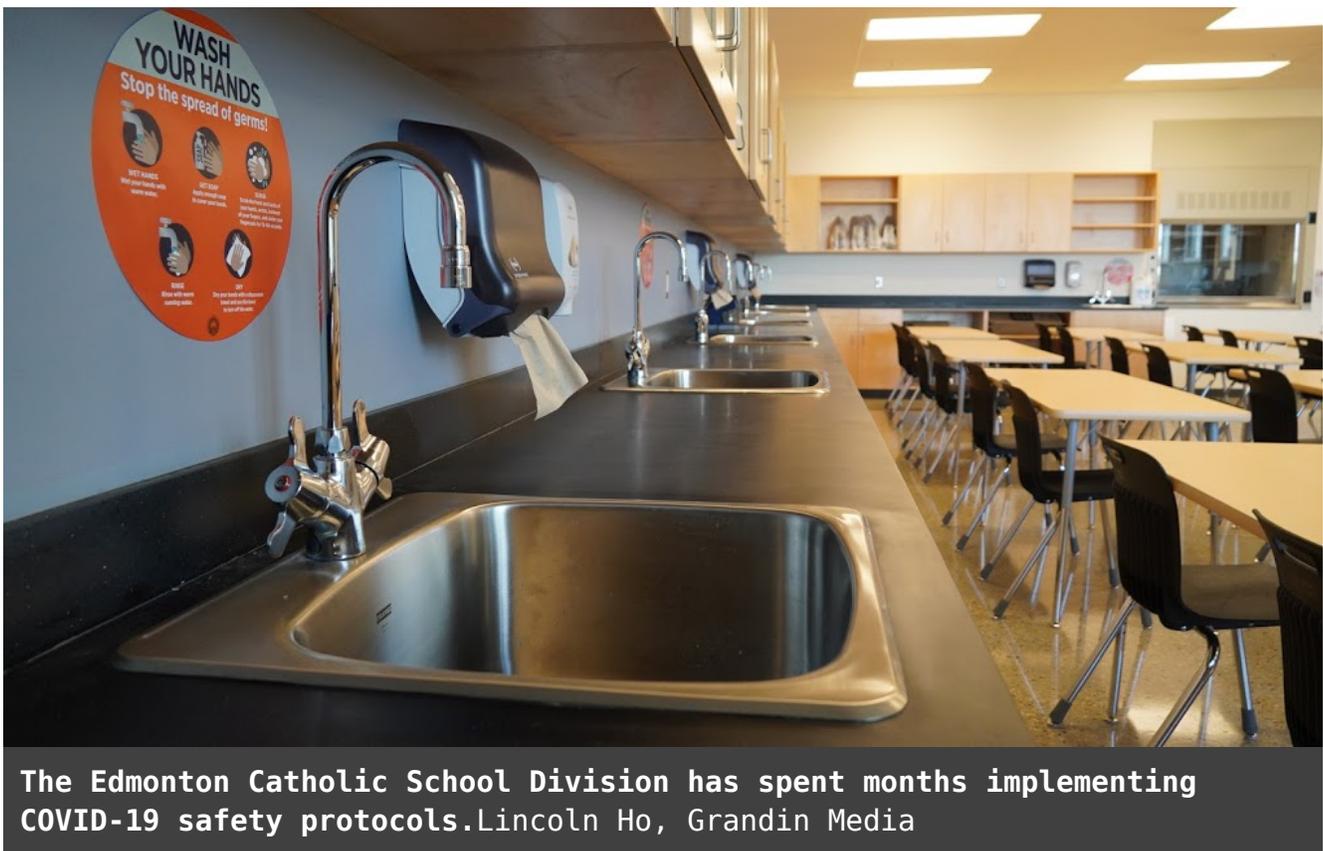
The division estimates that COVID safety precautions will cost between \$10 million and \$15 million, including cleaning supplies and extra staff, which will be paid through its reserves.

The province has provided \$10 million for face masks and other cleaning supplies.

What's unknown at this point is what portion of the additional \$20 billion in federal funding for schools, announced this week, will be allocated to each district for COVID safety.

Schools will be expected to reorganize classrooms to allow for physical distancing, implement strict stay-at-home policies if students or staff are sick, enforce the use of hand sanitizer, perform frequent cleaning, and stagger class times for cohorts of students to move around the schools.

Catholic and public school divisions are moving to a quarterly semester system so students take fewer classes at a time and limit their interaction.



The Edmonton Catholic School Division has spent months implementing COVID-19 safety protocols. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

At St. John XIII school, the protocols include physical cohort separation,

designated seating, individual school supplies, distance markers on the floor, touchless towel and bottle-refilling stations, and extra hand sanitizer for students.

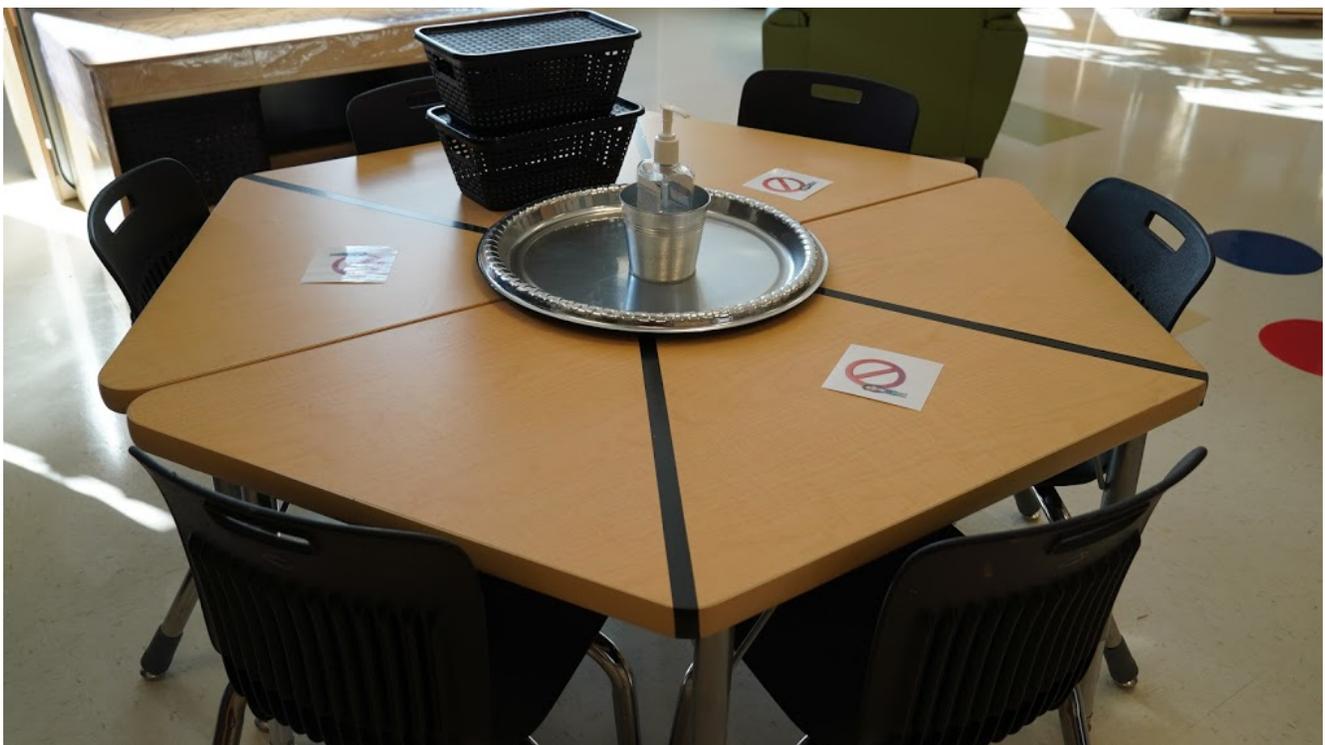
Students will carry their supplies instead of using lockers. They will move from class to class as a group and they will still stay in class instead of going into the halls.

The provincial government has not mandated a limit on class sizes, and Martin said even if it did, St. John XXII – located in the Windermere area of south Edmonton – in particular is already at 110-per-cent capacity.

“It’s not an easy solution,” Martin said. “It’s always great to have smaller class sizes; that’s certainly the case for all schools. In this particular school it would have posed a huge issue because there’s simply no room. It might have involved moving students to another school, but all our schools in this area are full.”

Martin said it’s not a matter of if a COVID case will occur, but when.

“We’re fully expecting it. We have 44,000 students, 5,000 staff. To think that there won’t be a case in our school division is unrealistic. It will happen. We’re going to manage it. We’re going to work with it,” Martin said. “Alberta Health Services is going to be there to support and to control it all. We’re confident in how it’s going to be managed.”

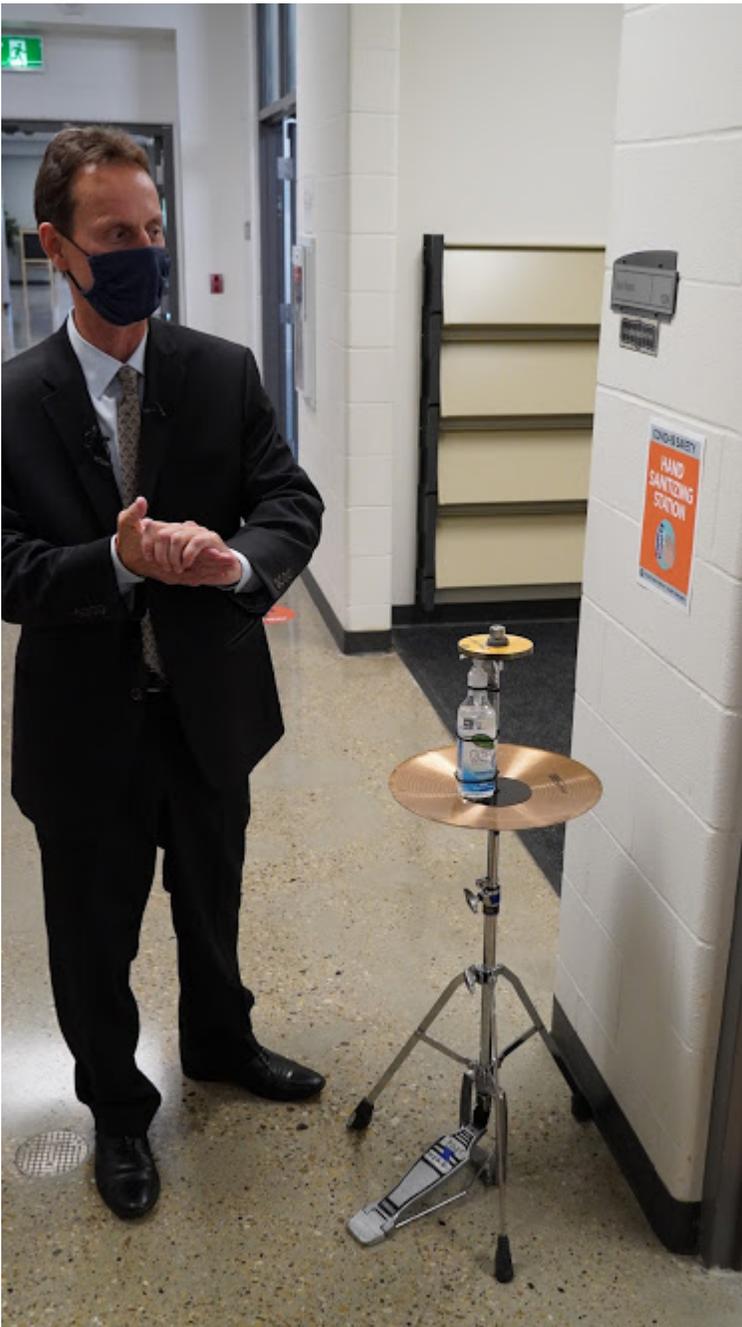


Seating arrangements are a part of the COVID-19 safety measures at St. John XXIII junior high school. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

As of Aug. 27, there have been 13,476 COVID cases in Alberta – 1,185 of them active – and 237 deaths.

An outbreak is declared if two students contract COVID-19 with the 14-day incubation period, according to provincial guidelines. But what happens after that is to be determined by Alberta Health Services.

“We don’t actually know if schools will be shut down or if students are sent home. We don’t know that answer at this point in time,” said Melanie McCullough, the manager of occupational health and safety for the Edmonton Catholic School Division. “It would be nice to have a clear guideline if this happens, this is what we do. Currently we don’t have that.”



Michael Kovacs, principal of St. John XXIII junior high school, uses one of the hand sanitizers outside a classroom. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Nevertheless, “we feel confident that we can mitigate the risk to prevent an outbreak,” she said.

Carrie McPherson, the kindergarten teacher at St. John XXIII school, agrees.

“I think what will be important is that we review procedures over and over and over again. I think they’ll kind of get it after we’ve practised quite a bit,” she said. “I think I’m concerned whether I’m at work anyway. We’re in a global pandemic. I think everyone is generally concerned.”

Asked if she had a heightened sense of anxiety over COVID, McPerson said no.

“You have to have protocols all the time. It’s just heightened with the pandemic,” said Michael Kovacs, principal of St. John XXIII school. “We can’t have 100 custodians coming into every building in the city. That’s not going to happen. You have to clean up after yourself anyway. So these are life skills kids should have all the time. Yes, we’re all going to be doing more cleaning that we did before.”

Both ECSD superintendent Martin and Kovacs, the principal of St. John XXIII, and the teachers on the media tour said they would send their kids to class for in-person instruction.

Parent Brigette Pady said she appreciates the district’s efforts, but she’s still concerned at the lack of options provided by the provincial government.

While her daughter performs better academically in a classroom than online, Pady said “we have to kind of choose her health over that. When they say families have a choice, not all of them do. It’s an unfair assessment.”