

Teachers, parents anxious and uncertain about plans to reopen Alberta classrooms

Confusion. Uncertainty. Anxiety.

These are the subjects of weighty discussions among parents and teachers as Alberta gingerly negotiates the resumption of in-person classes this fall, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In less than five weeks, students are expected to be in class after distance learning since the spring.

“The best part is to be able to see our students again and to be able to have some semblance of normalcy, but once you get past that quick reaction, it’s the realization that there’s actually not going to be anything normal about our return,” said Sandra Haltiner, who represents 2,400 teachers as president of the Edmonton Catholic Teachers local of the Alberta Teachers Association.

“The reality of it, once we get into schools, it will be a challenge to make this work.”



Sandra Haltiner

Alberta schools will open in September under near-normal conditions, with some health measures in place to help protect students and staff against COVID-19, according to government guidelines.

As of July 25, there are 1,341 active cases in the province. Alberta Health

says 178 people have died from the disease.

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.

The government is leaving it up to individual school divisions to determine what school will look like.

Education Minister Adriana LaGrange said there will be no cap on the size of classes, but noted school divisions have already made plans. The Edmonton 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 will offer online programming to give parents a choice. Those details are expected to be announced in the next few weeks

Haltiner praised the ECSD for keeping teachers informed and its work on a school re-entry plan.

Still, as the school year draws closer, so too has the level of anxiety among teachers across the province.

“There’s a lot of pressure surrounding the return. I feel like there’s this notion that teachers need to get back to school and kids need to get back to school so we can get things moving again,” Haltiner said. “What are the stakes of having that many people gather in one place, especially when we’re seeing a bit of a rise in the numbers” of COVID-19 cases

“There’s a strong sense that the government has really just left us in the hands of the division, almost washed their hands of it and said, ‘Make this work,’” Haltiner added.

“How are we going to make this all work and who is going to pay for it? It seems unfair to put this on the backs of the divisions throughout the province. Lots of questions. Will there be custodial staff hired? Will there be supplies provided to schools? Is there going to be some sort of class size adjustment? What’s going to be done to make sure this return is safe and pro-active?”



Arynn Abercrombie says she's concerned about what school will look like in the fall amid COVID-19. Courtesy of Arynn Abercrombie

Arynn Abercrombie also has questions about what school in Elk Island Catholic Schools will look like.

“How do they do that? I don’t know what their extra cleaning protocols are going to be. How do the teachers have the time to do that? Can they get enough hand sanitizer? How are they going to keep in stock? How are they going to keep kids from acting like kids with it?”

“There’s lots of confusion wondering how this is going to play out,” said Abercrombie, who lives in Sherwood Park. “I hope they’re going to get the resources. As it was, I don’t know how they would provide the same level of instruction and take care of the new demands because of COVID.”

Abercrombie has an additional concern because her four-year-old son, Dax, has kidney disease and is taking immune suppression drugs, so he’s more susceptible to germs and illness if her daughters get COVID-19 at school.

For Haltiner it’s also personal. She is a mother of two small children, the

eldest who has just lost his Program Unit (PUF) funding for pre-schools with developmental delays.

LaGrange said if there is a positive COVID-19 case in a school, it will be investigated by public health officials and parents will be informed and the guidelines will be adjusted on the advice of the chief medical officer.

The cost of the new rules is unclear but the government has not announced additional funding for COVID-19-related changes in schools.

“The less kids in the class, the more funding is required to make that happen. That’s the hamstring. Without the proper funding, that just can’t happen,” Haltiner said.

LaGrange said school authorities can expect an increase of \$120 million, compared to last year.

She also noted the \$250 million announced last month towards infrastructure maintenance and renewal in schools. The government says school divisions used \$15 million towards COVID-19-related upgrades.

LaGrange said school divisions will also be able to use money in their reserves, she said, noting that there is \$363 million in school boards’ reserves across the province.

However, when the UCP froze the provincial education budgets amid rising enrolment, per-student funding fell, and some school divisions, have spent most of their reserves.



Sarah Hoffman

The Alberta NDP announced its own plan for school re-entry, laying out 15 recommendations including the hiring of thousands more teachers, capping class sizes at 15 students – as is planned for Ontario – and covering the cost of personal protective equipment. The cost of the proposal is \$1 billion.

“We don’t believe it’s a choice between opening or not opening,” said education critic Sarah Hoffman.

“I think everyone wants their kids to go to school and continue their education and the important social interactions that happen through school. It’s a choice between just opening and opening safely.”

Hoffman also noted that the examples cited as success stories by the government of school divisions in B.C., and in-person summer school in the Calgary Catholic School District, have had caps on class sizes.

While the government may cite a lack of funds, Hoffman noted the millions for corporate tax breaks and the so-called Energy War Room to promote Alberta oil and gas.

Alberta classrooms have been closed since March 15 to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

School divisions were told to prepare for three COVID-19 scenarios for the fall: a return to near-normal, a partial reopening of schools, and a continuation of remote learning from home. LaGrange said if there is an outbreak in a community or school, the government could decide to move to one of the other two scenarios.