

DATE: May 25, 2021

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Trustee Bridget Stirling

SUBJECT: Motion re: Criteria to Shift to Online Learning and Metrics Used to Return to In-person Classes

REFERENCE: [Trustees' Handbook – Section 5.2.2 – Notices of Motion](#)

ISSUE

Notice of motion was served at the May 11, 2021, Board meeting.

BACKGROUND

The provincial government has communicated with school divisions that they may request a shift to online learning for specific grades if they meet the following criteria:

1. A significant number of students and staff in quarantine or isolation
2. A substitute teacher shortage
3. Recent requests from the Board for short-term shifts for a number of their schools
4. Substantial COVID-19 cases in the community

The first three criteria are operational, within the purview of education, and something that division leadership can determine; however, the fourth criteria is less clear. We are unclear if divisions are asked to determine if there are a substantial number of cases in the community or if this is a criterion being used by the provincial government in approving requests to move online.

We are concerned that this lack of clarity has led to some confusion among our parents and community. Tasking school boards with determining whether a community has a substantial number of COVID-19 cases is not within the expertise of educational leadership and should be informed by health experts.

We would like clarity from the provincial government on how a substantial number of cases is defined and whether this criterion is meant to reflect operational risk or risk to health and safety of students and staff. We must also be able to assure our parents and community that decisions regarding the risk of transmission and safety of schools based on community case numbers are grounded in advice from appropriate health experts.

RELATED FACTS

- School division staff are not public health experts and are not able to determine rates of community or in-school transmission of COVID-19.
- The threshold for significance of the number of students and staff in quarantine to warrant a transition to online learning is unclear.
- The threshold for what constitutes “substantial” cases in the community is unclear to boards and should not be left to the determination of division administration or trustees.
- Requests to transition to online learning by divisions have been approved or declined by the ministry; the criteria for accepting or declining those requests are unclear given the broad parameters set out by Alberta Education.

- EPSB students are returning to in-person learning on May 27 as part of the province’s directive to return to in-person schooling; however, continuing effects of COVID-19 may require additional shifts at the school or division level following this return.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Board write a letter to the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health requesting clarification on the criteria necessary to request a shift to online learning and the metrics used to determine when it is safe for students to return to in-person classes.

OPTIONS

1. Approve the recommendation.
2. Provide feedback and request changes to the recommendation for approval.

NEXT STEPS

A letter will be written on behalf of the Board to the Ministers of Health and Education. This letter will be shared online using the Board’s established process for the posting of correspondence.

BS:km