

August 10, 2021

Honourable Adriana LaGrange  
Minister of Education  
204 Legislature Building  
10800 – 97 Avenue  
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Honourable Tyler Shandro  
Minister of Health  
423 Legislature Building  
10800 – 97 Avenue  
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister LaGrange and Minister Shandro,

### Protocols needed for a safe return to school

We are looking forward to welcoming back over 106,000 students in just over three weeks. The expectation of being together in classes again and returning to a “normal” school year is a point of joy for our students, staff and families who have just experienced a very hard year. That will all be in jeopardy, however, if we cannot offer our students, staff and families assurance that school environments are safe.

The risk mitigation strategies used by our Division over the past 16 months, aligned with and supported by provincial guidelines, created the confidence families expected and deserved when sending their children to school. As part of our Division Feedback Survey this spring, 96 per cent of students, 92 per cent of parents and 96 per cent of staff indicated that masks were important for feeling safe during in-person learning. They were also clear that staying home when sick was a key to them feeling safe in school (90 per cent of students, 93 per cent of parents and 96 per cent of staff agreed).

The July 28 announcement that restrictions will be lifted on August 16 has caused tremendous uncertainty and concern for school divisions and families. We are being flooded with calls and emails from parents worried that students and staff will not have adequate safety measures in place in classrooms. We also saw an immediate increase in the number of families choosing online learning.

The daily infection numbers are currently increasing. The delta variant is highly transmissible and Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, told reporters on July 30 that [a long-range pandemic forecast](#) suggests the country is "at the start" of a fourth wave. The provincial vaccination rate is insufficient to reach herd immunity. We have seen that “personal responsibility” is not reliable as a public health measure and can force individuals into having to choose between maintaining their employment or maintaining their health (and that of those around them).

Most importantly, unlike the general population, students under 12 years of age (i.e., almost all of our 57,000 elementary students) do not have access to vaccinations as a means of protection from the virus. Therefore, having other measures in place is critical.

We do not want staff, students and families to have to transition in and out of classrooms. It is disruptive to good education, family plans, parent employment and student wellbeing. The following safety measures, implemented as part of our risk mitigation strategy, worked well last year to support safety and wellbeing across our schools. We believe they are critical for a safe start to the 2021-2022 school year. They are:

- Daily health screening by students and staff prior to coming to school.
- Enhanced cleaning and disinfecting in schools and on buses.
- Encouraging physical distancing where possible.
- Creating cohorts of students.
- Hand hygiene requirements for students and staff.
- Strict stay-at-home protocols for those who are feeling unwell.
- School protocols set out provincially that support access to COVID-19 testing, contact tracing and quarantine/isolation requirements for individuals who test positive.
- Asking K to 3 students who are physically, psychologically or developmentally able to wear a mask, to do so.
- Mandatory masks for students from Grades 4 to 12 and for all staff in settings where physical distancing cannot be maintained.

While we would hope you endorse all of these measures, it is particularly important that we and our families know that our government, at a minimum, supports masking in schools and isolating when ill with COVID-19. We ask that you respect school boards' autonomy in determining local needs by ensuring provincial health orders permit divisions to implement measures such as mandatory masking if they determine such measures are appropriate to community desires and local conditions, as was ensured last year.

These recommendations would align with the feedback we've received from students, staff and families, the learning from the past year and the back-to-school plans already introduced in [Ontario](#) and [Manitoba](#).

Given that we are already into August, time is of the essence. We require clarity so that we can communicate with families to allow them to make informed decisions when choosing in-person or online instruction. Their choices will also impact our organization of staff. As it is, we have already extended our August 12 family choice deadline to August 16. Extending the deadline further would impact our ability to staff all needed positions and organize for the calm, welcoming return that will be so important to students upon their return.

We ask that you share the plan for school re-entry with school divisions no later than noon on August 12, 2021. We also ask that, at a minimum, the plan continues to support the measures that our Division had in place for the last year and that divisions be allowed to make masking in schools a requirement. We would like to meet with you this week to discuss these issues further.

Sincerely,



Trisha Estabrooks  
Board Chair

KM/mj