

May 31, 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 Ministers LaGrange and Shandro,

Requesting information on metrics used to determine shift from and to in-person learning

With about a month of school remaining, we recognize that this has been an incredibly challenging year for students, staff and families. We want to thank your government for the decision on May 4 to shift all grades to online learning in an effort to ease some of the operational pressures facing school divisions and also in recognition of the rising case counts at that time and the significant number of cases in schools.

As you are aware, 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. A definition of “substantial” has not been given, and school divisions do not have the data required to determine the number of cases that would constitute “substantial” in the community. It is also unclear if or how this is a criterion being used by the provincial government in approving requests to move online.

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.

Additionally, while we as a division may have an understanding of what constitutes a “significant” number of our students and staff in quarantine, it is unclear what the threshold for significance may be for Alberta Education decision makers. Clarity regarding how significance is determined would assist division leaders across Alberta in determining appropriate responses and whether or not to put forward requests and reducing uncertainty for families and school division employees around these operational decisions.

On May 19, when Minister LaGrange announced students would be returning to in-person learning on May 25, the province's positivity rate was 9.1 per cent. There were 685 people in hospital being treated for COVID-19 including 185 in ICU. All of these rates are higher than in December 2020 when the previous shift to online learning was announced. Therefore, you can see how it is confusing to school officials, students, parents and community members about how the decisions to have students learning in-person or online are made.

We agree that in-person learning is the ideal learning environment for the majority of students and it is our hope that EPSB students who have chosen in-class learning will be able to finish this school year with their peers and teachers face to face. In the interest of transparency and understanding the decision to send students back to in-person learning, we are hoping that you can share the metrics that were used to make this decision.

We would like to be able to assure parents and community members that school boards are not tasked with decisions regarding the risk of transmission and safety of schools based on community case numbers, and that these decisions are grounded in evidence from qualified health experts. Clarity on these criteria will be helpful for us as we communicate with our school communities.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Trisha Estabrooks
Board Chair

KM/mj

c. Lorrie Jess, President, Alberta School Boards Association

