

October 15, 2021

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

Dear Minister LaGrange,

Request for urgently needed COVID-19 protection measures in schools

Our Division put in every measure we could this school year to mitigate COVID-19: cohorts and physical distancing wherever possible, requiring masks for ALL students and staff, daily health screening for students and staff before coming to school, a stay-at-home protocol for those who are sick, enhanced cleaning and disinfecting in schools and on yellow buses, hand hygiene requirements for students and staff and partnering with Alberta Health to host vaccination clinics in schools. On October 4, our Superintendent also announced a mandatory vaccination [policy](#) for all staff, contractors, on-site partners and volunteers.

Despite these measures, however, in the first month of school we and families watched as COVID-19 cases kept rising in schools - especially elementary schools. We were transparent with families and the public and sent letters home and posted on our website whenever we were made aware of a positive COVID-19 case in a classroom. These reports were voluntary though, so we had no way of confirming how many cases of COVID-19 our schools were actually affecting our schools. Due to the discontinuation of contact tracing, we also had no mechanism to ask possibly affected students to isolate and families and school administrators were left to worry without having the information they needed to make informed decisions.

The situation was dire and we had to do more for the families that we serve. Therefore, our Board convened a special meeting on October 5 and passed the following motions:

1. *Whereas* the provincial government has yet to reinstate positive notification of cases in schools, contract tracing and mandatory quarantine for close contacts of positive cases; and *whereas* the number of COVID-19 cases among Alberta children has hit record highs, particularly among school-aged children age 5-11; and *whereas* the number of self-reported positive cases in our schools continues to increase; and *whereas* we are concerned the increase in cases in our schools is leading to an increase of household spread and therefore adding to the burden on our health care system; and *whereas* the Canadian Medical Association is advocating for a “firebreak” using any and all measures to control the fourth wave of this pandemic and curb the rate of mortality, including the closure of schools; *Be it moved that* the Board of Trustees ask the Government of Alberta to implement a “firebreak” including the shutdown of all schools and non-essential services to control community transmission of COVID-19, including:

- a. A shutdown of in-person learning for a minimum of two weeks and until community transmission has substantially reduced
 - b. A continuation of in-person learning for students who need specialized supports and require in-person supports
 - c. A staged return that prioritizes schools as an essential service that will re-open well before non-essential services such as entertainment and hospitality industries
 - d. Financial supports for families to offset the impact of disruption to work and any childcare needs
 - e. Provision of childcare and learning supports for the children of frontline healthcare workers
 - f. Clear notice to families and teachers of impending school closures and a transition period to allow for an orderly transition to online learning
 - g. The use of the time during closure to implement measures such as contact tracing, mandatory quarantine, and other public health measures to ensure safer operation of schools
 - h. The establishment of a clear and transparent metric for school closures and school re-opening, including single school, regional, and provincial closure thresholds.
2. Given that providing clear, transparent data to parents, families and staff about COVID-19 cases in our *schools* remains a priority for our Division, and given that the provincial government is currently not sharing data about COVID-19 positive cases in our schools, *Be it moved that* the Board of Trustees advocate to the Provincial Government for the real-time release of this critical information. Furthermore, *be it moved that* we will continue to advocate for the reinstatement of Alberta Health Services contact tracing and the mandatory quarantining of close contacts of positive cases in our schools.
 3. Given the determination by the WHO, the CDC, and Public Health Canada that ventilation is important in *addressing* transmission of SARS-COV-2, *Be it moved that* the Board of Trustees request provincial ventilation standards and resources to include:
 - a. Clear provincial ventilation and air filtration standards for the management of airborne viruses, developed in partnership with APEGA.
 - b. The provincial purchasing and provision of HEPA units suitable for classroom air filtration, to be approved by qualified APEGA engineers.
 - c. Resources for building ventilation assessments, including room-level assessment of all student and staff spaces by qualified APEGA engineers.
 4. *Be it moved that* the Board of Trustees advocates on behalf of families to the provincial government to make at-home rapid testing kits approved by AHS available to families at no cost.

The decision to hold a special meeting, in light of the proximity to the municipal election, was not one we took lightly. Nor are any of the motions. We understand that the actions, particularly the call for a two-week shutdown of schools, will cause challenges for families. We also understand that what we are calling for are large undertakings. Given the gravity of the pandemic, the crippling effect it is having on

our healthcare system, and the danger it is placing students in—particularly our elementary students who cannot yet be vaccinated—these actions are necessary. And they are needed immediately.

We were pleased to hear in the provincial announcement on October 5 that rapid tests contact tracing in schools will be phased in, outbreaks will be declared in schools, and rapid-test kits will be made available for parents to test younger children. Unfortunately though, this was accompanied by the announcement that AHS support will not be available until mid-November, once again putting the burden of supplying health services onto schools and creating inequity among school divisions and confusion and frustration among families. We are also still awaiting details on the rapid tests.

Contact tracing conducted by AHS staff and supported with clear, timely communication to schools is needed immediately. It is not right to pile tasks that should be done by health workers onto the backs of already anxious and hard-working school staff. It is also not reasonable to ask school boards and families to make decisions about what is best for students without providing them with the information they need to inform those decisions.

Students and staff spend approximately seven hours per day, five days a week in schools. Province-wide ventilation standards are needed to ensure safety and equity and peace of mind for everyone.

The unending uncertainty and transitioning in and out of classrooms is disruptive to good education, family plans, parent employment, and staff, family and student wellbeing. We ask that your ministry take immediate action to put the supports in place to provide schools and families with the information and protection they need and deserve.

Sincerely,



Trisha Estabrooks
Board Chair

KM/mj