

January 6, 2022

An open letter to Minister LaGrange and Families of Edmonton Public Schools

With the arrival of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, this pandemic is once again pushing us into uncharted territory. Though symptoms of this variant seem not to be as severe as with other variants, transmissibility of Omicron is high and we still know very little about long-term impacts, including potential long-COVID symptoms. Alberta currently has over 30,000 active known cases and a test positivity rate of 36 per cent. This does not capture all cases, as testing capacity is once again stretched and positive cases confirmed through rapid tests are not included in these totals.

In this open letter, Edmonton Public School Board Trustees want to make it clear that we hear families' concerns. The Division will continue to take prudent action as the situation evolves. We also urge both the Province and our families to help us meet the challenges of the Omicron variant for the health, safety and continuity of learning for all students and staff.

Current Situation for Edmonton Public Schools

What We're Doing

Edmonton Public Schools' administrative team developed a thorough Back to School Plan that continues to evolve along with the pandemic. Division schools also meet all American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) recommendations for ventilation in regard to COVID-19.

Our Division continues to go above and beyond in many ways, including:

- [Vaccination policy](#) for Division staff, volunteers and contractors
- [Vaccination policy](#) for Trustees
- Masking requirement for all K-12 students
- Trustee Request for Information regarding further enhancing ventilation in our schools using HEPA filters and other measures
- A commitment by Administration to further explore [improving ventilation](#)
- The tremendous efforts of Division administration, teaching and non-teaching staff
- Providing [data](#) to families and media, when the information was available from Alberta Health Services, about positive COVID-19 cases in schools.

Concerns About Student and Staff Absences

COVID-19-related absences of both staff and students pose a significant risk to the Division's ability to provide continuity of learning to students. Frequent shifts between online and in-person learning also pose difficulty for both the Division and for many families, and increases stress.

Our Superintendent shared the following data with the Ministry of Education on December 29 and requested a temporary shift to online learning.

Unfilled Teacher Jobs

Month (2021)	Number of unfilled jobs
September	15
October	14
November	74
December	151

Projected Unfilled Teacher Jobs with Additional Increased Staff Absences due to COVID-19 illness

Increase in staff absences	Additional unfilled substitute teacher jobs per day
10 per cent	30
15 per cent	45
25 per cent	75

Examining Division data of staff absences and unfilled jobs for the month of December, we anticipate the majority of these additional jobs will go unfilled. The actual increase in the number of staff absent due to COVID could be much higher than the above modeling shows.

Projections include only teachers, but we know all school-based staff will experience high rates of absence due to illness. This will impact our ability to keep students learning in person.

Despite the extension to winter break, our concerns with staffing and Division operations have not changed.

Requests to the Province

We appreciate having the time during this week to plan for different scenarios, prepare staffing plans, and hear from families. We also appreciate the cancellation of diploma exams and postponement of the PATs, in consideration of the disruption to learning and anxiety faced by students.



Edmonton Public Schools is doing all we can with the tools we currently have. However, it is imperative that we layer as many methods of protection as possible, to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission in our schools. We can serve students better with your help. Our Board of Trustees respectfully requests the following from the Province:

Help Edmonton Public Schools provide clear, timely and evidence-based information to families

- Clear metrics are needed on when classes, schools or entire divisions should be transitioning to online learning. If the Province does not have the capacity to conduct PCR testing and/or contact tracing, then other metrics, such as positivity rate or absenteeism rates, could be indicators for when classes would move between in-person and online learning.
- Once the clear metrics are set, we ask that the flexibility allowed up to this point continue and be expanded to allow local school divisions, who know their staffing capacities, technology options and school communities, to respond to local circumstances and make the decision to move between in-person and online instruction. Knowing the disruption a shift in learning mode causes, we would never take the decision to shift lightly.
- Ensure that school staff are eligible for PCR testing.
- Have AHS consider schools “high risk” settings and continue to notify schools when a positive case of COVID-19 is identified.

Provide additional layers to keep transmission rates down in school settings

- Knowing our schools reflect our community, we ask that increased measures to reduce general community transmission be taken. As has always been the case, a combined effort will be required to end this pandemic.
- Prior to the winter break, the Division embarked on steps to further enhance our ventilation across all buildings. In October, the previous Board [wrote to you](#) to request provincial ventilation standards and resources. We look forward to a response to our request.
- We appreciate the provision of masks and at-home rapid testing kits for students and staff. We request that these items continue to be supplied beyond the currently allotted eight weeks, and that the province continue to evaluate a move to providing N95 masks for students and staff.

Requests of Families

The Board recognizes it is important for students to be able to learn in person when possible. To that end, we request that families:

- Continue to do the [daily COVID-19 symptom check](#). If your child exhibits any symptoms, no matter how mild, please keep them home.
- Participate in the at-home rapid testing program when the kits become available through schools (the Province is providing an eight-week supply). The Province recommends that if you don't have symptoms, you perform rapid tests twice per week, 72 hours apart (For example: Sunday and Wednesday or Monday and Thursday).



- Notify your school if your child tests positive. Then keep your child home for the required [isolation period](#), including time to recover from all symptoms.
- Reinforce with your children proper mask wearing and why it is important. Work towards getting masks that fit their face well, without gaps.
- Reduce in-person contacts, as suggested by the Chief Medical Officer of Health. This will also reduce the risk of transmission to your family, helping to keep our school communities safer.
- Follow Dr. Hinshaw’s request on vaccinations. “The most important thing that adults and older children can do to protect themselves and others is to be fully immunized. Vaccines are safe and effective and protect against severe illness and outcomes.”
- Continue being kind and patient, as you have been throughout this long pandemic. We appreciate you.


As a Board, working with our Administration, we continue to monitor the situation and adapt as needed. We truly appreciate your resilience and willingness to walk alongside us as we work towards solutions. Families - if you have any questions about this letter, please contact your locally elected Trustee. We look forward to continuing to serve students and families in public education.


Sincerely,


Trisha Estabrooks
Board Chair/Ward D


Nathan Ip
Vice-Chair/Ward H



Sherri O'Keefe
Ward A

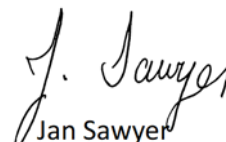

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Ward B


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Ward C


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Ward E


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Ward G


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Ward I

