

September 16, 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,

Reinstate contact tracing and close contact quarantine requirements

We recognize the global pandemic continues to be challenging for everyone. Challenges are best solved when people work together and we believe that the best decisions for students, families and staff happen when they are made in collaboration with locally elected school boards. And while we appreciate the measures announced during last night's news conference with Premier Jason Kenney, there was no mention of reinstating contact tracing in schools or requiring close contacts of positive cases to quarantine - measures we believe are integral to student and staff safety in our schools.

In July, Trustees and staff within Edmonton Public Schools heard from many parents who were concerned about the lack of a sound provincial back-to-school plan that would keep staff and students safe.

Knowing that decisions needed to be made in time to allow schools to appropriately staff and plan for a safe opening, our Board scheduled a Special Board Meeting on August 13, 2021. At that meeting, we passed the following motion:

Given that we are still in a pandemic and that children under the age of 12 cannot be vaccinated, the Board of Trustees takes the position that testing, contact tracing, self-isolation, mandatory masking, cohorts and screening for COVID-19 are critical measures that help keep staff and students as safe as possible.

When the Government of Alberta announced details of its provincial back-to-school plan in mid- August, latitude was given to schools to put local measures in place. However, this simply added confusion for families and placed added pressure on boards and staff who were already grappling with extending registration deadlines and staffing uncertainties because of the late government announcement.

Trustees and staff from Edmonton Public Schools find themselves in the position of having to repeatedly explain to worried, and sometimes frustrated, parents that schools do not have the resources or information to act as contact tracers, nor have we been given the authority to require quarantining even when multiple COVID cases have been confirmed in a school.

Edmonton Public Schools has implemented mandatory masking because in our Division Survey completed by over 55,000 respondents this spring, 96 per cent of students, 92 per cent of parents/guardians and 96 per cent of staff indicated that masks were important for feeling safe. We continue to hear from parents expressing gratitude for our leadership in mandating masking for students in all grades.

We are notifying families when there is a confirmed COVID case in their classroom or school because we believe we have the responsibility to be transparent and share information to help people make informed decisions. However, having to implement these measures at the local level with no backing from the provincial government or health officials takes resources away from teaching and learning. We are asking families to self-report when there is a positive case of COVID, but we know we are missing many other cases and that our case count is by no means an accurate picture of COVID in our schools.

This situation is not unique to Edmonton Public Schools. School divisions across the province are being forced into the untenable position of having to set and enforce public health policy without the necessary resources or support.

Hearing the same challenges from across the province, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) Directors passed the following motion at their September 9 meeting:

That the ASBA advocate to the provincial government for immediate reinstatement of contact tracing conducted by Alberta Health Services in a timely manner, and mandatory isolation for positive COVID-19 cases in our schools.

In Edmonton Public Schools, as of noon on September 16—just ten days into classes—we already had 239 reported cases of COVID.

Community case numbers are showing no signs of receding and our hospitals are being crippled by the influx of cases. As cases increase, we also have increased absences because parents are choosing to keep their children at home, and increasing calls from parents wanting to move their children to online learning and/or have quarantine orders. We hope the measures



announced on September 15 will bend the curve, but we know that will take time. Our schools need solutions immediately.

This situation in schools is not sustainable. It disrupts learning and increases anxiety for staff, students and families. Waiting for an outbreak to be declared in a school (i.e., 10 per cent of students absent) and acting on a school-by-school basis is not a prudent or responsible solution.

We need the government to act now. We implore you to show responsible leadership by immediately reinstating contact tracing, close contact notification and mandatory quarantining for close contacts in schools.

We would like to meet with you as soon as possible to discuss the actions that can be taken to help address these concerns in a timely manner. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Trisha Estabrooks
Board Chair

KM/mj

- c. Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Alberta Health
Lorrie Jess, President, Alberta School Boards Association
Cathy Hogg, President, Public School Boards' Association of Alberta
Alberta School Division Board Chairs



