

2020-21 DIVISION SURVEY

Division Qualitative Summary

Strategic Division Supports
February 2022

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

From March 15 to April 6, 2021, Edmonton Public Schools administered the 2020-21 Division Feedback Survey to students, staff, and families. The 2020-21 Survey was developed to reflect the unique circumstances of the year and focussed on the three pillars of the Division's COVID-19 Re-entry Strategy: Family Choice, Continuity of Instruction, and Safety and Well-being. The results of the survey are intended to serve as one source of information to measure our progress, determine what worked well in the Division's response to the pandemic, and help plan for the 2021-22 school year.

Three separate surveys were administered to the following respondent groups:

- Students from Grade 4 to 12 (43,309 responses)
- Families (6,433 responses)
- Staff (5,693 responses)

In total, the survey garnered 55,435 responses.

This report provides an analysis of the qualitative responses gathered from the 2020-21 Division Feedback Survey contextualized within a quantitative perspective.

METHODS

In total, there were 13 open-ended questions in the Division Feedback Survey across the three separate surveys. Each stakeholder group answered questions relevant to them, thus stakeholders did not necessarily respond to all open-ended questions. Similar questions were grouped across stakeholders and analyzed to identify key themes.

As a result of the overwhelming amount of feedback gathered from students, staff, and families, the qualitative practice of coding to saturation was employed. Coding to saturation is used when responses become repetitive and no new information appears to be forthcoming. The survey development team read over 100,000 responses and coded to saturation.

For each open ended question, this report:

- Specifies the respondent group,
- Provides an overview of the responses, including related quantitative questions (where available),
- Identifies themes that emerged,
- Provides a brief explanation of each theme. Explanations may include verbatim responses that exemplify that theme or illustrate different perspectives within that theme.

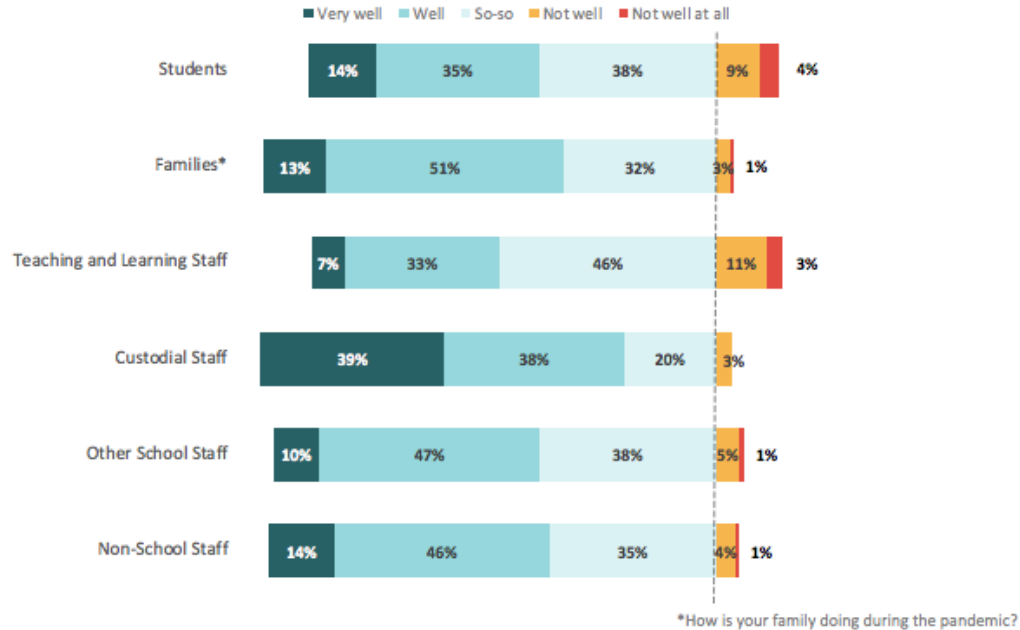
WHAT WE HEARD

Is there anything you would like to share about how you are doing during the pandemic?

Respondents: Students, Staff, Families

Overview: Respondents were asked “How are you doing during the pandemic?”.

Figure 1. How are you doing during the pandemic?



As a supplement to this question, respondents were asked if they would like to share anything about how they were doing during the pandemic. They spoke about a number of different topics. Responses ranged from sharing experiences specific to the school year, as well as personal experiences.

Key Themes

- Adjustments to Work or Life
- Perspectives on Learning Environments
- Pandemic Effects on Mental Health
- Perspectives on the Division’s Safety Measures

Highlights

Adjustments to Work or Life

Respondents spoke about the adjustments and changes that resulted from the pandemic including the lack of social contact with family and friends, lack of physical activity, difference in day-to-day activities and work/life balance, and financial upsets. Some respondents, however, shared silver linings that arose from the pandemic such as greater family time, a growing appreciation for family support, and ways in which they were coping with change.

- Student: “I’m doing very good because I get to go outside after school and play with my neighbors and there are lots of kids. But I miss in person school VERY VERY much”

Perspectives on Learning Environments

Many respondents expressed appreciation for the work done by Edmonton Public Schools to ensure consistency and safety during this difficult year. However, there were a variety of perspectives when describing experiences with both online and in-person learning. For both learning environments, opinions ranged and differed about levels of student engagement, pace of learning, workload, relationship building, use of technology, availability of supports and resources, as well as quality and consistency of learning.

- Families: “I really appreciate that EPSB was flexible and offered options for families. Our in person teacher has been amazing giving work and guidance while we were close contacts and [they were] still teaching in person. Our online teacher was amazing too and put in so much effort to make it a great experience for kids.”
- Staff: “It’s been a challenging year for all of us in many ways. There has been lots of changes and transitions continuously that made it very difficult to create a good learning environment.”

Pandemic Effects on Mental Health

Many respondents emphasized the effects that the pandemic was taking on the mental health of them and their loved ones. Pandemic practices and restrictions, constant change and uncertainty has led to feelings of stress, anxiety, fear and exhaustion.

- Families: “Despite all the wonderful things our school has done and put in place this year has come with significant mental health challenges.”

Perspectives on the Division’s Safety Measures

In general, respondents were satisfied and appreciative of the COVID protocols adopted by the Division (e.g. family choice, masking, cohorting, distancing, lunch and recess protocols, working from home, isolation protocols etc.) and found that they were effective in keeping students and staff safe. However, some respondents expressed pandemic fatigue and concerns about the restrictiveness of measures, which they felt led to increased stress and anxiety. These responses will be covered [in-depth](#) later in the report.

Is there anything that is being done differently this year because of the pandemic that you would like to see continue?

Respondents: Students, Staff, Families

Overview: It should be noted that this question was posed differently depending on the stakeholder. While students were asked about what they liked about the school year, families and staff asked what changes were made to this year that they would like to see continued. This difference should be kept in mind for the following discussion.

All stakeholders identified changes that they liked, while families and staff shared which changes they felt should be continued or even made permanent. Many stakeholders responded with the anticipation that COVID-19 would still be active in the community and that precautions would be necessary, while others indicated that some changes should remain in place after the pandemic and for the foreseeable future.

Key Themes

- Quarterly Schedule and Increased Assessment/Feedback
- Division-wide Scope and Sequence to Support Effective Transitions
- Family Choice to Support Family Circumstances and Learning Preference
- Adaptations to the Online and In-person Learning Environments
- Flexible Working Conditions for Staff
- Safety Measures and Staggered Entry/Dismissal
- Increased Communication
- Increased Online Professional Learning and Collaboration Opportunities for Staff

Highlights

Quarterly Schedule and Increased Assessment/Feedback

While the benefits and challenges of the quarterly schedule will be discussed [in-depth](#) later in this report, champions of the quarterly schedule used this question to reiterate their appreciation for this format and advocate for its continued use. High school students, in particular, and families emphasized the benefits of being able to have increased focus due to the decreased course load and longer class times, easier transitions back to in-person learning in cases where students were sick or quarantining, and fewer transitions during the school day.

In addition, students expressed that the increased assessment and feedback cycle that resulted from the creation of the quarterly schedule helped them track their progress. Some staff advocated for the continuation of this increase in assessment and feedback because they felt that it supported quality engagement with families.

Division-wide Scope and Sequence to Support Effective Transitions

Similar to the quarterly schedule, staff had an [in-depth](#) discussion of the benefits and challenges of Division-wide Scope and Sequence. Supporters of the Division-wide Scope and Sequence appreciated the increased ease of student transitions, alignment of curriculum across the Division, the ability to address learning gaps, and increased opportunities for facilitated collaboration. While a number of staff supported the continued use of the Division-wide Scope and Sequence, they recommended that further refinement was needed.

- Staff: “The concept of the Scope & Sequence but with more flexibility and more support for teachers to use it effectively in combined grades and to support students with special needs.”

Family Choice to Support Family Circumstances and Learning Preference

Students and families indicated a strong preference for either in-person or online learning depending on family circumstance or a child’s learning preference and appreciated the ability to shift between the two learning environments. Students acknowledged that the availability of online resources and supports made transition between learning environments easier. While staff felt they saw reduced levels of student stress as a result of the Division offering family choice. Many families expressed their desire to have family choice as a more

permanent option at EPSB because of the flexibility it affords. Additionally, some families suggested the possibility of hybrid education models could be used to mitigate “schools being at capacity.”

Adaptations to the Online and In-person Learning Environments

Students and families identified adaptations made both to online and in-person learning environments they liked and wanted to continue.

In general, families appreciated the added opportunities to enhance computer literacy and increased availability of online resources accessible to parents/caregivers. For in-person learners, students liked the chance to safely socialize with friends while avoiding navigating busy hallways, and increased outdoor learning experiences; while families would like the smaller class sizes to continue. For online learners, students liked having the opportunity to meet new teachers and peers while not worrying about transportation issues.

Flexible Working Conditions for Staff

One of the most predominant responses from staff was their endorsement of flexible working conditions in cases where working from home is a possibility. Staff noted that the option to work from home when sick or when not required to be in the office cuts down on transportation time and could potentially increase productivity.

- Staff: “I very strongly believe that a work from home policy be implemented as a permanent fixture during the pandemic and beyond, even on a rotational basis. The ability to work from home when special projects require extra concentration would help me more effectively do my job. Also, allowing staff who are sick, perhaps with a head cold, work from home would help the spread of illness. Sometimes a person can be sick, but not to the point when they are unable to perform their job.”

Safety Measures and Staggered Entry/Dismissal

While safety measures garnered a [mixed response](#) from students, families and staff alike, the majority of respondents indicated their approval of increased hand hygiene, mask wearing, sickness policies, and extra cleaning protocols. Although many stakeholders acknowledged the difficulty in maintaining and enforcing safety measures and protocols, students in particular highlighted the important role that compliance to these measures played in helping them feel safe in classrooms and other spaces in schools.

Families and staff also felt that staggered entry and dismissal in schools and use of multiple exits at different points during the school day had numerous benefits including decreased congestion at entryways and hallways, reduced student anxiety, smoother transitions during the school day, and increased opportunities for more efficient supervision.

Increased Communication

The increased levels of communication were lauded by families and staff for different reasons. Families wanted the continuation of virtual parent/teacher conferences as they felt it enhanced the timeliness and convenience of engagement with teachers. They also felt that the accessibility of the Google Classroom platform assisted in this teacher engagement, and increased their capacity to support their child(ren).

- Families: “I appreciate the opportunity for Google meet options with the school teachers and administrators, as required. Very convenient if there is an emerging issue and we do not have flexibility to leave work early.”

Staff appreciated the Division communication efforts, and development of additional communication channels (e.g. On Behalf of Assistant Superintendent Information or the weekly updates from the Superintendent related to our COVID-19 Cases) to ensure the timely delivery of critical messaging.

Increased Online Professional Learning and Collaboration Opportunities for Staff

Staff emphasized the convenience and effectiveness of peer communication, collaboration, and professional learning in a virtual format that removes the need for travel time, removes opportunities to transmit illness, and decreases the need to book supply time.

What worked well with the Division-wide scope and sequence?

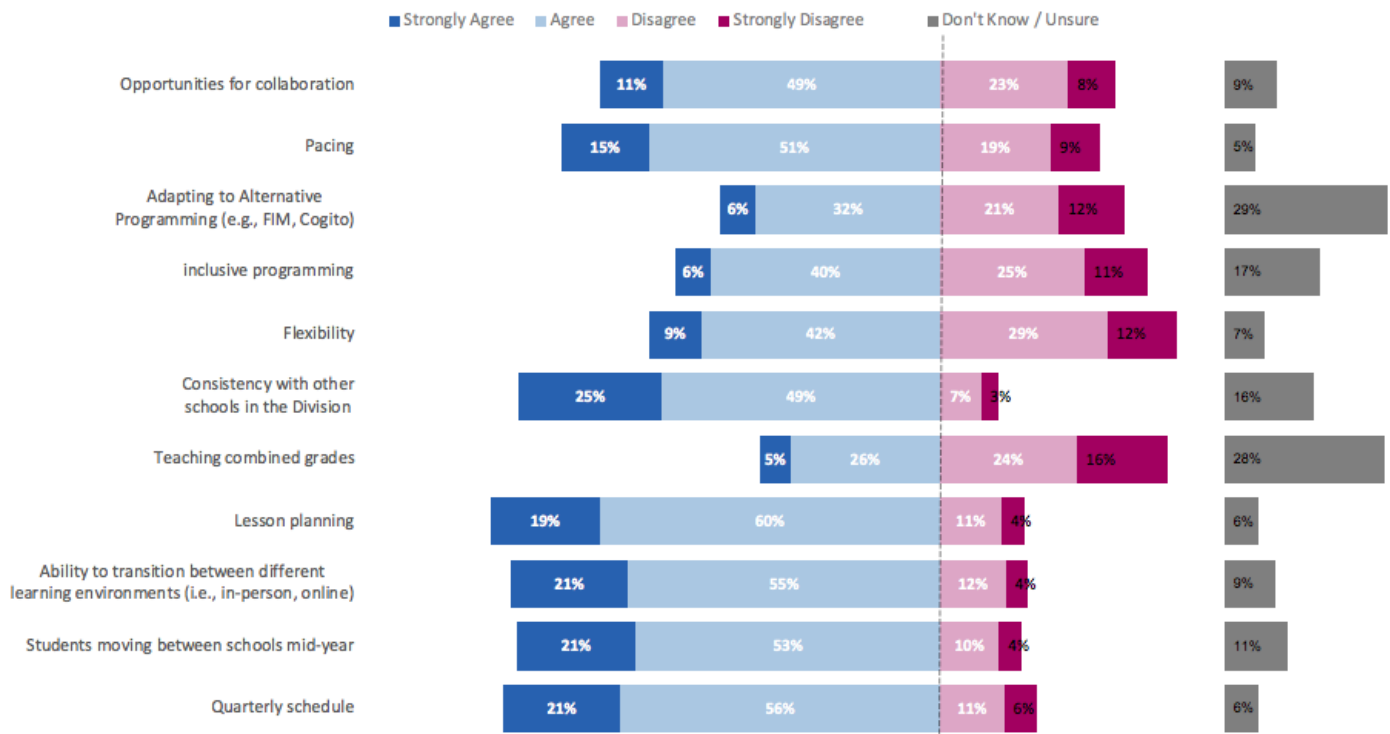
What were the challenges with the Division-wide scope and sequence?

Respondents: Staff

Overview: Division-wide scope and sequence documents were created with the intention of providing continuity for learning should student transition between in-school and at-home learning.

Staff shared their perspective on how strongly they felt the Division-wide scope and sequence supported a number of different areas.

Figure 2. Staff, based on their experience this year, felt the Division-wide scope and sequence supported the following.



Staff were also asked to elaborate on their responses by identifying what they felt were benefits and challenges of the Division-wide scope and sequence. Many of the benefits and challenges identified by staff seemed to be two sides of the same coin. In these instances, the two diverging perspectives will be presented and discussed together.

Key Themes

- Consistency vs. Inflexibility/Lack of Teacher Autonomy
- Clear Pacing vs. Unsuitable Pacing
- Clearly Defined and Focused vs. Out of Order Sequencing
- Excellent Teacher Support vs. Incompatibility with Online Learning
- Enhanced Collaboration
- Difficulties with Differentiation and Split Grades

Highlights

Consistency vs. Inflexibility/Lack of Teacher Autonomy

While the consistency and commonality within schools, across schools, and between different learning environments (i.e. in-person and online) were lauded by staff, some staff found the consistency too rigid and inflexible at meeting students where they are at.

- “Some of the timing of the units and the pieces of units wasn’t working especially from an inquiry based, cross curricular standpoint”.

Clear Pacing vs. Unsuitable Pacing

Staff commented that the scope and sequence provided a guideline to pacing, facilitated planning, and acted as a guidepost for reflection. With this common pacing, however, came the comment that the pacing, at times, was unsuitable for all students or for certain topic areas.

- “I guess pacing worked well, although it limited me in some areas. When you have taught for so long, you understand what needs more time and what doesn’t”

Clearly Defined and Focused vs. Out of order sequencing

Staff appreciated the clearly identified essential learning outcomes (ELOs), which allowed them to prioritize and focus so they felt “less overwhelmed by trying to meet all the outcomes in the programs of studies.” Additionally, the scope and sequence documents helped with planning, making it easier to navigate throughout the year. While the identified ELOs worked for the most part, staff felt that in some subjects the ELOs were out of sequence, which made teaching difficult as it was not based on the skill set the student would have acquired by that time. Some also felt the sequencing was also not conducive to cross-curricular programming and learning.

Excellent Teacher Support vs. Incompatibility with Online Learning

The Division-wide Scope and Sequence in partnership with the Teacher Support Packs (TSPs) were widely seen to support teachers new to the Division, new to a particular teaching assignment, or on temporary contracts. For experienced teachers, some commented the TSPs were “helpful and refreshing to see a new way to structure curriculum delivery,” and acted as a good supplementary resource. While a few comments mention

the Scope and Sequence and TSPs being helpful for online teachers, some felt the lessons and strategies were difficult to adapt to an online format. Some comments also mentioned there was less content available for online learners vs. in person learning.

Enhance Collaboration

Staff felt that the consistency that resulted from the Scope and Sequence documents enhanced collaborative opportunities within catchments, especially for schools with which there was only one teacher for a particular grade. Additionally, one staff member commented that the common Scope and Sequence “allowed for focused curricular related discussions during collaboration times and was instrumental in helping online teachers stay connected with in-person teachers.”

Difficulties with Differentiation or Split Grades

A concern of Scope and Sequence was its inability to address and support classrooms with a wide range of grade levels and student needs. This inability did not only extend to students working below or above grade level, but also for teachers teaching a combined grade, or specialized programs with multiple grade levels.

What worked well dividing the year into quarters?

What were the challenges with dividing the year into quarters?

Respondents: Students, Staff, Families

Overview: The Division organized the school year into a quarterly schedule to enable families to decide between in-person and at-home learning four times during the school year. Students and staff shared how strongly they felt the quarterly schedule supported a number of different aspects.

Figure 3. As a student, how strongly did you like or dislike the following about the quarterly schedule for this school year?

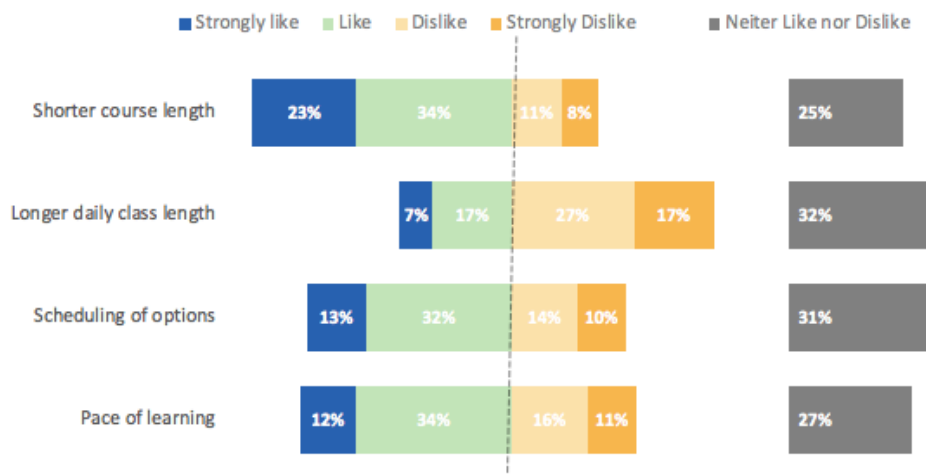
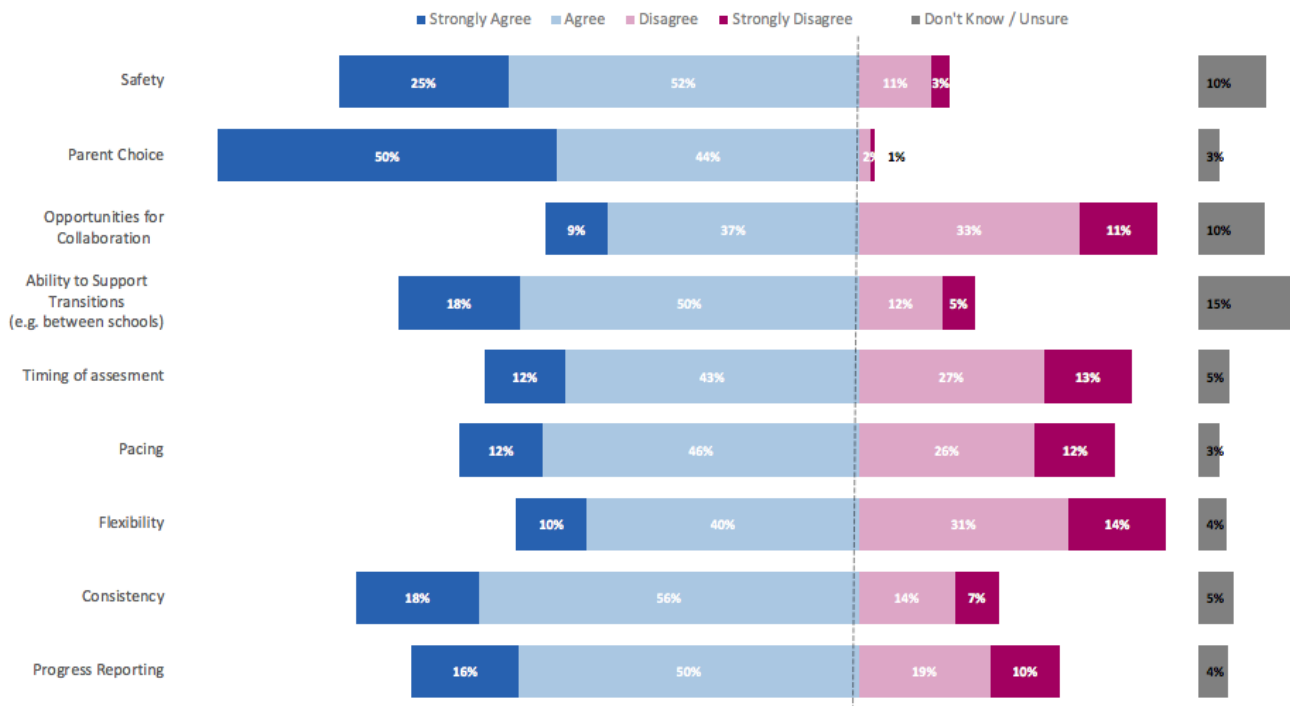


Figure 4. Staff, based on their experience, felt the quarterly schedule supported the following.



When asked to elaborate on their responses, it was clear that the quarterly schedule was much appreciated by some respondents, while for others there were challenges. Many respondents also felt that the quarterly schedule made no difference to them. Similar to the scope and sequence questions, responses were frequently two sides of the same coin and many of the themes were to be found across all three stakeholder groups.

Key Themes

- Greater Structure vs. Inconsistencies during Transitions
- Family Choice: Control and Safety vs. Effort and Work
- Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Pacing
- More Frequent Assessments vs. Difficulties Assessing with Shorter Timeframes
- Ability to Sample a Variety of Options
- Greater Anxiety and Work during Transitions

Highlights

Greater Structure vs. Inconsistencies during Transitions

Families felt that the quarterly system provided more structure to the year. They knew what was expected in each quarter and if their child changed schools or mode of learning they did not miss anything.

- Families: “[What worked well with the quarterly schedule was] Having the whole district on the same learning schedule. One of our children switched schools part way through the year and it was easy to ensure she had learned everything she needed to over the year.”

Some families, students, and staff felt that transitions between online and in-person or vice versa disrupted continuity. This disruption was mainly attributed to instances in which there were inconsistencies in following

the Division-wide Scope and Sequence or differences between online and in-person learning in expectations, marking and workload, and not the quarterly schedule itself.

Family Choice: Control and Safety vs. Effort and Work

Families and students appreciated the ability to choose between online and in-person at a quarterly interval. Many families felt it provided them a sense of control and safety, while staff felt it provided families the flexibility to make the best decision possible as the pandemic progressed. Even families who did not make any changes to their child's mode of learning appreciated having the option available to them.

- Families: "We loved and always considered the opportunity for re-entry, to in-person learning at every quarter. It absolutely made our decision easier because it was not absolute for the year."

Despite the benefits, families identified some challenges including too many opportunities to choose, too few opportunities to choose based on rapidly changing situations and too much communication about family choice. Staff noted that transitioning at quarters created additional work due to the need to change and adapt to evolving circumstances and new information.

Appropriate Pacing vs. Inappropriate Pacing

Staff, families and students felt the quarters helped with the pace of learning because they acted as guideposts to anchor and organize instruction, as well as mark the passage of time and progress. Staff also felt the quarters encouraged more responsibility and independence in students for their learning.

- Student: "I appreciate the year being broken into quarters because it gives me a break in between quarters and gives me a sense of accomplishment at the end of each one."
- Staff: "The pacing of working in quarters allowed students to start fresh each quarter. I think it opened up a greater sense of 'this quarter I will work better.' 'I have time to improve my work habits and demonstrate my independence.' The shorter divisions of time seem to help in goal planning for students, to make a goal and review it in a more expedient time frame."

Since the quarters were short, some respondents felt that it was more difficult to learn and understand concepts fully, there was less time to complete work and improve grades, fewer opportunities to collaborate, as well as fewer opportunities for teachers to provide individualized feedback and provide help.

High school students and families provided a unique perspective about how the quarterly schedule impacted their instruction. Proponents felt that the two class quarters helped them focus because there was less homework and it was easier to retain information for tests, thus they felt that this improved learning led to better academic outcomes. Additionally they found the extra time very helpful for CTS and science classes and there was a better balance between core and option classes. However, in addition to the challenges mentioned earlier, some high school students and families also felt that the classes were too long, there was too much homework, and it was difficult to review or catch up if a class was missed or a concept was not fully understood.

More Frequent Assessments vs. Difficulties Assessing with Shorter Timeframes

Families and students generally liked receiving four progress/interim reports over the year as they felt that it improved communication. Students mentioned being able to improve their marks, because they better understood how they were doing due to the increased reporting. Students also felt that the non-cumulative reports provided an opportunity to reset at each quarter. Neither group mentioned challenges related to the increased number of progress reports.

Staff also appreciated that four progress/interim reports provided more timely information for families and students. Some liked the switch to two interim reports as it reduced their stress. There was appreciation for having the same format and reporting time across the Division. Teachers also felt that the shorter assessment cycle kept them more on track and mentioned that the format allowed students to reset every quarter which could be helpful.

However, staff generally found progress reporting more challenging than in previous years because of the non-cumulative nature of the reporting, the difficulty of getting to know students before first report was due, the difficulty of triangulating assessment and observing students improvement given the short timeframe, and the extra reporting was difficult in already stressful time. Some also noted the timing did not align with IPPs.

Ability to Sample a Variety of Options

Students and families in grades 7-9 liked being able to sample a variety of different options. However, families and students also found there was an inconsistent approach to options between schools, there were fewer to choose from and some were repetitive, the option classes were too short, and they did not like that there were no full year options like band/music or drama.

Greater Anxiety and Work during Transitions

Families, students and staff identified challenges with the timing, scheduling and transitions associated with the quarterly schedule. Students felt transitions were both socially and academically difficult because of potential change in teachers, classmates, friends, and routines. Families felt these challenges were especially difficult for elementary aged students.

Staff echoed the same sentiment and found that the shifts in students at each quarter meant having to re-establish classroom routines and structures, as well as having to re-develop relationships. Teachers felt that there were too many unknowns for students caused by the quarterly changes, particularly in elementary school. Some teachers observed that as the year progressed it became more challenging to transition online learners back into in-person learning.

Some students, however, viewed the transitions as an opportunity to meet new students and friends. While staff liked how the quarterly schedule helped with planning and respecting timelines because they were shorter. Teaching staff also felt that there could be a fresh start every quarter and made transitioning students in and out of the classroom manageable.

- Staff: "For in person learning, admin was able to reorganize timetables and groupings more quickly

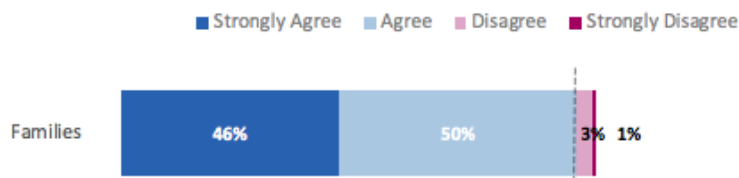
than if we had 2 semesters or a full year schedule. This came in handy when everything had to be reorganized to not have so many staff out at once for a COVID positive case in a cohort.”

What additional information would have been helpful in your decision for family choice?

Respondents: Families

Overview: The majority of families felt like they had enough information to decide between in-person or online for their child.

Figure 5. I have received enough information to choose either online or in-person learning for my child



However, a small proportion of family respondents commented on additional information that would have been helpful in their decision for family choice. It is acknowledged that some of the additional information requested may have already been available. In general, families expressed the need for greater communication that was more regular, better, and in-person.

Key Themes

- Details and expectations for online learning
- Specific programming Information: Alternative Programming, Special Needs Programming
- Additional safety protocols
- Transmission and case rates
- Available mental health supports

Highlights

Details and expectations for online learning

Families expressed the desire to have more information about the online learning experience (i.e. schedule, teacher experience with online learning, curriculum coverage, navigating SchoolZone, etc.) and how it may or may not differ from in-person learning. A number of comments also spoke about the need to give parents a better understanding of the expectation and time commitment needed from them to support their child’s learning in an online environment.

- “Knowing what would have been expected of online parents would have been helpful. Some parents thought they would be hands off and have had to put in a lot of work and others have had none.”

Specific Programming Information: Alternative Programming, Special Needs Programming

Families wanted more information if alternative programs such as French Immersion, IB, Gifted and Talented were to be offered and if so, how they might look on an online format. They also wanted more information on the supports available to children with special needs and how their needs would be met.

- “It would be helpful to know more about what classes will be offered. We didn’t know if our child would be able to take [their] second language or what options [they] would have. [...] We appreciate

that it took the Division a lot of adjusting and planning, but going into next year it would be helpful if it were more clear what classes they'll get.”

Additional safety protocols

Families understood the standards of cleaning and mask use determined by the Division and outlined in the Re-Entry Plan, but they wanted more information about other regulations/considerations such as: transportation/yellow bus safety protocols, use of plexiglass, how day-to-day operations may change, safety measures used in the cases of mask exemption, how teachers planned to adapt lessons in light of public health restrictions.

Transmission and case rates

Families wanted more transparent and up to date information from Alberta Health Services about school transmission rates, contact tracing, modeling, and outbreaks. When isolations were required, families wanted more detailed information about when the contact happened, how long the isolation was to last, what considerations were taken to ensure the child’s schooling would continue, as well as a follow up as to whether and what extent the case ‘spread’ within the classroom or school. In short, families wanted a better joint effort between Alberta Health Services and the Division.

Available Mental health Supports

Families wanted more information not only about how their child’s mental health would be addressed, but also the mental health of school staff. Other families felt there needed to be more information about the resources available for parents and families to cope during the pandemic.

Is there anything else you would like to share about the measures that Edmonton Public Schools is taking during the pandemic?

Respondents: Families

Overview: Although this particular open-response only pertained to families, through other questions families, students and staff shared how safe they felt in their school community/work. Stakeholders also shared how important they felt a number of measures were in helping them feel safe during in-person learning during the pandemic.

Figure 6. My child feels safe in their school community

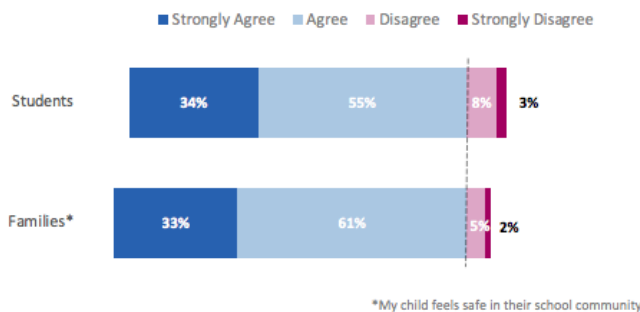


Figure 7. The Division’s COVID-19 safety protocols help me feel safe at work

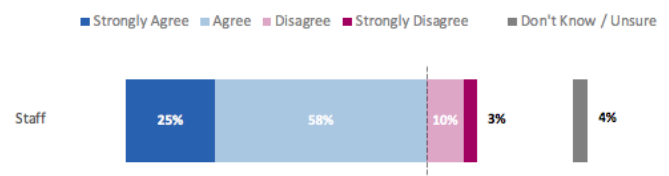


Figure 8. For students, the following measures are important to make them feel safe during in-person learning during the pandemic

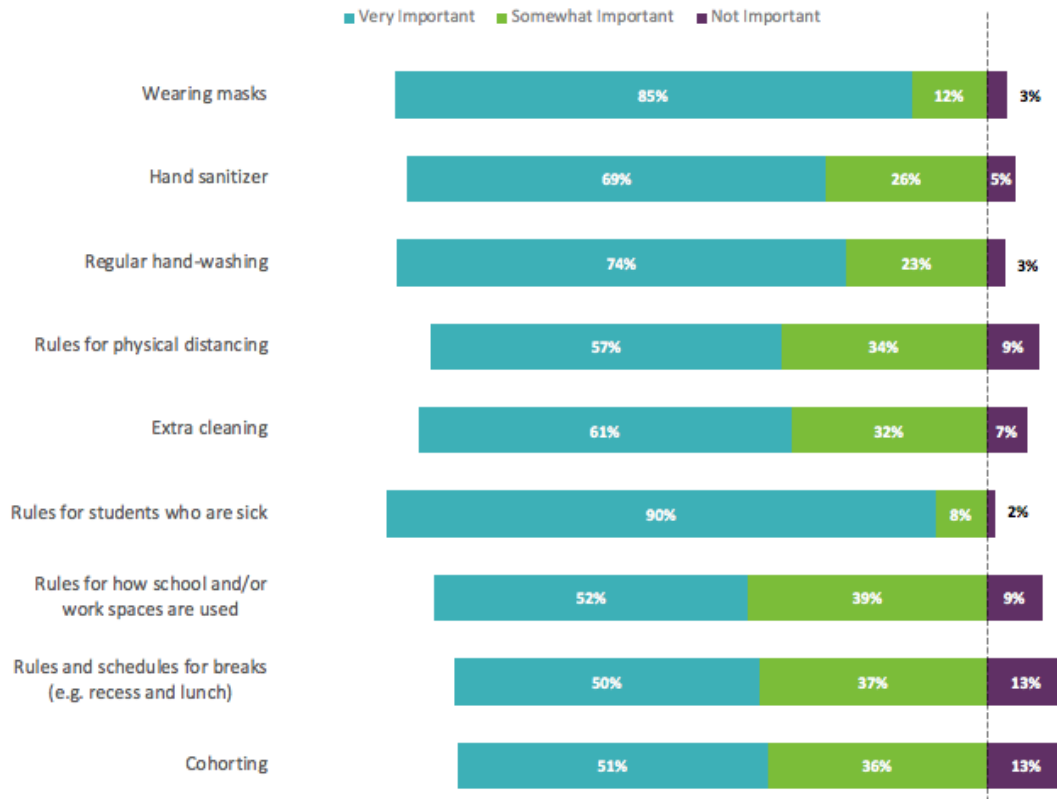


Figure 9. For families, the following measures are important to make them feel safe during in-person learning during the pandemic

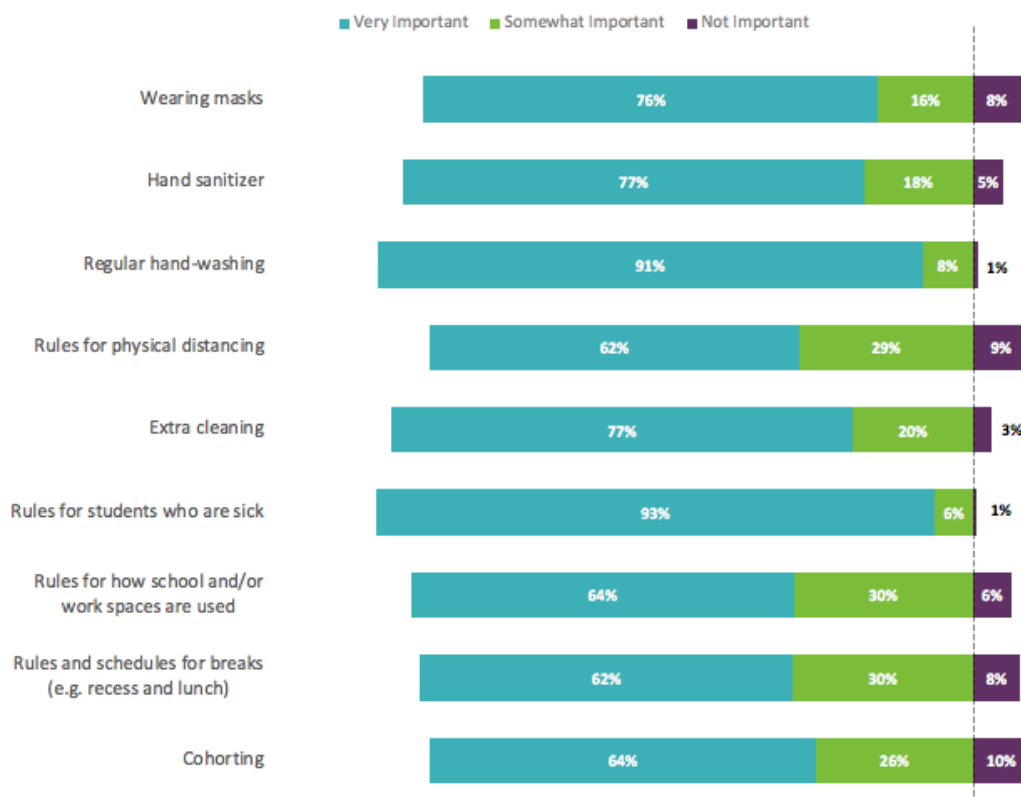
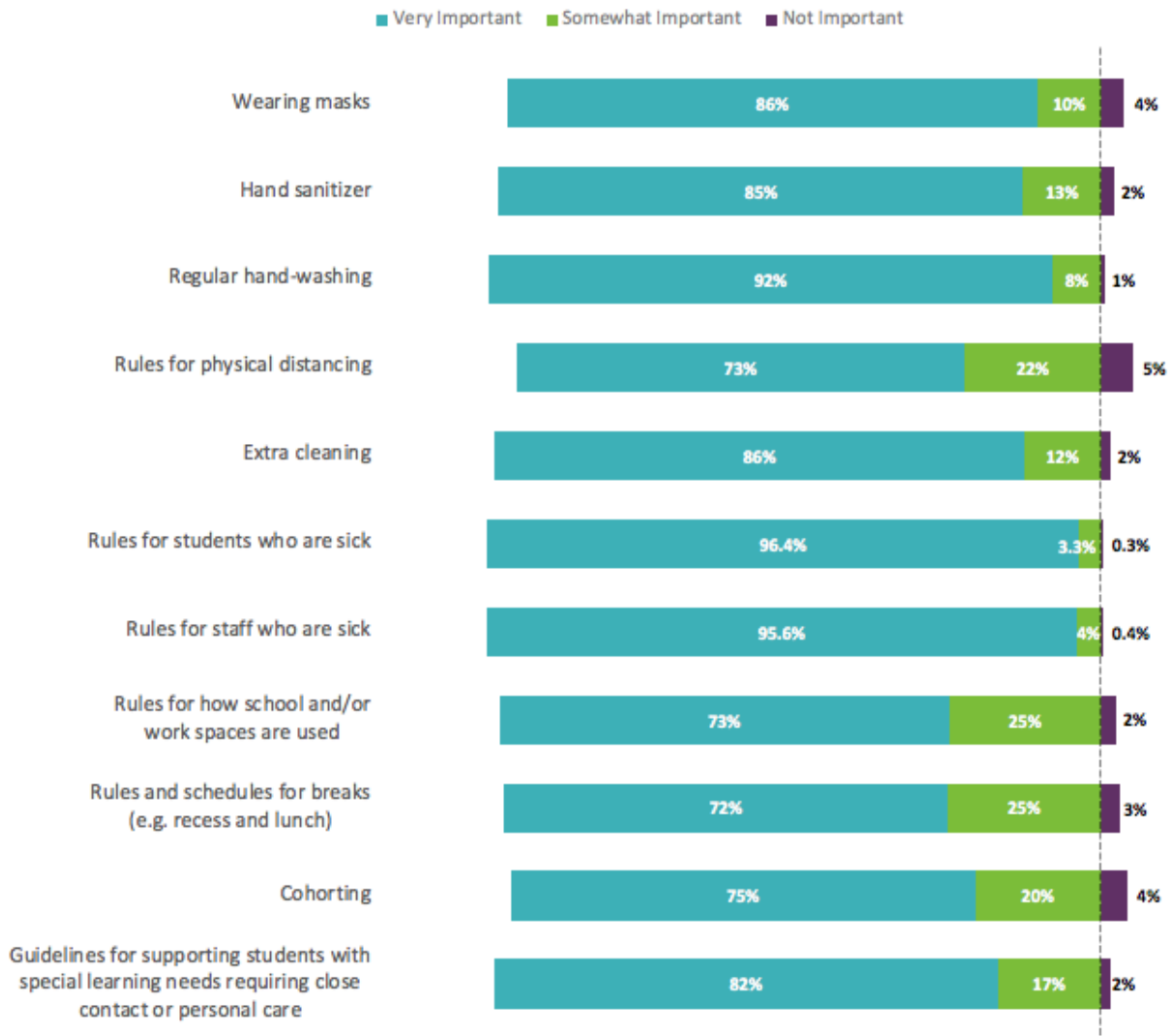


Figure 10. For teaching and learning staff, the following measures are important to make them feel safe during in-person learning during the pandemic



When families were asked if there was anything else they wanted to share about the measures that the Division is taking during the pandemic, families spoke about not only COVID safety measures, but also about family choice and the quarterly schedule. Since family choice and the quarterly schedule has been spoken about in depth in responses about the [quarterly schedule](#), responses about the safety measures will be the focus of this discussion.

Key Themes

- Safety Measures and Protocols, In General
- Masks
- Cohorting and Physical Distancing
- Other Safety Measures and Protocols: Hand sanitizing, Cleaning, Staying at home, and Ventilation
- Transportation
- Communication
- Mental Health

Highlights

Safety Measures and Protocols, In General

Overall, families were appreciative of the Division's efforts to keep students and staff safe, especially for students engaging in in-person learning. Families expressed their gratitude for the hard work of the Division and its staff going "over and above expectation" during a difficult and stressful time, despite school budget cutbacks and lack of government support. A number of families stressed that the Division and its teachers should have been provided with greater support and resources.

- "I am blown away with the way in which my child's school and as an extension, Edmonton Public has navigated this brand new and extremely fluid situation with such ease. I feel like our kids and as a result, our community is in great hands. Thank you so very much for all the hard work to make this possible."

A few families, however, felt that measures and protocols that were outside of those recommended by Alberta Health Service "put unnecessary stress on kids."

Masks

While quantitative responses demonstrated that the majority of staff, students and families agreed that masks were important in helping them feel safe, qualitative responses highlighted different perspectives on masking. The majority of families were appreciative that Grade 4 to 12 students were required to wear masks indoors, and that masks were encouraged for Kindergarten to Grade 3. Some families even expressed they would like to see greater adherence to masking, as these requirements made families feel "safer sending [their] child to school despite a very large class size." Those opposed to masking pointed to the masking protocols encouraged for students in Kindergarten to Grade 3, since this requirement fell outside of AHS recommendations.

Cohorting and Physical Distancing

While families were happy with the Division's protocols around cohorting, families felt there were challenges in implementing them effectively. Challenges included the mixing of cohorts outside of school hours (e.g. before school, after school, during lunch time for high school students, on school buses) and having one teacher teach multiple cohorts. Similarly, families appreciated the Division's efforts with respect to physical distancing, but felt that large class sizes did not allow for adequate distancing. Many families acknowledged, however, that smaller classes would be impossible given the lack of government support.

Other Safety Measures and Protocols: Hand sanitizing, Cleaning, Staying at home and Ventilation

Families felt that handwashing, hand sanitizing, cleaning, and sickness protocols were important to continue even after the pandemic. As with other safety measures and protocols, families were divided amongst those that appreciated the Division's efforts, those that felt not enough was being done to enforce these measures, and those that thought these measures were too strict.

A number of families also mentioned the importance of better ventilation and air purification, emphasizing the need for government support to afford such upgrades.

Transportation

Families spoke about the challenges that arose from limited yellow bus services, and voiced concerns about the enforcement of safety protocols such as social distancing and masking on yellow buses. Some families felt there should be stronger protocols in place. In addition, although not under the purview of the Division, families also voiced their concern about safety for their children that needed to take public transportation to school.

Communication

There were mixed opinions regarding the Division's communication around COVID safety measures. Some families were pleased, commenting that there were multiple modes (e.g. newsletter, principal, teachers, and School Zone) of timely, accurate and clear communication. Others felt there was not enough information, and they wanted more transparency when it came to details about cases, transmissions, and challenges surrounding the pandemic. Some respondents felt that Alberta Health Services' lack of transparency may have impacted the Division's ability to communicate with parents, students, and staff.

Mental Health

While many families understood the importance of safety measures and protocols and found them to be effective in stopping the spread of the virus, families were concerned about the effects that the restrictions were having on their child's mental health. Families felt the restrictions affected their child's ability to connect and form relationships and friendships, reduced their physical activity, and caused greater anxiety and stress. Many families expressed hopes for a return to "normal."

- "Our school has done an incredible job this year navigating this pandemic. I appreciate all they have done, but it's time to ease up and allow our kids to be kids."

In your role as principal what has been your biggest challenge this year?

Respondents: Staff (Principals)

Overview: The majority of responses from principals about their biggest challenges over the past year related to mental health and well-being of staff, students and families, as well as their own. Some principals described balancing these challenges with the demands with the regular academic and professional priorities in schools.

Key Themes

- Mental health, well-being and relationships with staff, students, and families
- Extra workload, incoming information and communication, documentation, and contact tracing
- Balancing safety and well-being with academic, professional development, and other priorities
- Staffing issues due to isolation and supply shortages

Highlights

Mental health, well-being, and relationships with staff, students, and families

Principals identified that their primary challenge over the last year was navigating and supporting staff, student and family mental health and well-being. This included maintaining staff morale and relationships despite losing in-person modes of communication and collaboration. Several principals noted the extra stress and

demand placed on teachers over the past year and reflected on the challenges of adequately supporting and maintaining connections with both in-person and online teachers.

In addition, several principals reported that building and maintaining relationships with families was a significant challenge over the past year. This included managing parent expectations, particularly with online learning, and trying to ensure families were still involved in their children's learning and the school community. The ability to support families in need of additional support and feeling disconnected from parents were common challenges.

Along with supporting staff and families, many principals identified significant challenges supporting and meeting the needs of students over the last year. Principals particularly identified this challenge with the online learning cohort, citing challenges with attendance, engagement, and connections with online students. Regardless of whether the student was an online or in-person learner, meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties, as well as supporting student mental health were also reported as key challenges.

Some principals also reported challenges with their own mental health and well-being over the last year. Principals described how hard it has been to balance supporting others with their own well-being, as well as how lonely, isolating, and exhausting the last year has been as a principal.

- “Navigating the unknown while trying to meet the pressing needs of staff, students, and families. People come to me as a leader to lead - that has been difficult as I've had to learn and lead at the same time. As a single administrator, I have had great support from staff, however it has been a very heavy year that began at the beginning of August. Now that things are better 'known', next year will not be as heavy.”

Extra workload, incoming information and communication, documentation, and contact tracing

Principals identified challenges with increased workload, as well as increased communication and information. Some of these challenges might be attributed to the quarterly schedule and family choice, as well as what principals described as the lack of clear or consistent direction and rules from Alberta Health Services. The administrative demands of reporting and documenting, communicating, and contact tracing resulted in significant overtime and exhaustion for administrative staff. Some principals also found the flow of communication, information, and messaging regarding these changes to be overwhelming.

Balancing safety and well-being with academic, professional development, and other priorities

Principals reported challenges with balancing safety and demand of the pandemic with other school and professional priorities. These priorities included the ability to collaborate well, support professional learning, the ability to meet the academic needs of students, and support staff in their role as educators. Balancing the demands of the pandemic with expectations for student success, high quality instruction and teaching strategies, instructional leadership, and new professional learning opportunities was described as a challenge throughout the year.

Staffing issues due to isolation and supply shortages

Staffing issues, particularly shortages and lack of supply staff and educational assistants, due to isolation requirements were noted by principals as a challenge. Principals reported significant stress and time demands as a result of these staffing issues. In addition, some principals noted that continuous realignment of staffing needs due to staff accommodation and changing enrolment numbers had challenging implications for school budgets in addition to logistical challenges in filling staff roles.

Additional themes

In addition to the themes described above, principals described the following challenges:

- The quarterly schedule, particularly new timetabling, last minute family choice and changes to school population each quarter, and constant change each quarter
- Lack of time in classrooms and the impact of this on connections with staff and students as well as instructional leadership
- Keeping staff and students safe from COVID-19, enforcing pandemic rules and restrictions
- Supervising and leading staff, particularly staff teaching online

After the pandemic, what is one thing you are looking forward to in your work as a school leader? After the pandemic, what is one thing you are looking forward to for your school community?

Respondents: Staff (Principals)

Overview: Many of the things that principals were looking forward to as a school leader and for their school community overlapped, thus these questions will be discussed together. Like many other stakeholders, school leaders are most looking forward to seeing others in person. There also appeared to be a general hope that the 2021-22 school year would see the return of “normal” pre-pandemic activities.

Key Themes

- Connecting with students, staff, and parents
- Return to normal

Highlights

Connecting with students, staff and parents

Many principals looked forward to connecting and (re)establishing relationships with their students and school communities. Principals spoke about their desire to “spend more time in classrooms” greater than 15 minutes at a time, and connecting and engaging with students in a more authentic and dedicated manner. Principals were also excited about welcoming parents and families back into the building so that families could be involved daily in school life, be it as school volunteers or parent councils/association meetings.

For staff, principals looked forward to less restrictions so that they could collaborate, connect, build relationships, and support their staff in-person and in a more personal way.

- “[I look forward to] the ability to meet face-to-face and celebrate our successes in a way that honors and respects the relationships that we have worked so hard to build. Relationships are the key to everything that we do.”

They also looked forward to supporting teaching and learning by providing teachers with meaningful and authentic feedback in classrooms and resumption of normal classroom practices such as being able to provide baseline assessments of students' foundational skills and identifying learning gaps.

Return to normal

Many principals look forward to a return to normal, and having their “students once again ‘owning’ this whole building.”

- “[I look forward to] restoring the normal 'life of the school' that helps to create a sense of belonging and provides to children the positive affirmation of learning and growing that schools usually provide.”

This return to normal also includes the resumption of clubs, sports, and events. Principal agreed that these activities not only help to build school culture, but also help develop relationships with students, staff and parents, as well as encourage community partnerships.

After the pandemic, what is one thing you are looking forward to?

Respondents: Students, Staff, Families

Overview: It should be noted that this question was posed differently depending on the stakeholder. Students were asked “After the pandemic, what are you most looking forward to at school?,” families were asked “At your child’s school, what is one thing you are looking forward to once the pandemic ends?” and staff were asked “After the pandemic, what is one thing you are looking forward to at work?”

Students, staff, and families all indicated that they were most looking forward to (re)establishing in-person connections, interactions, and relationships in schools once the pandemic ends. All stakeholders spoke about their desire to return to “normal” and identified a range of additional experiences and activities that they were looking forward to once the pandemic ends.

Key Themes

- (Re)establishing in-person connections, interactions, and relationships
- Resumption of school activities, events, and extracurricular
- Normal routine, scheduling, and course options
- Parent involvement and presence in schools
- Relaxed/No Safety Protocols
- Other

Highlights

(Re)establishing in-person connections, interactions, and relationships

Students and families alike are excited for students to connect and interact with other students across grades, classrooms and cohorts, as well as see teachers and principals in person. Students are looking forward to moving freely around their school and being physically close to their peers (e.g. hugs, classroom desks

arranged in pods, etc.), while families voiced the importance of these interactions for their children's ongoing social development and sense of normalcy.

While staff were also excited about (re)establishing connection with students and parents in a more "normal" setting, they also mentioned their excitement of building relationships, camaraderie, and strong collaborative environments with their colleagues through in-person social (e.g. lunch, potlucks, coffee) and professional (e.g. staff meeting, team building) activities.

Resumption of school activities, events, and extracurricular

Students, staff, and families are all looking forward to participating in school activities, school events, and extracurriculars. In particular, respondents are looking forward to field trips, sports teams, class parties, dances, clubs, theatre and music performances, art showcases, celebrations of learning, and celebrating graduations. Students placed a particular emphasis on being able to participate in more physical activity through sports and more flexibility at recess. Additionally, some students noted how school events and activities help build a sense of school community, and that they were looking forward to building a stronger school community in the future.

- Student: "[...] Compared to previous years, the student community is a bit less connected and I'm really looking forward to being able to hold events that everyone can participate in especially the grade 10 students who may feel disconnected due to being at a new school during these times."

Normal routine, scheduling, and course options

Although the merits of a [quarterly schedule](#) was discussed earlier, several students reported looking forward to having their regular course schedule and routine back. Part of this regular scheduling included the ability to choose and have a wide range of options including drama, art, foods, and outdoor education.

School staff are looking forward to being able to welcome students, staff and parents back into the school and office, returning to flexible class groupings and group work, freely visiting schools and classrooms for observation, being able to support students who have learning difficulties, having assemblies, having music and singing back in schools, as well as allowing students to interact and socialize more (e.g., group work, conflict management). Not having to check in and check out of various and multiple sites or having to repeatedly prepare equipment and technology to support online or in-class learning were also mentioned along with anticipation of returning to the previous staffing levels.

For non-school staff, several comments were made about looking forward to returning to the office to work in person but only when it is safe to do so.

Parent involvement and presence in schools

Many parents are looking forward to being allowed to physically enter their children's schools again. Parents described wanting to visit and meet their child's teacher and other school staff, attend school events, see the spaces with which their children learn in, and volunteer with their children's schools. Several parents noted

that being present in the school contributed to feeling part of the school community and connected to staff and other parents.

Relaxed/No Safety Protocols

Despite students acknowledging that masks were important in making them feel safe during the pandemic, students and staff looked forward to no longer needing to wear masks in schools so that they could see others' facial expressions and have improved communication. Staff anticipated being able to complete certain assessments (e.g. social and cognitive development) with greater ease since these assessments proved to be more challenging when students were masked.

Some students looked forward to not having to use hand sanitizer, or as much hand sanitizer, after the pandemic. While staff looked forward to having students work in groups and on projects without worrying about social distancing and being able to share materials, as well as being able to visit multiple students, classrooms and/or schools without the need to clean between each visit or worrying about putting someone at risk. Staff working in different locations also looked forward to not having to worry about safety and cleaning protocols, as well as having the anxiety or stress associated with getting sick or transmitting COVID-19 to others.

Additional Themes

In addition to the themes described above, students reported that they were looking forward to:

- In-person learning, including easier, interactive, collaborative, and normal ways of learning.
- The ability to use lockers again to store belongings.
- Feeling safer from COVID-19 and not needing to worry about spreading the virus.
- Being able to access the library and library books again.

Families reported they are looking forward to:

- In-class instruction and learning for their children, in general but also particularly for language classes
- More choices for options, including band, music, and arts
- No more need to wear masks and less hand sanitizing
- Connections and interactions between students and teachers
- Less stress for teachers, better mental health supports for teachers and students
- Some felt that it is too early to assume the end of the pandemic is near

Staff reported they are looking forward to:

- Permanent contracts
- Not having to worry about whether there will be enough supply teachers if people are sick or a class has to go into quarantine
- Having consistent job security and long term assignments
- More work for supply teachers

Do you have any additional comments?

Respondents: Students, Staff, Families

Overview: Respondents were asked to submit general comments regarding Edmonton Public Schools. Most reiterated the same or similar thoughts as to their responses to earlier questions.

Key Themes

- A review of the additional comments submitted by students, staff and families shows similar themes carried through from the responses to previous questions within the survey. There were no emergent, actionable themes found in this group of responses.

CONTACTS

For more information about this report, please contact the Strategic Division Supports Team (divisionsurvey@epsb.ca).