

Message from Superintendent Jordan Tinney

Staff, parents, students and the community. It's great to speak with you as we approach opening day on September 7th. I wanted to share some of the very basics of opening routines and health and safety protocols so that you know what to expect as children come to school next week.

With the changes announced by government on August 24th, for the first time since early 2020 we will start to see our schools looking a lot like they did before the pandemic. Of the many things we learned during the past year, it's the importance of gathering and sharing with friends and colleagues that stands out the most and we look forward to connecting once again.

This message really is a chance to highlight a few key changes from last year. I want to walk you through the major changes and so you understand the differences. The most significant and visible reminder that we're still in a pandemic will be the requirement of masks for all staff and students in grades 4 and above. But the movement, the gatherings, the activities and the structures will begin to look a lot like they did in 2019.

For both elementary and secondary schools, we will be returning to our 2019 timetable structures. This means attending schools full time, face-to-face for everyone who comes to their neighbourhood school. For secondary schools, this also means a return to a semester system. The move back to semesters has been made possible because staying in cohorts is no longer recommended and students are free to gather in groups. The 2m physical distancing requirement has been eased but we will still be asking people to respecting everyone's private space and we will work with students and staff to limit physical contact. We will still have many things in place to space students out as much as possible, but in many ways, you will see a return to gatherings that look like they have in the past. We heard loudly and clearly from students last year was how much they missed being able to be with their friends at school. The removal of these restrictions means that students can once again be with whomever they wish.

We are also delighted to welcome parents back on our grounds and in our schools as we normally would. Some requirements remain such as the obvious daily health check, a need to sign in, and to wear a mask. Schools likely will also want you to book an appointment if possible. We look forward to normalizing those routines for parents and visitors within the pandemic health and safety guidelines, but it will be wonderful to have parents and community members in our schools again.

Finally, there is the notification process. Last year, we sent thousands of notices home. For many parents, they appreciated the transparency and full openness, for other parents it was overwhelming and increased anxiety. The notification process is driven by Health and the province and we do not yet know what the process will look like in the coming year. As we await more information, here is what we believe you can look for:

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- We still believe that there will be notifications such as isolation letters and, as always, Health is our guide as to when and how to inform the public of an exposure.
 - In a recent press briefing, Dr. Henry, the Provincial Health Officer stated that there will not be notifications for single exposures in schools but if there is an outbreak or cluster, it will be reported.
 - She talked about working with schools and that “every individual who is at risk will be notified” and in addition to that “every cluster or outbreak will be reported.”

We are awaiting the final details of notification processes and when these details are released, we will share with the public so that you will know what to look for in the coming year.

Finally, on the gathering protocols, there are many changes that will impact staff and how they meet and gather at school. Specifically, the protocol of gatherings of up to 50 people or 50% of capacity of a room means that we will be able to meet in large groups which is a good thing. I want to say that people across our district are in different places of comfort with the pandemic. I’m hoping that we ease into such changes respecting that people’s comfort levels are very different and this transition will take time. It may be some time before we meet with hundreds of students in the gym even though the protocols permit it on day one.

In June, I said to staff that there was no way to adequately thank them for all that they did in helping us navigate an incredibly complex year. Looking forward, there is no question that the pandemic is still a major concern. We still need to take all health and safety measures very seriously and to remain vigilant. What we do know for sure is that in the spring of last year, once vaccinations became available, our case numbers in schools plummeted. I am very hopeful that, despite the Delta variant, this too will be our story in the fall, and we will continue to see small case numbers in schools.

On September 7th, close to 75,000 students will cross the threshold of our schools and begin a year where they will be able to play with their friends, join clubs, participate on teams, and engage in so many other activities. Following appropriate protocols, we will once again be able to gather students into assemblies, and to take students on field trips to enhance and extend their learning. There is no question that the pandemic is far from over, but this fall we hope to see ourselves turning a corner and looking at life in school far more like it was prior to 2020.

We look forward to the journey together.