

Hello parents, staff and community,

May is here and all the talk recently is about our current success in battling COVID-19 and now we look toward a potential lifting of restrictions. Once again, all of the decisions will be guided by Health and the government's desire to find a way forward. No matter what, we know that schools play an enormous role in rebuilding the economy as people need to get back to work. So the question still is, when will we open and what will that look like? The message this week attempts to once again wade through the threads and to highlight some key points.

There certainly are no magic answers but, to me, there seems to be 4 key questions to consider:

1. When will schools reopen?
2. What safety precautions will be in place in order for schools to reopen?
3. Who are the students who will first step foot in schools when they reopen?
4. If there is an opening in some form prior to June 30th, how do we support those parents and families who choose not to attend?

As our COVID battle seems to be stabilizing, some things seem to be a given from the direction coming from government. There is no question that the reopening of schools is a significant part of reopening society and the economy and there is a strong appetite to get things going. Decisions as to the extent to reopening and the timing seem to be imminent.

Opening the economy is directly linked to opening schools and government believes that for people to return to work, they need their young children cared for during the working day and for many, this care means school. As a result, early decisions likely will focus on children in the early years because their parents need to be able to go to work, and these young children are less able to manage remote and online learning.

No matter when we open and in whatever form, there will no doubt be an increased focus on enhanced cleaning and safety. New guidelines are on the way and whatever new guidelines come, they will be more rigorous than our current cleaning protocols. In addition to increased cleaning, some measures of physical distancing will be in place and these will have to be adapted to a school setting. These adaptations will have to take into account the very real challenges that young children will face in managing social distancing.

The BC Centre for Disease Control tells us that infection rates in children are low and that the transmission rates from children to adults appear to be very low but more research is required. Regardless, in bringing our adults back, we also have to consider how to support those who have compromised immune systems or have family members in their homes with compromised immune systems. Society has repeatedly been given the message, stay home, don't gather, don't touch, to the extent that we see very real fear and anxiety in the community about being with, or near, other people. This fear needs to be addressed and it will require patience and compassion on behalf of us all.

Finally, as I have stated before, reopening schools is not an all or nothing decision. I still believe that any reopening will be slow and gradual however we still do not know what decisions are coming. We know that if a decision to reopen comes soon, some parents may choose not to send their child back to school prior to June 30th. This personal and family choice needs to be respected. To date, districts have been given some flexibility on what works in our own vast and diverse communities across BC as we all work

to adhere to the government's top priorities of health and safety, support for Essential Services Workers, attention to the our vulnerable learners, and finally to supporting all learners through our ongoing efforts.

The complexities of re-opening schools in midst of a pandemic are mind-boggling, but I believe we are all guided by common values which are:

- We all believe that health and safety should be a top priority;
- We all want the virus to remain under control;
- We all want our children to continue their learning.
- We all want to see a resurgence of our economy; and
- We all want to see a return to life in a new normal.

If we stay true to these commons values, then the work to get there is indeed complex and challenging, but the rewards of success are worth the effort. We can, and must, rebuild together and that rebuilding will require a collective commitment on behalf of us all.