

Report from the Legislature August 6, 2020

A safe return to school has been the top priority of your Saskatchewan Party government ever since our in-school programs came to a halt this past March.

Recently, our government released a plan that will allow for our staff and students to return safely to school this fall. We have evaluated best practices and emerging research that has been provided by public health and have worked alongside our Chief Medical Health Officer to develop this plan.

Our government has developed an eight-step guideline for general operation. All steps will be tailored by their school division to fit the needs of local students and staff. We trust local autonomy, as we understand that a cookie-cutter plan will not work across our province. By laying out the foundation, school divisions will develop plan that is practical for their area. In close consultation with public health officials, the Education Response Planning Team has reviewed and approved each plan to ensure alignment with Saskatchewan's Safe Schools plan.

Safe attendance and safe classrooms are part of these new operational guidelines. All staff and students are encouraged to stay home if they are feeling unwell. Protocols will be put in place for a staff member or student who falls ill while at school. In the classroom, procedures to limit physical contact and promoting hygiene will be implemented.

The third priority within the guidelines is safe transportation. Where possible, parents are encouraged to transport their own children to and from school. Recognizing this isn't an option for many, there will also be protocols in place for those who will utilize transport such as:

- Assigned seats and a record of this seating plan on school buses;
- Students who live in the same household should be seated together;
- Partitions around drivers can be considered; and
- Cleaning and sanitation of buses or other vehicles used to transport students is required between each run.

The fourth and fifth priorities are safe access and safe facilities. Safe access will focus on the daily flow of students and staff within the building. Safe access includes school-level considerations such as dedicated entrances, staggered start times and controlled flow of students and staff in common areas.

Safe facilities will focus on the cleaning and sanitation of school buildings. Each school has been asked to increase sanitation measures and continue to promote proper hygiene practices. This includes the availability of hand sanitizer wherever possible and establishing clear protocols for bringing supplementary school materials such as backpacks and school supplies in and out of schools. If needed, the ministry will provide Personal Protection Equipment, or PPE to students and teachers at the request of the Chief Medical Health Officer.

The sixth guideline focuses on safe classrooms. This measure will ensure the safe sharing of space in the classroom between students and staff. Safer classrooms will include increased personal sanitation measures and proper hygiene practices, as well as minimizing contact among students and staff as much as possible. Many students and teachers across our province are missing their classrooms and classmates, so we must ensure that they are able to return to these spaces as safely as possible.

The seventh guideline includes safe supports. Our physical health has been threatened by this pandemic, but we understand that our mental health has taken a toll as well. This measure will ensure that support for our staff and students mental health is readily available when needed. Support for the learning needs of intensive needs or immune-compromised students will also be put in place. I encourage you to read through your school divisions tailored plan to become familiar with the various supports that will be available in this area.

The eighth guideline focuses on safe activities. This protocol focuses on policies governing group activities including:

- Extra-curricular club activities;
- Participation in athletic events/competitions; and,
- School assemblies.

Our plan includes four levels of safe alternatives that focus on our province's contingency plan at the advice of our Chief Medical Health Officer. These four scenarios may be activated regionally or provincially.

- Level 1: Primary and Secondary Educational Guidelines – as close to 'normal' as possible, with some additional measures.
- Level 2: will involve mask usage as determined by the Chief Medical Health Officer.
- Level 3: will involve reducing classrooms capacity. This may include establishing cohorts and hybrid learning models as considerations.
- Level 4: would take us back to suspending in-class learning and moving back to a similar model we saw this past spring, with divisions working at the local level to ensure learning continues. In this model school would continue to be mandatory, albeit remotely.

As it stands our government is planning on our classroom return to be at a Level 1. As the situation with COVID-19 in Saskatchewan is evolving, plans may be updated and adjusted as needed. Again, our government is trusting the advice and direction of our Chief Medical Health Officer and we will monitor our provinces potential outbreaks closely.

Through increased investment in our 2020 Budget, initial estimates show school divisions are planning to hire more than 225 additional staff. School divisions were able to save about \$40 million due to the in-school suspension earlier this year. Divisions have indicated to our government that they will use their savings for costs associated with a safer return to school. While the costs may not be finalized yet, divisions have identified over \$3 million in expenses so far. No school division has identified the need for funding outside of their savings at this time.

For parents with questions or concerns regarding your child's return to school we encourage you to first contact your local school division as they have created the detailed guidelines and protocols for local school. Our government has given our local school divisions autonomy to tailor their return to school plan to the best interest of their students, and we thank them for their cooperation during these unprecedented times.

For more information please contact your local school division or www.saskatchewan.ca.