

How will schools open back up?

EDITORIAL

ONTARIO'S SCHOOLS will be back in operation in September, but it remains to be seen just how that will happen.

Classes will be back in session for both elementary and high school students, but the experience will be markedly different from what we saw before the COVID-19 pandemic hit back in March.

The provincial government has released a "safety plan for the resumption of class for the 2020-21 school year," but the plan provides a number of different scenarios under which students, teachers and school staff might return to school after the summer break.

Clearly, much will depend on the extent to which there is a community spread of the coronavirus. In areas where there have been no recent outbreaks it might be possible to have classes of 20 or more students, particularly if everyone wore a mask. But in areas where there is evidence of community spread the only sensible course will involve small classes with two-metre distancing and a blending of ordinary and online teaching.

Based on the government's current safety plan, students could experience one of the following:

"A normal school day routine with enhanced public health protocols" that sees students go to school every day in classes that reflect standard class size regulations.

"A modified school day routine" in which each classroom has a limit of 15 pupils and students attend classes on alternate days, rotating with another cohort of classmates every other day or week.

"An at-home learning" routine in which remote education would be "delivered online to the greatest extent possible, including the establishment of minimum expectations for students to have direct contact with their teacher at the same time on a regular basis, also known as synchronous learning."

It has been left to each individual school board to prepare a plan under each of these scenarios, and it will be up to each parent to decide whether or not they want to participate.

Parents who don't feel comfortable sending their kids physically back to class in September can simply continue with online classes, although with more people heading back to work under Stage 2 of the reopening process, staying home to teach may prove difficult.

Both Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce say the safety of students and staff is paramount.

"We simply can't provide a blanket solution for the whole province," Premier Ford said when announcing the plan with Mr. Lecce.

"Instead, we need to provide school boards the tools and the guidelines to get the kids back in the classroom. School boards will be empowered to make decisions based on their local needs, challenges and priorities."

The plan, developed in conjunction with health experts, medical experts at The Hospital for Sick Children, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. David Williams, education sector partners, frontline workers, parents and students, is said to reflect "the best medical and scientific advice and recommendations available."

The government is providing another \$4 million in net new funding specifically for cleaning, cleaning protocols, and financial support to hire additional custodial staff in September.

A release describing the guidelines says the school boards have been asked to prepare their own safety plans for the upcoming school year and submit them to the ministry by August 4.

?School boards will also be required to communicate with parents and students prior to the start of the 2020-21 school year, outlining the safety plan, guidance on health and safety measures and protocols, and any other changes that will be implemented when schools open in September.?

In the circumstances, it would be a good idea for all school boards to seek input from parents as to the best course for them to pursue locally.

One option that should be considered is to experiment with the different options within a single board's jurisdiction, perhaps with permitting larger classes in predominantly rural schools.