

Subject: Schools scramble to plan partial reopening - MTS President quoted

Schools scramble to plan partial reopening

By: [Maggie Macintosh](#) | Posted: 05/22/2020 7:00 PM |

Students can expect individualized invites, social distancing decals and an emphasis on outdoor activities when schools partially reopen next month to offer limited instruction and closure to an unusual school year.

The province surprised teachers, school staff and students alike on Thursday when it unveiled a draft plan for reopening phase two, which would see students return to classrooms in a limited capacity June 1 and the 2020-21 school year start on Aug. 31.

As the premier announced the tentative next steps, Brian Pallister emphasized community feedback and consultation with stakeholders, the Manitoba Teachers' Society included, would be undertaken before firm decisions are made.

Since learning the latest, school divisions have been scrambling to plan for June. While divisions and individual schools will vary in their approach to inviting students back, teachers are expected to resume working from schools next month.



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The province surprised teachers, school staff and students alike on Thursday when it unveiled a draft plan for reopening phase two,

which would see students return to classrooms in a limited capacity June 1 and the 2020-21 school year start on Aug. 31.

No one will be allowed to enter schools if they exhibit any COVID-19 symptoms, including coughing, sneezing, fever, shortness of breath or a runny nose or sore throat.

"June offers us the opportunity to plan for a larger-scale opening of classes in the fall. Obviously, the hygiene situation, the numbers, the physical distancing — all of this will be part of the conversation going forward," said MTS president James Bedford, who represents upwards of 15,000 public school teachers across the province.

Pallister was clear that regular classes will remain suspended, although teachers will soon be able to hold one-on-one tutoring and small sessions with students who have struggled with distance learning. Schools will not be allowed to surpass 50 per cent of their regular capacity.

The Seven Oaks School Division has unveiled the most detailed plan to date; the division expects all students will return to their schools at least once a week in June. Invitations to return will be on an individualized basis.

Superintendent Brian O'Leary said the hope is teachers can connect with students to check in on their wellbeing and distance learning progress and students can get some closure on the school year and find out what to expect as they transition into next year.

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"A lot of this is just getting everyone comfortable with the idea that you can come to school and be safe," O'Leary said Friday. He said it will also be an opportunity for students in hands-on classes, such as auto or wood shop, to resume lessons in small sections.

The main safety measure will be restricting how many students are invited into schools at a time, while the division will also set-up controlled entrances, screenings, additional signage and encourage frequent handwashing and outdoor activities. Desks will be spread out and there will be markers to encourage six-foot separation on the floors. O'Leary said he doubts the division will be using hula hoops or tape measures to maintain protocols.

At the Winnipeg School Division, parents will be asked to monitor their children's symptoms and use the provincial assessment tool before the children come to class, if the children are invited to do so.

Division spokeswoman Radean Carter said students will likely be given appointments to come in to visit a teacher or do an assessment. "It's really going to work as a transitioning period for us," Carter said, "so it's definitely not business as usual."

Carter suggested there won't be more than two or three students meeting with an instructor at a time.



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Administrators will do site visits of area schools in the coming days to figure out what social distancing measures need to be put in place. The division is also reviewing its staffing levels to determine whether any educational assistants will be asked to return.

Other city divisions told the *Free Press* Friday administrators are waiting on a template from the province about how their partial reopenings should look. The department of education did not provide any details about the template Friday.

Louis Riel, St. James-Assiniboia, Pembina Trails and River-East Transcona school divisions sent generic messages to their communities about the draft plan this week.

As planning gets underway, Dr. Philippe Lagacé-Wiens, a medical microbiologist at St. Boniface Hospital and parent of two school-aged children, is prescribing as much of a robust return as possible.

Lagacé-Wiens is critical of the province's modest reopening of schools; he cites minimal cases in Manitoba, fairly low rates of infection among children and students' deteriorating mental health as arguments to resume classes in full.

"We're certainly going to have a conversation with the minister about that early start, and whether it's necessary and whether, quite frankly, it's in the best interests of students and their families." – MTS president James Bedford

Also an assistant professor of medical microbiology and infectious diseases at the University of Manitoba, he said schools can take extensive precautions to keep students safe.

Schools should space out desks in classes, open windows whenever possible to circulate fresh air and implement staggered entries and recesses, as well as alternative day-schooling, he said. Classes could also be isolated from one another, allowing only for a small group of students to socialize, he said, adding that specialized teachers, equipped with masks, could visit classrooms to teach their subjects.

The reaction to even a slight return has been mixed; some teachers are keen to greet their students while others are anxious, especially those who have their own children at home.

On Friday, Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen spoke for a half an hour to delegates at MTS' annual general meeting, which was held virtually, about what's ahead. Partial reopening aside, the province has proposed classes resume before Labour Day and some non-instructional days in 2020-21 be converted for remedial learning.

"We're certainly going to have a conversation with the minister about that early start, and whether it's necessary and whether, quite frankly, it's in the best interests of students and their families," Bedford said, adding that it's important to respect teachers' summer plans too.

maggie.macintosh@freepress.mb.ca

Raman Job
Public Relations Facilitator
Communications/Publications