



SAFE SCHOOLS, SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS: An Alternative Relaunch Plan for Alberta Schools

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Alberta's
NDP Caucus 

Table of Contents

4

MESSAGE FROM NDP LEADER RACHEL NOTLEY

5

**MESSAGE FROM DEPUTY LEADER &
EDUCATION CRITIC SARAH HOFFMAN**

6

SETTING THE STAGE FOR THIS REPORT

7

GUIDING PRINCIPLES & CONSULTATION

8

RECOMMENDATIONS

10

RATIONALIZATION & COSTING

19

CONCLUSION



Message from NDP Leader Rachel Notley

Dear Albertans,

Alberta's public schools are indispensable. They are essential for preparing our children for the challenges of a fast-changing world. There can be no economic recovery without safe schools to which parents can send their kids with confidence.

However, the plan proposed by Jason Kenney and the UCP government risks the health and safety of our children, while also hurting our province's recovery from this pandemic.

Even before Alberta reported its first cases of COVID-19, the UCP government failed Alberta's students. They refused to fund enrolment growth, sending 30,000 more students to school without a single new teacher to greet them. They cut funding for improving classrooms, and they cut funding for supporting students with special needs. Their response to the pandemic was to fire more than 20,000 educational assistants and other school staff at a time when we needed to be adding supports to respond to the unprecedented situation created by COVID-19.

September is approaching fast and we have heard from thousands of Albertans that they are worried about how they will be able to return to school safely. COVID-19 is going to be a persistent threat to our education system throughout the year, so we need to ensure that our schools will be funded sufficiently and prepared to deal with the risks.

Yet, the plan announced by Jason Kenney doesn't include a single new operational dollar for health and safety measures. School boards will be forced to use their reserve funds — dollars meant to improve classroom learning — on hand sanitizer. Moreover, many boards have already exhausted their reserves or had none to begin with. So, the Kenney Government's plan that boards use these funds is a recipe for inconsistency across the province.

Children will still be forced to learn in classrooms with more than 30 kids, and no educational assistants to help. It doesn't have to be this way.

In this report, we will provide a series of proposals that, if implemented, will help ensure a safe reopening. By working together, we can address the challenges with physical space faced in many schools that were already at or over capacity. With additional funding support, clear cleaning and infection protocols and additional staff, we can reopen our schools safely.

Keeping students, teachers and staff safe needs to be a bi-partisan effort and I hope that the government takes our recommendations seriously. We must do everything we can today to ensure our schools are safe this fall. Alberta's children and families deserve nothing less.

Thank you,
- Rachel Notley
Leader of the NDP Official Opposition



Message from Deputy Leader & Education Critic Sarah Hoffman

I have been honoured to consult with thousands of Albertans regarding what education should look like during COVID-19. Over the past few months we have held online meetings, received correspondence and surveys, reviewed survey data from other Alberta-based organizations and have met with many educators, staff, students and family members.

Several themes emerged during this engagement. We have taken this feedback and used it to help generate a number of recommendations based on what is working in other jurisdictions. We believe that school during 2020-2021 shouldn't be a choice between open or close, but that we are in a position to choose how we can open and operate schools safely. Some of these recommendations will take considerable investment.

Governing is about choices and priorities. Albertans have repeatedly told us that childrens' safety must be a top priority. While these recommendations come with a cost, the consequences of pretending things can operate normally without consequence will be far more costly.

To everyone who provided feedback and helped us generate this report, including our staff in the NDP Official Opposition, thank you. It is my hope that the government will act on your concerns, and heed your thoughtful advice, so students and staff can return to school safely this fall.

Sincerely,
- Sarah Hoffman
Deputy Leader of the NDP Official Opposition

Setting the Stage for This Report

Alberta has approximately 740,000 students enrolled in school from Kindergarten to Grade 12. In Budget 2018, the Government of Alberta, under the leadership of Premier Rachel Notley, invested \$8.2 billion in K-12 education, including fully funding growth in student enrolment and reducing school fees charged to parents.

This all changed after the 2019 election.

The UCP government chose to freeze spending on education, despite government officials predicting a 2.2 per cent increase in enrolment each year for the next four years. This means the UCP's plan included no extra funding for 60,000 new students over four years, reducing per student funding by \$400 per student when compared with 2018 levels.

Included within these cuts were several attacks on children with disabilities. For instance, they slashed funding to the PUF (program unit funding), which provides integrated early learning support for children with medical needs or learning or cognitive disabilities. PUF existed for children who were as young as two years and six months of age and lasted until a student was six as of September 1. The goal was to ensure all students could learn alongside their peers by grade one. Without consulting parents, the UCP cut funding for most pre-kindergarten students and canceled PUF for kindergarten students altogether.

They also then cut Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD), which was funding designed to coordinate and provide extra support for students in need of speech language pathology, occupational therapy, educational audiologists, mental health therapists etc.

Finally, in March, in the middle of a pandemic, Jason Kenney and the UCP cut \$128 million from Alberta's schools, forcing layoffs of more than 20,000 educational staff and removing critical support to students at a time when they need them the most.

Jason Kenney and the UCP government have spent months destroying public education. Now, as they look to reopen schools during a global pandemic, they refuse to undo the damage they've done or fund new initiatives to keep students, staff, and their families safe.



Guiding Principles

Students and staff safety must be the top priority. While staff care deeply about their students and careers, they should not have their safety — or well-being of their families — compromised. Parents deserve to feel confident that their kids are safe and cared for at school.

Student learning must continue. Students deserve a world-class education system that helps them find their passion, share their personalities, and foster the skills they need to confront the challenges of a fast-changing world.

Public health officials must feel supported and respected by all orders of government in protecting students, staff, families, and all Albertans. Local decision makers need to feel supported in addressing local pressures and health concerns.

Consultation

In order to inform the reopening of schools, Alberta's NDP Official Opposition gathered feedback from Albertans on ways to support a safe reopening of our province's K-12 schools through an online survey that ran over a three-week period from June 15 to July 3. Multiple conversations were also conducted using digital platforms.

Almost 14,000 Albertans took part in these conversations and many shared their experiences, concerns, and perspectives on reopening. More than half of those we consulted, identified as parents, 40 percent identified as teachers and about 10 percent identified as other school staff or interested Albertans.



Recommendations

CLASS SIZES & STAFFING

- 1** Set a provincewide cap of 15 students per classroom and hire the staff necessary to accomplish this.
- 2** Hire additional staff to cover paid sick leave and time off to care for sick dependents.
- 3** Hire additional staff to meet parallel and fluctuating home learning demands.
- 4** Hire additional custodial staff to ensure schools are cleaned thoroughly and constantly.
- 5** Reverse cuts to student support and rehire the more than 20,000 educational support staff laid off at the outset of the pandemic in acknowledgement of the difficult learning challenges students with disabilities face, especially during COVID-19.

PRACTICES & PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

- 6** Develop comprehensive and consistent health and safety protocols for schools, including mandatory use of masks in common areas and physical distancing in classrooms.
- 7** Develop a best practices guideline to limit student travel between classrooms. Students and staff should stay in one classroom where feasible.
- 8** Limit parent and visitor admission to the school.
- 9** School authorities should consider ways to support hands-on learning should we be required to return to emergency remote home learning for options including art, music and Career and Technology Studies (programs like cosmetology, metal fabrication studies, mechanics, and construction).
- 10** Provide emergency funding to school authorities to offset the cost of additional cleaning and personal protective equipment (PPE). Release a specific protocol on PPE and safe practices for students with disabilities and students that are medically fragile.

BUSING

- 11** Develop a comprehensive and consistent health and safety protocol for school buses and provide funding for PPE specifically for use by bus drivers and passengers. Students should be grouped by family cohort where possible or classroom cohort where family members are not on the same bus.
- 12** Provide a grant by application for school boards to help ensure physical distancing on school buses.

MENTAL HEALTH

- 13** Provide additional funding for mental health support for students and staff by reinstating funding for Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD).

INFRASTRUCTURE

- 14** Working with municipal governments, create an inventory of existing public spaces (indoor and outdoor) in addition to schools for the use of school authorities.

TRANSPARENCY

- 15** The Chief Medical Officer of Health should publicly release a report with all of her recommendations to the government regarding school reopening, including funding and resource needs.



Rationalization & Costing

CLASS SIZES & STAFFING

SET A PROVINCEWIDE CAP OF 15 STUDENTS PER CLASSROOM AND HIRE THE STAFF NECESSARY TO ACCOMPLISH THIS.

Class sizes were the most common concern among Albertans consulted by the NDP Official Opposition, especially given the need for physical distancing. One teacher highlighted the difficulty physically distancing with her current class size:

“Class sizes are already much higher than they should be. I have 33 students registered to be in my Grade 3 classroom, and I do not have enough individual desks and chairs for them, we have done flexible seating, and now that won't be possible. I also don't have enough space for each student to have their own “cubby-locker” for their backpack, lunch, coat, etc.”

The Government of Ontario has asked school boards to prepare for three scenarios (online learning, classroom learning, and a hybrid model of the two) but the Minister of Education has made it clear that, given physical distancing requirements, any return to classroom learning will come with a requirement to “maintain a limit of 15 students in a typical classroom at one time.”

When British Columbia reopened schools this spring, about 30 per cent of the students attended and class sizes were capped at 50 per cent of their previous class size.

Reduced class sizes are also used as a transmission control measure by Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Norway and Switzerland. Not all countries implement their class size caps the same way. Greece and Norway capped their class sizes at 15 students, while Greece required all desks be placed 1.5 meters apart.

Denmark and Belgium use similar systems by keeping classes together throughout the day.



Classes in Belgium are limited to 10 students, while in Denmark classes are generally restricted to 12 students based on the maximum number of students that could occupy a room while maintaining sufficient physical distance between students and teachers.

Israel introduced a class size cap when they first reopened and then removed it, which was publicly attributed as contributing to subsequent COVID-19 outbreaks — one school saw 130 cases alone. One month after Israel reopened schools, there were 244 positive cases among students and staff across multiple schools.

Another consideration is workload, especially in a changed school environment. Teachers consulted by the Alberta NDP Opposition said they were already stressed with how much they were being asked to take on prior to the pandemic.

One said:

“I am a teacher, we are already overloaded with work, how will I be able to sanitize everything and teach?”

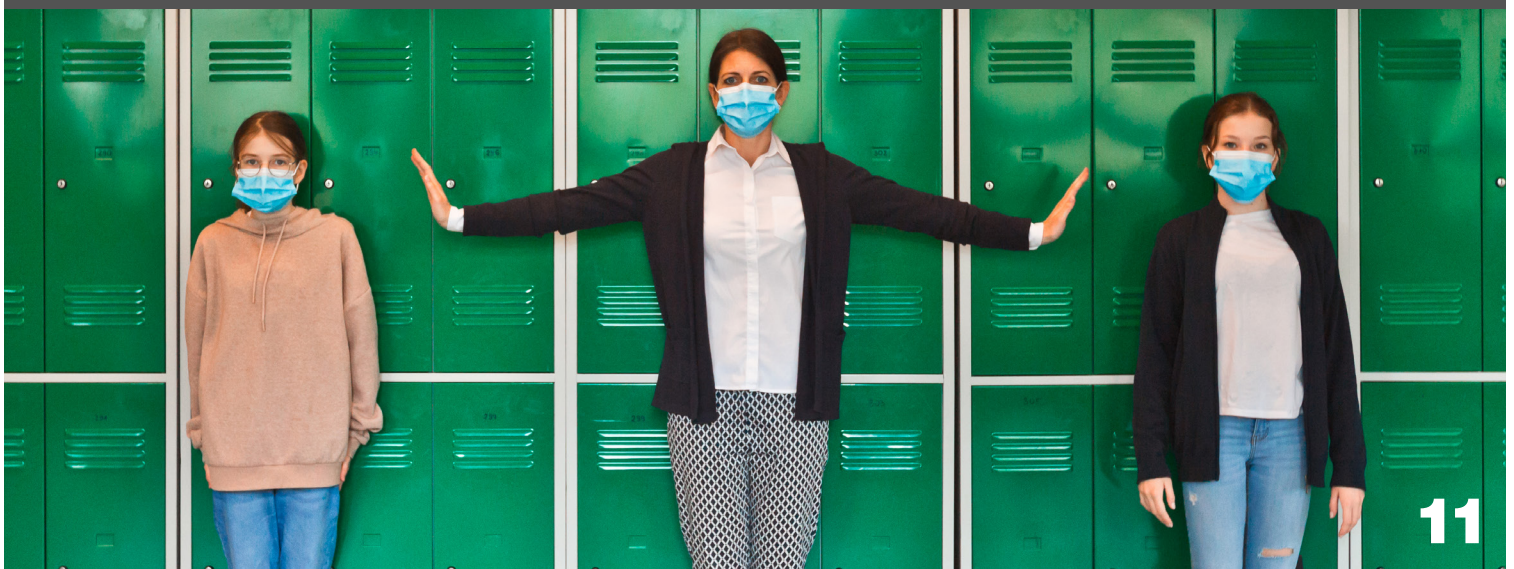
Another added:

“We felt overworked before as there hasn’t been funding to keep up with student growth. All I hear now, is how are we going to teach all day, and check in on students learning at home or home sick. When will we prep?”

A majority of our survey respondents called for more educational staff and support beyond what was provided by a single teacher. One parent submitted the following answer:

“Too many students fell behind... There needs to be consistent check-ins with students in order to ensure that these children are not falling behind their peers. This kind of oversight will require additional personnel, and therefore increased government funding.”

The addition of teachers will absolutely be necessary to ensure students are taught in socially distant classrooms. An exact staffing target will be determined once final enrolment is complete and the number of classes is calculated in September, but it’s safe to assume thousands of additional teachers will be needed to maintain safe schools.





CLASS SIZES & STAFFING (cont'd)

HIRE ADDITIONAL STAFF TO COVER PAID SICK LEAVE AND TIME OFF TO CARE FOR SICK DEPENDENTS.

Teachers will need to stay at home when ill, when their dependents are ill or when waiting on results from a COVID-19 test. This was noted by full-time and substitute teachers that were consulted. The substitute teacher pool will need to grow to keep schools functioning properly.

HIRE ADDITIONAL STAFF TO MEET PARALLEL AND FLUCTUATING HOME LEARNING DEMANDS.

Parents' most frequent concern was regarding their ability to balance their work responsibilities with the support they need to provide for their children at home with their school work. The majority of parents stated that they will either not be able to help their children with their school work or not be able to help them enough to make sure they don't fall behind. One respondent stated:

"I have been working from home full time for the duration of the pandemic, so I was not able to devote much time to my kids' schoolwork. My oldest basically has missed half her grade. My youngest two are barely keeping up but have extremely isolated and boring lives right now. So, either I need reduced work hours to be able to devote some time to home learning, or need to hire someone to come in as the kids can't do it by themselves."

The Alberta NDP Official Opposition believes a cohort of teachers and support staff should be assigned by school boards this fall specifically to work with students still learning from home.

HIRE ADDITIONAL CUSTODIAL STAFF TO ENSURE SCHOOLS ARE CLEANED THOROUGHLY AND CONSTANTLY.

Custodians reported staffing shortages and said that it was already impossible to clean every classroom thoroughly prior to COVID-19. Multiple respondents said they're left with 10 minutes or less to clean every room in their school. The cleaning protocols established in response to COVID-19 will require additional custodial staff. While it will be up to boards to determine school-by-school staffing allocations, some respondents suggested a minimum of two additional custodial staff per school.

Teachers also expressed a great deal of concern that they will be forced to teach and clean, adding more job responsibilities to days that are already packed. One teacher wrote in the survey:

"With classes coming in and out and little time to prep, how exactly am I now supposed to wipe every desk and make sure that my students aren't spreading germs around the classroom. Put simply, we will need more help."

Along with more teachers, the Alberta NDP Opposition believes priority must be put on hiring additional custodial staff.

REVERSE CUTS TO STUDENT SUPPORT AND REHIRE THE MORE THAN 20,000 EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT STAFF LAID OFF AT THE OUTSET OF THE PANDEMIC IN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE DIFFICULT LEARNING CHALLENGES STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES FACE, ESPECIALLY DURING COVID-19.

There was overwhelming agreement among Albertans surveyed that educational assistants play an essential role in helping many students with specialized needs. On March 28, the UCP Government announced the mass layoff of 20,000 educational assistants and other school staff. No warning was given and no consultation was done — many educational assistants told the NDP Opposition they found out about losing their jobs through the news. Parents were also shocked, one stated during a virtual discussion:

"I have an autistic daughter in the regular junior high program. She is very capable with the right supports — which there is too little of at the best of times—but the sudden removal of support staff left her struggling since classes were cancelled."

The Minister of Education maintained at the time that EAs will be rehired for fall classes, but that has not happened. In fact, Edmonton Public Schools said UCP budget cuts will force them to cut more than 400 EA positions.

Class Sizes & Staffing Estimated Cost: \$740 million

Costing based on Alberta student population (roughly 740,000 in 2019-20 school year) and on work done by Toronto District School Board, which has estimated about \$1 million per 1,000 students to hire teachers and arrange spacing for students during COVID-19 with a classroom cap of 15 students.

PRACTICES & PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

DEVELOP COMPREHENSIVE AND CONSISTENT HEALTH AND SAFETY PROTOCOLS FOR SCHOOLS, INCLUDING MANDATORY USE OF MASKS IN COMMON AREAS AND PHYSICAL DISTANCING IN CLASSROOMS.

Mandatory face masks have become a major discussion point in Alberta, especially with the City of Calgary passing a bylaw requiring them to be worn in all public places.

With regards to schools, mandatory face masks are required in Taiwan and South Korea to be worn by staff and students. Taiwan requires masks for everyone in school to replace a class limit and social distancing requirements, while South Korea has their mask policy to accompany their class cap policies.

France, Germany, Belgium, and Israel all have different mask requirements. Belgium only requires teachers to wear face masks. France requires all staff, but masks are only compulsory for high school students. Israel strictly requires students under the age of seven to wear face masks.

The Alberta NDP Opposition recognizes the use of masks in schools around the world varies considerably; however, we recommend the Government adopt mandatory mask requirements in common areas of schools.

DEVELOP A BEST PRACTICES GUIDELINE TO LIMIT STUDENT TRAVEL BETWEEN CLASSROOMS. STUDENTS AND STAFF SHOULD STAY IN ONE CLASSROOM WHERE FEASIBLE.

Along with a 15 student limit per classroom, The Government of Ontario is advocating schools adopt timetables that see students interact only with their designated classmates and a single teacher for as much of the school day as possible.

Denmark utilizes a system of “micro-groups” of students that arrive at a separate time, eat lunch separate from other groups, stay in their own zones in the playground and are taught by one teacher. This strategy helps with reducing the risk of spread because students are limited from interacting with students outside their group.

Alberta should follow the success of other regions and develop a plan like staggered start times and small class cohorts that will reduce the likelihood of a large-scale outbreak within a school.

LIMIT PARENT AND VISITOR ADMISSION TO SCHOOLS.

Under the UCP Government’s plan, students, staff, children and school visitors etc must self-screen prior to leaving home. Schools are also encouraged to develop policies to limit contact, including staggered drop off and pick up times and locations. Some respondents to the Alberta NDP Official Opposition survey expressed concern about frequent travel of guests in and out of the school. The Government of Quebec has adopted a practice of parents dropping their kids off at school outside and only students and school staff are permitted to enter the building.

SCHOOL AUTHORITIES SHOULD CONSIDER WAYS TO SUPPORT HANDS-ON LEARNING SHOULD WE BE REQUIRED TO RETURN TO EMERGENCY REMOTE HOME LEARNING FOR OPTIONS INCLUDING ART, MUSIC AND CAREER AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES (PROGRAMS LIKE COSMETOLOGY, METAL FABRICATION STUDIES, MECHANICS AND CONSTRUCTION).

Schools should use the return of classes to also prepare for the potential of a second wave of COVID-19 cases. Survey respondents noted widespread frustration and challenges with doing hands-on learning. Additional consideration may need to be given to new government programs should schools shut down again.

PROVIDE EMERGENCY FUNDING TO SCHOOL AUTHORITIES TO OFFSET THE COST OF ADDITIONAL CLEANING AND PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE).

The cost of additional sanitation supplies and required personal protective equipment (PPE) needs to be subsidized by the provincial government. School boards are strapped for funds due to successive UCP budgets with cuts across various grants and a freeze on enrolment growth funding.

We cannot rely on school boards to use their reserves to pay for these additional supplies that are needed to keep students and staff safe. Reserve levels vary across the province and can only be drawn from once. Depleting reserves will hinder school boards' ability to address acute issues that arise.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees has done some preliminary costing of cleaning supplies and PPE and determined the cost to be roughly \$300 annually per student.

Practice & Personal Protective Equipment Estimated Cost: \$220 million

Funding is based on the \$300 per student cost estimate from the Canadian Union of Public Employees.



BUSING

DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE AND CONSISTENT HEALTH AND SAFETY PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL BUSES AND PROVIDE FUNDING FOR PPE SPECIFICALLY FOR USE BY BUS DRIVERS AND PASSENGERS. STUDENTS SHOULD BE GROUPED BY FAMILY COHORT WHERE POSSIBLE OR CLASSROOM COHORT WHERE FAMILY MEMBERS ARE NOT ON THE SAME BUS.

Parents responding to our survey expressed specific concerns about safety on school buses. Alberta student transportation regulations need to follow the federal guidelines for school bus operations for COVID-19. Students need to be able to maintain physical distance on their commute to and from school. One student per seat or two if they are from the same household.

Physical distancing on school buses will require changes to bus schedules to accommodate school boards not being able to use every seat. Before COVID-19 some bus routes were overcrowded to the point three students needed to share a single seat.

School boards should not rely on schools asking parents to drive their children to school to reduce the demand on school transit. Parents, for many different reasons, cannot take their children to school. Families need to be able to count on safe and reliable transit.

Masks need to be mandatory for the safety of the passengers and the driver. Masks on school busses will help reduce the risk of COVID-19 when social distancing is difficult to enforce. This will provide an extra precaution when students are entering and exiting the bus and also moving around between seats. This will follow the City of Calgary and other jurisdictions that have made masks on public transit compulsory.

PROVIDE A GRANT BY APPLICATION FOR SCHOOL BOARDS TO HELP ENSURE PHYSICAL DISTANCING ON SCHOOL BUSES.

To ensure physical distancing for students on buses, some school boards will need extra funds to pay for additional school buses and drivers. School busing grants will distribute extra funds to the divisions based on their needs and will be allocated through an application process.

Busing

Estimated Cost: \$31 million

Costing is based on a 10 per cent top up on the annual student transportation grant that is provided to Alberta school boards by the provincial government.

MENTAL HEALTH

PROVIDE ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF BY REINSTATING FUNDING FOR REGIONAL COLLABORATIVE SERVICE DELIVERY (RCSD).

The lack of mental health support was mentioned frequently by survey respondents. The mental health concerns were identified in responses from parents, teachers and support staff. One teacher said:

“[A] priority is going to be addressing the mental and emotional health and well-being of students, families and of course all staff members. There is great anxiety, fear, confusion, anger and varying levels of responsiveness to the information we are receiving from health officials. Meeting the needs of students and families experiencing trauma and crisis has always been a problem and now the situation is going to be even worse. Think about the families who have been struggling with their own mental health issues, financial issues, domestic abuse issues etc.”

From the responses, it can be anticipated that children and youth may experience increased stress and anxiety related to continuing online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore we are calling on the UCP government to provide additional funding for adequate mental health support for students and staff.

It is important to note that Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD) was in place for a decade. In Budget 2020, the government abolished this model. As a result, many mental health therapists and other allied health professionals will not be returning to schools this fall. One teacher said the following:

“This is the worst time possible for mental health therapists to be laid off. We know our students. We want to support them when they come back to school. Students who were experiencing anxiety or depression in February will almost certainly require more support this fall than they did previously and we won’t be there.”

Mental Health

Estimated Cost: \$63 million

Figure is based on what was to be provided in 2020 Alberta Education budget for RCSD before it was cut by UCP Government

INFRASTRUCTURE

WORKING WITH MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS, CREATE AN INVENTORY OF EXISTING PUBLIC SPACES (INDOOR AND OUTDOOR) IN ADDITION TO SCHOOLS FOR THE USE OF SCHOOL AUTHORITIES.

Scotland does not have a firm cap on how many students in a classroom, but students are required to be six feet apart. To accommodate the need for extra room because of physical distancing, school boards in Scotland are working to access new space in libraries, community halls, leisure centers, conference venues, and taking short-term leases of vacant business spaces.

Alberta should be exploring similar opportunities and working with municipalities to find additional space near high-density schools where physical distancing will be difficult to maintain.

Estimated Cost: \$0 - Interjurisdictional collaboration

TRANSPARENCY

THE CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH SHOULD RELEASE A REPORT WITH ALL OF HER RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT REGARDING SCHOOL REOPENING, INCLUDING FUNDING AND RESOURCE NEEDS.

When posed with the question, “Do you trust that the Minister of Education will make the right decision based on the advice of our Chief Medical Officer of Health?” only seven percent of the respondents to the Alberta NDP survey said they trust Minister of Education Adriana LaGrange to make the right decision. This level of distrust should be addressed through a full report on all recommendations that went to the Government Cabinet from the Chief Medical Officer of Health. If the Government wants to give the public certainty that they have adopted all CMOH recommendations exactly as recommended, and regardless of cost, this level of transparency is necessary.

Estimated Cost: \$0

Conclusion

Albertans expect their government to put the health and safety of students and staff first. There is no economic recovery without a safe reopening of Alberta's schools. That message came through loud and clear in our consultation.

One teacher respondent stated:

"Schools are a big part of the economic chain in the fact that we provide, along with education, a safe place for kids to be while their parents work."

Reopening schools safely will require substantial funding and support. This is a serious challenge. For the record, and to counter misinformation from the UCP Government, children can be infected with COVID-19 and it can make them very sick. Jeffrey Shaman, an epidemiologist at Columbia University, said, "to open schools because of some uninvestigated notion that children aren't really involved in this, that will be a very foolish thing."

The Alberta NDP Official Opposition believes there is a way to make schools educational and functional, to support teachers and essential school staff, and to protect Alberta's students. The total cost of our proposals is about \$1 billion. This is a necessary price to pay to keep 740,000 students and tens of thousands of staff safe from the deadly COVID-19 virus. It also pales in comparison to spending by Premier Kenney, who gambled \$7.5 billion on a single pipeline earlier this summer and accelerated his failed, \$4.7-billion corporate handout, which has yet to create a single job.

This is an unprecedented situation and it requires unprecedented action. The alternative is to keep the schools closed indefinitely or reopen them in a manner that's not safe, allow the virus to spread, and then shut down again.

We do not believe the plan put forward by Premier Jason Kenney and the UCP is adequate. There is not a single additional operational dollar invested in our schools to support a safe reopening, and the Premier's plan comes after successive budgets from this Government filled with cuts to support for students with learning disabilities, student transportation grants and a host of other harmful reductions.

The UCP can do better. They must do better. We will be submitting this report and its 15 recommendations to the Premier. We hope he reconsiders his plan and implements these recommendations.