

Media Release

September 2020 School Reopening Issues

On June 19 the provincial government finally announced when the 2020-21 school year would begin for teachers and students though the full calendar for the school year, a government responsibility, has yet to be confirmed. In addition, the strict health safety requirements for the operation of schools in regards to social distancing and group size restrictions are variables faced by school divisions. School division administrators are confronted with the need to develop operational plans for school reopening that conform with the evolving government directives. On June 25 another set of changes was mandated and the government announced that one of three possible scenarios for reopening will be revealed on August 1. As these become known, information will be posted on the KSD website as schools are closed over the summer.

To provide as much flexibility as possible over the summer in the development of plans for 2020-21, the school board authorized the superintendent to respond as needed to the ever changing COVID-19 situation and government directives.

With the current restrictions on the use of school space and group sizes, several issues are immediately evident.

1. School buses cannot carry their usual student loads with current social distancing restrictions, so the transportation of students to/from school becomes a problem.
2. Class spaces which need to be restricted due to the need for social distancing may not be large enough to do so.
3. The number of students previously accommodated at noon hour, including mandated bus students and allowed town students, is greater than the available school spaces can accommodate under the restrictions. The option to restrict lunch students to remaining in their classrooms for lunch may be addressed on August 1.

4. The start-up configuration that may be allowed in September is still to be revealed, and could change significantly based on the management of COVID-19 in the province. Meanwhile school divisions were required to develop a range of start up plans covering the three possible scenarios.

Solutions to the Kelsey School Division issues are difficult or impossible to come by. Some examples of hindrances are as follows.

1. Running school buses with reduced student loads two or more times than currently impacts school organization timetables, driver availability, and costs. Provincial reimbursement of costs is based on student load kilometres so additional funding for increased busing is not available. Some parents could volunteer to transport their own children to school, without reimbursement, to lighten the bus loads.
2. Frequent hand washing protocols will change school operation dynamics. Some form of physical education or band classes may occur, and other specialist teachers on staff may be repurposed if space is available to accommodate this. Requiring students to remaining in their classroom for all instruction will be restrictive.
3. A lunch period which includes non-bus students has been a privilege supported by the Kelsey School Division Board for many years. This has required additional staffing by education assistants, a cost not funded by Manitoba Education and instead borne by the local taxpayers. Labour collective agreements requiring a duty free lunch have to be followed. Previously the use of subsidized lunch fees to support this optional program had its own administrative short comings - late or non-payment of fees among them. With the mandated restrictions to group size and social distancing, only so much can be done at each school.

Meanwhile, the financial restrictions previously and currently mandated by the provincial authorities such as reductions to school division operating grants, reductions in salaries,

curtailment of all expenditures including freezing of staff employment, additional paid days for support staff due to three days added to the upcoming school year, and limits placed on the use of the local education special levy have left the school division in a precarious financial position.

We all hope that things will change for the better by September. Because the issues facing parents are well known, it was important to alert as soon as possible those who have relied on noon hour supervision of the children. Administration continues to confer with other school division officials and with government on any feasible options, but each school division has its own unique issues to deal with. The school board and senior administration will continue to monitor the situation over the summer.

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