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September 17, 2021

Honourable Adriana LaGrange
Minister of Education
228 Legislature Building
10800 – 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Honourable Tyler Shandro
Minister of Health
423 Legislature Building
10800 – 97 Avenue NW
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister LaGrange and Minister Shandro:

RE: COVID-19 Impacts on CBE Schools

We are writing to express grave concern with the government's response to the pandemic in the face of the fourth wave and the COVID-19 Delta variant.

We prepared plans for this school year with measures that exceeded the government's public health measures for schools. CBE's plans were determined with the purpose of prioritizing in-person learning, limiting disruptions due to absences and providing access for students to participate in extra-curricular activities. Despite this we have experienced increasing positive cases since students returned to school in mid-August.

We are frustrated by the lack of coherent provincial guidance being provided to our families and students. Families have received mixed messages about the real and substantial risk that COVID-19 presents to our communities and school jurisdictions are left to fill the public health gap left by the government. The absence of leadership by the provincial government and specifically the downloading of public health decisions onto individual school boards means that CBE resources are being dedicated to the management of what is a province-wide public health crisis.

In the absence of government transparency and tracking, families have shared how important it is for them to understand the possible exposures that occur in schools. After monitoring self-reported cases since the beginning of the modified calendar school year, CBE determined that we will also provide notices of self-reported COVID-19 cases to families. Families have been clear that they want more. We understand that Alberta Health Services (AHS) has information of confirmed student COVID-19 cases and the schools linked to cases. This information, including dates of possible exposure, should be shared with school authorities.

Families are concerned about sending their child(ren) to school given provincial and local context and are trying to make their best decisions in the absence of confirmed information and guidance from AHS. We expect continued challenges with overall absentee rates for both staff and students exacerbating the learning disruptions already experienced last year.

Thus far in the 2021-22 school year, we are faced with the reality of approximately 350 self-reported cases linked to over 120 CBE schools. The vast majority of these cases are in elementary schools. Many schools are quickly approaching a rate of absence greater than 10% due to illness. In the absence of communication from AHS, the CBE currently has no knowledge of the actual number of positive COVID-19 cases within our schools.

While we appreciate the flexibility for school authorities to apply for transitions to at-home learning, we remain concerned that confirmed COVID-19 case information is not being shared by AHS. As we see absenteeism increase, it is important that school authorities be positioned to make effective decisions with the necessary health information.

We ask that the provincial government immediately reinstate contact tracing conducted by AHS in a timely manner and mandatory isolation for positive COVID-19 cases in our schools.

We advocate for families to have direct access to rapid testing kits through AHS and that AHS provide direction to families should a child have a positive test. This would further assist families in de-escalating concerns for the health of students where high rates of symptoms have been present.

We also ask that ministry officials ensure they are proactively working with AHS to develop a strategy for continued access to vaccinations in schools should the vaccine become approved for children under the age of 12. We appreciate the direct work with AHS to improve access to vaccines for individuals ages 12 and up. Schools with students eligible for vaccines have diligently followed up with families to promote consent for vaccinations during the AHS vaccine clinics in schools.

Further to vaccine clinics in schools, we also request that the provincial government mandate vaccinations for all employees who work in the education sector. As approximately 70,000 CBE students are ineligible to be vaccinated, this is imperative for continuity of learning.

We are committed to ensuring our schools are as safe as possible so our students can continue in-person learning. Supporting the health and well-being of Alberta students is a priority we share. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Marilyn Dennis, Chair
Board of Trustees

cc: Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Alberta Health
Lorrie Jess, President, Alberta School Board Association

All Alberta School Division Board Chairs
Calgary Members of the Legislative Assembly
Christopher Usih, Chief Superintendent of Schools

