

Hello staff, parents and students,

Eye-sway!

Next week will be week 5 of our suspension of instruction and so quickly, May is upon us. We've heard a lot this past week about a return to school and, so this week, I want to talk about what exactly might a return to school mean for all of us, how and when would that happen, and how is the district planning for that eventuality? Know that most importantly, I appreciate and acknowledge that there is an enormous amount of anxiety and fear out there about just what a return to school would mean. People are worried about their health and the health of their children. My hope today is to address some of those concerns and to try to frame a picture for the long haul.

We've all heard about the lifting of some restrictions, potentially in May, and people have started to speculate what that means if schools were to resume face to face instruction. Provincial Health Officer Doctor Bonnie Henry has stated that the eventual return to school could be "some sort of hybrid" and our Premier has stated that if we get positive signals from Dr. Henry, then we can start looking at getting kids back to school. As a district, we've been asked to start planning for a return of some form.

So then what might a series of small steps toward more kids in school look like? To me, any models would have to be guided by a set of principles that start with two important caveats:

1. Health and safety – how can we ensure that our schools are safe to return to and how do we keep those levels of safety and cleanliness in place; and
2. How do we then gradually and thoughtfully move from where we are to a place of increasing face to face instruction for students in a way that sustains social distancing and keeps our staff and children safe?

I will add that "social distancing" is a tricky term for and likely impossible for our very young students. In my humble opinion, there likely is no way that our small children who are so innocent and kind can be expected to stay 2m apart, don't share any toys, and don't touch your friends. Those three things are the essence of who our little ones are "come play with me, did you see my new toy, and do you want to play tag?" It's not just what they do, it's who they are. Our plans have to include the practicality of physical distancing and the ability of our students.

Please don't fret when you hear that the district is talking about models such as alternating days or alternating grades. It's essential that we explore options because we need to figure out what it might look like when we are given direction by the province to return and we also need to figure out what happens if we do a gradual return and then we need to go back out in November if the pandemic ramps up. I've received emails and have heard that people worrying that Jordan Tinney is opening schools on May 15th for Kindergarten and Grade 1 on alternating days. That's just not who we are nor what we would do. We are guided by the province, and we will build models with our partners that are well communicated to parents and our community well ahead of any implementation. I will also continue to work hand in hand with our provincial partners to support a thoughtful and gradual approach.

I want to end on two notes. First, an acknowledgement that not all employees are impacted in the same way in our current situation. We deeply believe that our support staff are critical to any model moving forward and we continue to see many stories of the incredible work they are doing in support of learning for our most vulnerable learners. We have had no additional information about their status

past April 30th and so we are simply continuing with life as normal given that the 30th is only days away. We assume no news is good news.

Along with our Support Staff who have faced uncertainty are our Teachers Teaching on Call and within our Support Staff there are spare board employees. These part-time employees who, during normal operations are critical to our district, have seen an enormous reduction or even elimination of their work. I just want to acknowledge that spare board and TTOC workers are deeply impacted and we are thinking of you and the enormous change this is for your lives and work.

As we all live this pandemic and its impact every day, our district will continue to plan, to think of possibilities and to try to make sense of this new world. Guided by health and the province, slowly and steadily, I believe we will get to a place where we see more students in schools.

This coming Friday, May 1st, teachers across the district have a chance to review their plans, take stock of where they are and to think about what's needed as we head toward June. Whatever plans come, we will do it together, we will do it with your health and safety in mind, and we do it in the hope that one day we will see an end to the pandemic and we can all walk our parks, community, and the halls of our schools in the way we miss so much.

Take care,
Hychke