

August 14, 2020

Board of Trustees
Toronto Catholic District School Board

Dear Trustees:

Re: TCDSB Reopening Action Plan

We are writing as concerned parents of children belonging to the Toronto Catholic District School Board (“TCDSB”). We thank the Board of Trustees for calling this emergency meeting to discuss the roll out of the survey and the return to school plan.

We write to express our concerns about the Ministry of Education’s directive and the TCDSB Reopening Action Plan (the “Plan”) shared with parents on Monday, August 10, 2020 and to request advocacy and action from the Board to address those concerns.

Concerns about Health and Safety and Ability to Make Informed Decisions

We have been asked to send our children to schools based on a plan that leaves huge gaps to the fundamental recommendations made by the Hospital for Sick Children. And, we are being asked to make the decision to return (distance vs. in-person) on the basis of a plan that is lacking in critical details around key things like re-entry, curriculum, itinerant staff, ventilation, and case detection protocols.

The biggest issue in the Plan is that class sizes, given the physical space of classrooms, do not allow for physical distancing.

This is especially true at the kindergarten level where classes can have 29 students and 2 teachers. The lack of physical distancing is not mitigated by masks as masks are not mandated for JK to grade 3. Moreover, the younger students will need more direction on distancing and hand hygiene and smaller student to teacher ratios will assist with that.

A cohort of 15 is a reasonable proxy for the 1 meter distance that can “be considered” in the event that 2 meters cannot be achieved, as per the recommendations made by the Hospital for Sick Children.

Page 6 of the Plan seems to suggest that smaller cohorts/groups may be possible depending on the data gathered from the pre-registration survey, and that “kindergarten cohorts will be considered with opportunities to work in smaller groupings with DECE’s [*sic*], classroom and itinerant staff to further enhance safety and distancing measures”. Parents need to be assured that cohorts will be 15 students or less per classroom in order to make their decisions.

The lack of detail in the Plan and the rushed ‘survey’ which commits us to decisions until re-entry in October must be revisited.

Requested Actions

We recognize that schools are between a rock and a hard place, given the COVID-19 risks and the need for socializing and education, as well as the benefits to the economy for caregivers to be working. However, we need the Board to advocate solutions to achieve an appropriate risk balance that takes into account the public health and medical advice.

As you read the requests below, please know that we are committed to doing whatever we can to help you – advocate, fundraise, and propose creative solutions – to increase health and safety at our schools in the TCDSB.

1. Assess Physical Distancing in the Classrooms

The August 7, 2020 article in the Toronto Star has the medical experts advising that class size that allows distancing is vital to managing the spread of the virus:

<https://www.google.ca/amp/s/www.thestar.com/amp/news/gta/2020/08/07/class-sizes-vital-to-curbing-spread-of-covid-19-in-schools-sick-kids-experts-say.html/>. In particular, the experts at Sick Kids talk about the school boards' role in that regard:

“When pressed about what is considered a safe number of elementary students in a class, Cohn and Allen would not provide a specific cut off, emphasizing that the size and orientation of individual classrooms would determine physical distancing needs.

“This is where we need to listen to the school boards and the teachers,” Cohn said. “If they say, ‘If we don’t reduce class sizes, then we are also not able to maintain physical distancing and other things, and then I do think this needs to be revisited.’”

We ask that the Trustees bring a motion for a report (to be shared with the Ministry), for data from each school showing for elementary classes, how many can socially distance by 2 meters, and by 1 meter. And for those that cannot, what the best case distance is (assuming optimal desk separation)? This data is especially important for kindergarten to grade 3 where there are large class sizes (up to 29 students plus teachers) and no mask mandate.

It would be informative to see the actual distancing gaps between the plan and the infectious disease, pediatric and Public Health advice which includes 2 meters of distancing and masks when that is not possible.

2. Require Lower Class Sizes

We ask that the Trustees make a motion that no indoor classroom be operated except with 15 or fewer students or such number of students as required to make it practical to maintain a consistent minimum physical distance of 2 meters between students and staff in classrooms.

While we understand having to work under Ministerial Directives, there is a place for advocacy from the Board. Other boards like TDSB and HWDSB have approved plans that require the provision of full funding to achieve lower elementary school classes. Simply resigning itself to the Provincial directive, knowing that the Plan is far removed from the current norms of physical distancing in society and failing to meet the medical advice, makes the Board complicit in not providing for a safe school reopening that meets the approval of the Sick Kids recommendations and of Toronto Public Health. It is also beneficial if our Board is aligned with TDSB on matters of funding and class sizes.

3. Advocate for Provincial/ Federal Funding

We urge the Board to join the voices of other school boards, organizations, parents, health professionals and community members in advocating for funding to support physical distancing and other health measures. The Board has the bench strength and the depth of networks needed to be an effective advocate for its students and staff, not to mention all of their bubbles.

Such advocacy should include making an application for the shared \$30M to decrease class size (which the Premier indicated in his press conference of August 11, 2020 could be increased).

The funding should consider local conditions. The rate of infection in the GTA has been higher than many other places in Ontario, and given the population density, more attention needs to be made to physical distancing and other measures in Toronto than in areas where the community spread is lower.

4. Look at Spending From Reserves

With the announcement by the Minister of Education on August 13, 2020 that boards are able to unlock reserves, the TCDSB should look at using its reserves to lower class sizes. The TCDSB's total reserves appear to be around \$50M (\$50.8M at 2018 year end; with \$49.3M budgeted for 2019-20 period). Using reserves for plexiglass barriers is a good idea, but for the youngest children in our schools who have the largest elementary class sizes and who have no mask mandate, plexiglass barriers are not an effective solution. Spending to lower class size and hence distancing is needed.

5. Adopt Partial Reduction / Alternative Distancing Measures

Ideally, funding will allow classroom occupancy to be restricted to 15 students. Short of getting the \$132 million requested, consider implementing some or all of these measures:

- a) Class size reduction for JK to grade 3 in 'hot spot', at risk areas.
- b) Class size reduction for all kindergarten classes.
- c) Class size reduction for grades 1-3 to 15 students.

- d) Class size reduction for grades 4 – 8 to 20 students, in line with what TDSB has approved.
- e) Where physical distance cannot be maintained, ensure funding is dedicated to the creation of outdoor classrooms and outdoor equipment. (Even where classroom size and ventilation are adequate, consider outdoor classrooms to provide students with ‘mask breaks’.)
- f) Where physical distance in a classroom cannot be maintained, mandate that classes be held in an indoor space sufficiently large (such as a gymnasium or community centre or church) and well ventilated to make it practical to maintain a consistent minimum physical distance of 2 meters.

We note that the TDSB is working with the Ministry of Education to explore options to lower class sizes, but depending on funding, is considering other strategies “such as shortening the school day, reassigning teachers from non-classroom roles and lowering class sizes in areas deemed at-risk by Toronto Public Health”:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-toronto-considers-shorter-school-day-as-more-ontario-public-health/>.

6. Assess and Address Ventilation

With the announcement of \$50M (for all boards) for improved ventilation, the Board should access its portion of that funding and apply it to the most critical areas. In that regard, there should be an audit to assess the state of ventilation for each school and classroom. The Plan has a single paragraph regarding ventilation, that provides some limited measures that are to be taken but no information on the adequacy of those measures.

Indoor classrooms need to be well ventilated, as per the Sick Kids report and this informative review: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/analysis-ventilation-should-be-part-of-the-conversation-on-school-reopening-why-isnt-it>. See also:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-school-ventilation-could-spread-covid-19-why-arent-we-talking-about/>. Ensure windows remain open where possible so that fresh air may enter the classroom. Where windows cannot be sufficiently opened and/or don’t provide enough ventilation, implement other viable solutions such as fans, HEPA filters etc. Individual, localized support for ventilation will be required. We also need to ensure solutions are in place to address the serious problem of heat entrapment in upper floors which will almost certainly discourage the full-day use of masks.

Where rooms cannot be properly ventilated, schools should provide for outdoor or off-property spaces.

7. Ensure Clear and Timely Communication Between the Board, Individual Schools and Families, including regarding re-entry, staffing and programing

There are outstanding questions such as:

- a. The details on school start and end times. We understand that start and end times are to be staggered by cohorts but this is not stated in the Plan.
- b. How will physical distancing be managed at school start and end times?
- c. What will cohorts look like? What will happen with French, Physical Education, Music, and other teachers who would usually be moving between cohorts? On the webinar hosted by OAPCE on August 12, 2020, staff seemed to suggest that there was no health concern with teacher movement between cohorts, only with students mingling out of cohorts/ the groupings of 50. This needs to be explained.
- d. How will lunch supervision, supply staffing be managed to ensure limited contacts?
- e. How will students with IEPs and special needs students be supported? If they are in schools, they are usually supported by a variety of EAS'. This would increase cohort size. And if these families choose online learning, how will these children be supported?

8. Delay 'Survey' Deadline or Allow for Changes

We would suggest that a restart to the “survey” – which is a misnomer given that it is expected to be a binding commitment to distance vs. in class learning – which was so poorly executed, would be appropriate.

We understand from social media and the OAPCE webinar that parents can contact their school principal to make changes, but this has not been communicated widely. It is also problematic as the Plan is really a working draft. A key takeaway from the OAPCE webinar is that while lots of good plans are being made, they are still being made at the Administrative level, with little to no involvement of individual schools, and the plans (e.g. around kindergarten cohorts/ division, buses, case detection, case management) are nowhere near the implementation phase.

9. Allow Flexibility to Make Decisions Based on Changing Circumstances

Allow parents who have opted for remote learning to switch to in-class learning and vice versa at their reasonable discretion. Let parents adapt to changing circumstances by allowing them to switch to a model that is appropriate to their then current situation. We understand that the administration needs to solidify staff schedules etc., but build some slack into the schedules to accommodate reasonable changes, especially as we were informed on the OAPCE webinar that the Plan is a ‘living document’.

10. Delay the School Year Start Date

Given the Plan is still a work in progress, discussions with the MOE should/could still take place, and the extensive planning, procurement and implementation necessary to ensure logistics and protocols are shared, with opportunity for training and feedback, we are requesting that the Board explore the option of a delayed school reopening. Toronto moved to Stage 3 two weeks later than most other Ontario jurisdictions, and it would be

reasonable to delay school reopening by at least that amount of time to allow for proper implementation. The rushing of the survey showed what chaos ensues from lack of proper implementation and the survey is much less complicated to roll out than the actual start of school.

We have been out of school since March. We can afford to take a few more weeks to implement a smooth reopening, including allowing teachers and staff the time they need to adequately prepare for a return to school. Toronto Public Health needs to be engaged on the adequacy of the plan, and while TPH will take the driver's seat when it comes to positive case management, parents and staff should be given some clue as to the TPH framework for case management and the possibilities that may affect the students and their household members. Even relatively basic logistics of putting up signage, allocating courtyard space, reallocating classroom space, determining optimal traffic flow, and setting up staggered arrival, departure times will take time to do well.

11. Staggered Re-Start

In that same vein, we support a gentle reopening, staggering cohorts and classes to lessen congestion, and anxieties.

12. Clearly Define and Communicate Covid Case Detection and Containment Plans

While we have every confidence in Toronto Public Health, protocols and procedures as well as communications and training still need to be developed for staff, students, and their families on these protocols. The Plan leaves many questions remaining with respect to screening, positive case detection, and contact tracing of staff and students. For example:

- What is being screened for at home? Can a sample of the questions be provided? Will it be like YRDSB's, which is more comprehensive (e.g. includes "covid toes") than the Provincial online tool?
- What is the screening process at the school upon entry? Passive or active screening? If active, has that been accounted for in terms of staffing, line ups and wait times to get processed?
- Is testing mandatory upon screening positive as the Plan seems to suggest by its statement that students/staff with symptoms "are to go to an assessment center and get tested"? If not mandatory, what is the process? OCSB's plan provides that if students are not tested, they must isolate for 14 days from the day of the symptoms or until 24 hours after respiratory symptoms subside or 48 hours after gastro symptoms subside, whichever is longer.
- If a teacher or student gets ill, what safety procedures will the rest of the cohort follow?
- What is the process if someone in a cohort shows symptoms? The Plan speaks to cleaning of the isolation room but not other rooms/ surface areas of contact.
- What will the process be if someone in a cohort tests positive?

- Is the period of communicability 48 hours before onset of symptoms as stated in the Plan, or also 10 – 14 days from symptom onset? Does the protocol take into account the time lag between test results and symptom onset?
- The Plan at pg. 12 states that people who are diagnosed with COVID-19 “can return to work 14 days after their symptoms first appear, as long as symptoms are mostly gone.” The OCSB’s plan calls for students who test positive to provide medical clearance in order to be allowed to return to in person instruction.
- If virtual learning isn’t available once a student chooses full day in-class, what happens if a student has to be quarantined? Or multiple students? Would virtual learning be made accessible for them if they are able to continue studies while in quarantine?
- What can household members expect if a student is to be quarantined? How might this differ depending on the age of the child?

We are prepared to work with you to implement the requests highlighted in this letter. Thank you for your hard work, dedication, and openness to changes and solutions to ensure a safe reopening.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Adolf, parent of Grade 9 student, Bishop Morocco/Thomas Merton High School

Carla Alves-Dias, parent of Grade 6 and 8 students, All Saints CES

Sheryl Baraniuk, parent of Grade 5 and 8 students, Our Lady of Peace

Joan Broto & Tulus Daniel Simatupang, parent of Grade 4 and 6 students, Holy Rosary

Christina Bugaj, parent of Grade 3 and 4 students, St. Cecilia Catholic Elementary School

Aldo Carinci

Sheila Colla, parent of JK and Grade 2 students, St. Brigid.

Diane Draguzet, parent of Grade 7 student, Our Lady of Lourdes

Marida Etherington, parent of Grade 8 student, Our Lady of Peace

Jennifer Henderson, parent of Grade 5 student, St. Joseph Elementary School

Stella Mi Hyun, parent of student, St. John

Nadia Hoult, parent of Grade 2 and Grade 5 students, St. Gregory School

Carol Iazzetta, parent of Grade 1 and Grade 3 students, St. Matthais

Matt and Rachel Koehler, parent of JK and Grade 1 students, Holy Name Catholic School

Wilma Kohler

Karolina Krystniak, parent of Grade 1 student, St. Joseph Elementary School

Kathleen Boetto Laflamme, parent of Grade 1 and Grade 4 students at St. Brigid

Katie Larson, parent of a Kindergarten student at St. Brigid

Danielle Lewis, parent of Grade 2 student at St. Brigid

Elizabeth Malak, parent of a Grade 6 student at All Saints and a Grade 9 student at Michael Power

Sunil Mohan, parent of Grade 2 and Grade 4 students, Holy Angels

Jessica Skeath-Makxam, parent of JK student, St. Gregory

Alienne Wan, parent of a JK student, Holy Name

Sarah Wheeler, parent of an SK student, St. Denis

Michelle Wong, parent of SK student, St. Norbert Catholic Elementary School

cc: Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education
Marit Stiles, Opposition Critic for Education (NDP)
Christine Elliot, Minister of Health
Toronto Public Health