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Hon. Stephen McNeil, Premier
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Dear Hon. Premier,

Everyone understands that as COVID-19 reached our province, reactionary changes were necessary to every aspect of our day-to-day lives, including the education system. These changes were accepted, and Nova Scotians adapted amazingly well.

Thinking about education, as we look forward, our Province will be judged more on how our education system supports children in September than how it did in March.

There has been time to plan and prepare and there is no excuse for not being ready when the 2020-2021 school year begins. That means proactive leadership. It is not too late to give our students the very best possible experience and it is in that cooperative spirit that I share my thoughts on what is possible and necessary.

What will school look like in September?

Everyone is asking this question and they are looking to government for assurance that a plan is actively being established. They want assurance that a return can be implemented safely, following Public Health protocols.

Our students cannot be left behind, and our Caucus is here to help you in any way possible to make sure that doesn't happen. My colleagues, Tim Halman and Pat Dunn, former educators, also bring a plethora of experience and knowledge to the table and would be able to provide substantial contributions to any discussions your team may be having.

New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia have now all delivered plans on how to return to school. In some cases, they have already determined the needs and have taken procurement action to be ready.

Meanwhile, I am hearing from teachers, parents and students expressing concern that they don't know what school will look like in September. They don't know how to plan, and they don't know how to prepare. We must commit to working with the regional centres for education and Public Health to

meet the needs of students and staff to ensure that we are putting our learners in the best possible position for academic success.

The key considerations for planning to resume school are as follows:

- Health and safety of students, teachers, staff, administration and families;
- Human resources limitations; and
- Space limitations.

Below, I have outlined several areas to be considered. We don't have all of the information that is available to your team and we accept that some of the suggestions below won't be perfect, but we feel very strongly that this is a public discussion that is overdue.

School Level Administration

Each school, in conjunction with its regional centre for education, would develop an operational plan in conjunction with Public Health and the NSTU, outlining how that school will manage day-to-day operations.

Essentially, school operations would be decentralized to the local level. Teachers and administration know their students, schools and communities better than anyone else, and we should use that to the advantage of our students.

They must have the authority to establish plans addressing times of congestion; determining health and safety protocols that meet advised standards, based on their size and unique characteristics. The more time that passes without a plan, the more potential for our children to fall behind. As such, plans should be submitted to Public Health no later than August 1 to allow time for adjustments to staff, programming, infrastructure and classroom equipment.

Given the need for strict policies for staff and not attending work in the event of experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, schools will have to have a plan for staffing shortages in order to remain fully staffed. We will need to take stock of the number of substitute teachers in an area and, if there is a shortage of potential staff, the Province should work with the Teachers Union to determine acceptable ways to expand who can act as a substitute teacher.

In Prince Edward Island, for example, university graduates may provide substitute services. I appreciate this is not a replacement for someone with a background in education, and would only be reserved as a last resort, but, if there are concerns of staff shortages, we need to work with the NSTU and collectively think outside the box.

Supporting Teachers

Throughout all of the feedback we have received from teachers, parents and students, one common theme emerged: regardless of grade, some level of in-person education is necessary in most circumstances. No doubt, you have received similar feedback. The amount of in-school time will vary by age, but everyone seems to agree that students will benefit from classroom time significantly more than at-home learning. The physical classroom and the close personal engagement of teachers is a great equalizer.

Teachers too had to adapt essentially on the fly as they supported students and without question many families gained a new respect for teaching as they huddled around dining tables with their children and the day's lesson plans.

We must do all that we can to support our teachers, including:

- Offering personal development to those that want it over the summer, particularly around the use of technology;
- Identifying opportunities to remove hurdles, but take away those meaningless record keeping tasks that inhibit educational time;
- Discussing dropping provincial exams for this year and reassessing in the future;
- Seeking input on how to logistically lay out classrooms; schools; student flow etc; and
- Engaging them in a realignment of curriculum outcomes that maintain the focus on literacy, mathematics, critical thinking and experiential learning experiences within this new learning environment.

We must also recognize that not all teachers will be able to return to the new classrooms. Particularly, those who are immunocompromised must be respected. Your government must work with them and create opportunities for them to continue supporting students. We suggest you actively work with them to identify opportunities to teach exclusively on-line, potentially with cohorts of students who are also unable to attend school.

Additionally, of course, the province must equip these teachers with appropriate distance learning equipment as needed.

Focus on Students and Families

Things will be different, but students' overall educational outcomes do not have to be compromised.

The main concern on the mind of families is safety. The *Sick Kids* Hospital in Ontario recently prepared a report on how schools across Canada can safely resume in-school education. The report emphasized the importance of access to education for students and specifically stated: "It is critical that we balance the risks of COVID-19 in children, which appear to be minimal, with the harm of school closure which is impacting their physical and mental health."

This is a powerful statement. It is true that the return to school may result in more cases of COVID-19 and that is why the Province must be thoughtful in its approach and proactively act to mitigate the risk of spread. Risk mitigation means increased testing and contact tracing capacity.

Specifically, it will be important to cohort students in an effort to provide swift information with respect to contact tracing in the event of an outbreak. Cohorting students will also minimize the number of students, staff and families impacted by an outbreak.

Like our educational professionals, students, parents and families must have confidence that it is safe. This confidence can be delivered in the form of a well thought out plan that is properly communicated.

To assist you, in terms of how the actual experience might look in September, we offer the following initial thoughts and, as you know, we are very interested in helping your team move forward. Our

Province is behind, relative to other provinces, but we can help make that ground up should you allow us.

Overall Classroom Experience

Each classroom should be looked at as a mini bubble of sorts. Schools should cohort students in their classrooms, as practicable. This provides students with the opportunity to learn with their peers while reducing the extent of exposure and simplifying the contact tracing process.

Similarly, efforts should be made in common areas to encourage separation. For instance, limits should be placed on the number of students permitted on playground equipment at one time. Recess and lunch periods should be staggered as practicable. Outside of the classroom, students should be separated into their smaller classroom “bubbles,” *when possible*.

Limitations should be placed on assemblies and gatherings, following the Public Health protocols in place at any given time. Currently, any gatherings over 50, with physical distancing would be permitted. In younger age groups (grades 5 and under), these types of gatherings should be prohibited completely, unless and until Public Health provides their approval.

Separate entry and exit points should be designated in each school’s plan to minimize contact at high traffic periods.

In addition, all steps that are taken to prepare for the resumption of school in September should consider the possibility of a second wave. This highlights the importance of conducting an inventory of students’ technical needs to ensure that all students have access to the supplies and services they need when school resumes, if and when in-person learning has to stop.

Ideally, if a second wave hits, because of planning that is taking place now, the transition to learning at-home will be different than the March experience with, *ideally*, minimal disruption.

That said, provided Public Health officials indicate that the risk of exposure to COVID-19 remains at least the same as it does today, all schools should resume with in-person learning in September. If Public Health determines the risk has increased, then obviously, the ideas outlined below must be reassessed.

In the event a case of COVID-19 arises in a school, that school will work with Public Health to determine the best course of action. In all likelihood, that school will immediately be closed and thoroughly cleaned. Public Health would direct when a return to school is safe.

During the time of any school closures, students would participate in at-home learning.

Grades Pre-Primary to Five

Grades pre-primary through five should resume with reduced class sizes. The research in the *Sick Kids* report, along with feedback from teachers, students and parents, is clear that younger students, in particular, benefit from in-person education. At-home learning is more challenging to oversee in this age group and the social impact they experience is very significant.

Everyone can appreciate the challenges associated with larger classes of young learners and physical contact should be discouraged when possible. We can all appreciate how challenging these physical distancing restrictions will be to enforce, particularly in younger grades. *Sick Kids* has

suggested this will be near impossible, and further, may not be beneficial. As such, efforts should be made to minimize class size, thus minimizing exposure. In minimizing class size, that will allow classrooms to be configured with more space between desks.

Therefore, starting in September, class sizes may vary depending on the specific needs of each school, but a minimum number of students should be established from grades pre-primary to five of no more than 15 students per classroom.

If individual schools cannot accommodate minimizing class size, they should immediately explore alternative options for classroom placement, either within or outside the school using available community space.

Additionally, in an area like North Sydney where we see a school scheduled to close in September, that school could potentially remain open on a temporary basis to accommodate the increased need for classroom space.

We recognize that during this period, additional staff will be required to accommodate the increased demands on the system. I am hopeful your team has already quantified the need and is exploring solutions.

Grades Six to Twelve

To begin the school year, until Public Health, working with the Department of Education determines it is advantageous, these grades should see a blended learning program. Students would be in school two-to-three days a week, with at-home learning the remaining days.

For these older grades, students should continue to be cohorted in their classrooms, and physical contact should be discouraged when possible for students in grades six to eight and practiced to the greatest extent possible for students in grades nine through twelve.

Appropriate physical distancing measures must be in place and the appropriate number of students per classroom should be established at the school administration level based on the physical size of the classroom. Overcrowding could be determined by comparing actual classroom size to the number of students in the classroom. This is where an individual school's plan becomes pivotal to the process.

What the in-school daily attendance plan would look like, would be determined by the school itself in terms of whether they have the capacity to accommodate all students each day of in-class study, or whether a rotation needs to be done with the students. These decisions should be decentralized and left to the schools, with the disclaimer that outcomes, as determined by the Department, must be met. In practical terms that could mean there are in-school rotations, with students learning at home while their classmates are in school and vice versa.

The blended approach allows a more seamless transition to either completely at-home or completely in-school programming, as the risk of exposure to COVID-19 either increases or decreases, but it is also an opportunity to provide increased, different learning experiences as discussed below in the Blended Learning section.

The health risk level should be constantly assessed and, if the deemed health risk has decreased by October, another day of in-school programming should be added. This could happen again in November and if the risk continues to decrease, students could resume full-time to the classroom.

Conversely, if the deemed health risk were to increase at any time, Public Health and the Department of Education would have to consider the level of increased risk and determine whether more days should be added to the at-home programming, or whether there should be a complete transition to at-home education.

Learning Priorities

I mentioned above how important it is to involve and engage teachers in a realignment of curriculum outcomes that maintains the focus on literacy, mathematics, critical thinking and experiential learning experiences within this new environment.

With the uncertainty of future waves and the potential that in-person learning could be halted at any time, it is important that there is clear agreement in the core outcomes to be delivered in each subject matter so the focus can be maintained at all times. This ensures the basics are the learning priority for all students.

If it has not already been done, the priority of the Department staff for the next month must be to work with all stakeholders to establish those key competencies.

Feedback I received from teachers suggested that they saw significant drop-offs in engagement in at-home programming when it was announced that their final marks would be based on work completed to March. We can't put teachers in that position again. Any educational programming going forward must be graded to encourage participation and engagement.

Blended Learning

Part of the fall learning program for students grades six through twelve, will include at-home learning. In establishing this program, consideration must be given to the best way to maximize the learning experience for all students.

Firstly, each school needs to take stock of their students' capacity for at-home learning. Each school will need to determine which students do not have readily available access to the Internet and which students do not have access to devices to participate in e-learning.

For students without Internet, the school should work with those students to determine what alternatives are available: Is there somewhere else that is easily accessible to those students where they may be able to access the Internet (for example: at a library or with a relative). If no alternative exists, those students could be permitted to physically attend the school on the "at-home" days to ensure they have the same opportunity as their classmates.

If students don't have devices, the school, supported by the regional centre for education, should sign out Chromebooks, or similar devices to those students who require the aid.

Work should begin immediately to identify students in these two groups so a plan can be communicated with their families forthwith.

The at-home component of the fall education plan should include online teaching (i.e. lessons from the teacher via Google Meet); guided projects and experiential learning. Everything must focus around the core competencies that have been established for each subject. At-home learning could also include experiential learning with students being provided the option to work with their teacher to identify appropriate activities and volunteer roles that support school credit

Students at High Risk

Those students who are immunocompromised or with underlying health conditions, would have the option for total at-home learning.

If it has not already happened, an immediate assessment of this need should be undertaken so they can be provided the same learning opportunity as their peers. We have noted that there will be teachers in similar circumstances. Depending on the needs, it might be possible to pair these two groups, and this should be discussed with the students, families and teachers as a priority.

In conjunction with this program, the school should take immediate steps to establish what supplies are needed to equip those teachers with and students with the necessary supplies to facilitate at-home learning.

If no Internet access is available, those parents should work with the schools and teachers to determine personalized lesson plans, particularly if the student is unable to attend other locations that may have Internet access.

Students with Diverse Needs

Given the number of changes to learning and the lack of consistency, we must dedicate special attention to students with diverse needs.

At the very least, the Department needs to convene a panel of parents with diverse needs children to determine what can be done to provide them with the most effective education. Each school can then work with families locally to determine the best option for these students, whether that be in-school, at-home, or a blended learning model.

Hygiene Protocols

Clear attendance policies that require strict adherence to Public Health protocols must be put in place for all school staff and students. Teachers, administrators and parents should all be provided with information on the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, including a checklist for parents with a daily screening. Obviously, anyone experiencing any symptoms, or who has been in contact with anyone being tested, should not attend the school.

Parents should be asked to monitor their child daily for symptoms and asked not to send their child to school if sick.

To assist the learning team and parents, Public Health should prepare videos for different age groups demonstrating proper hygiene protocols (i.e. how to properly wash your hands; not to touch your face, etc.). Those videos would become a mandatory aspect of the curriculum and would be shown to students at the beginning of the school year and periodically reintroduced.

Regular hand washing must be scheduled throughout the school day, including at the beginning of the day as people enter the building and also, where relevant, their bus. Hand washing stations should either be established in the classrooms or in very close range, minimizing exposure to high traffic areas.

Students must label personal items brought into the school and not share. For younger age groups (grades five and under), students should only be permitted to bring food products into the school.

Health and Safety Supplies

We have all read about the numerous concerns and issues related to procuring and providing frontline professionals with adequate personal protective equipment and other hygiene supplies over the course of the last few months. If it hasn't happened already, the Province must act now to secure necessary supplies to ensure each classroom and school has sufficient supplies. These supplies include, but are not limited to hand sanitizer, handwashing stations, masks, directional stickers and plexiglass.

Each school should evaluate their specific needs over the coming weeks and determine where plexiglass partitions are possible and install those items over the summer months.

Cleaning Protocols

To compliment the hygiene protocols and education, each school and classroom needs to increase cleaning protocols for high traffic and high touch surface areas. Depending on the surface or area, this may mean cleaning each evening, or even throughout the day. For example, door handles should regularly be wiped down.

Mental Health Supports

The negative impact of the last few months of being confined to our homes, largely in isolation, has been well-documented, particularly for our children.

The report from *Sick Kids* identifies mental health as a major concern for students going forward. Prior to resuming school in the fall, it is incumbent upon the Department of Education to ensure that appropriate mental health supports are in place for students. Ideally, this would include in-person access for students directly at their schools.

In the event that this is not possible, both online and telephone support options should be provided to allow students direct access to counsel, when needed.

Bussing

In discussing any reopening of our school systems, we must include a bussing strategy. Similar to the need for each school to take stock of what students have what needs, the schools also need to spend that time reaching out to each family to determine who relies on the bussing system and who is able to get to and from school through other means.

To begin the school year, buses should be running at half capacity. In areas where the schools determine that lesser capacity is not possible on the current schedule, a new schedule needs to be designed.

Once those particular bus routes are identified, the school, in conjunction with the regional centre for education and the Department, must establish alternative plans for those particular routes. Those plans may include duplicating the route by starting the service earlier to allow for two pickups in advance of school; and similarly, doing two shifts of the same route after school.

Alternatively, provided the risk of spread of the virus remains low, schools could work with their regional centres for education along with the school's parent-teacher associations to establish voluntary car-pooling schedules, for those who have met the school's licensing and insurance criteria.

This work must be done by August so as to have sufficient time to work with all involved to establish a working schedule. This also assists parents in giving them time to prepare for their fall schedules.

Way Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic is constantly evolving. These suggestions hopefully offer some useful guidance and insight that will allow the education system to be responsive to the needs of students and their teachers throughout the upcoming academic year.

I trust that these suggested measures will compliment or improve existing plans and will give Nova Scotians the confidence to begin to get back to some level of normalcy.

Students, teachers and parents are looking for clarity on how school begins to return to normal.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these ideas and next steps.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim', with a horizontal line above it.

Tim Houston
Leader, Progressive Conservative
Party of Nova Scotia