

# RETURN TO LEARN

An Open Letter to Alberta School Communities



**Ever  
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In partnership with



SEPTEMBER 2020

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In late July, the Government of Alberta released its back-to-school plans for in-person classes. Safety of students and staff is the number one concern, and well-being for all needs to be priority number two. We at Ever Active Schools, together with the Health and Physical Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association, believe that a strong focus on student and staff well-being fosters resiliency in our school communities and produces improved personal well-being and academic outcomes.

[In a survey this summer](#) of more than 500 Alberta school community stakeholders, teaching physical education, daily physical activity, social and emotional learning, and teacher and staff well-being emerged as the top priorities. Specifically, 71% of respondents said they need classroom materials and resources. We hear you.

Schools and jurisdictions are making a myriad of decisions around what the return to learning looks like. We urge decision makers to: **(1)** prioritize quality health and physical education; **(2)** consider alternative spaces for curriculum delivery; **(3)** maintain recess every day; **(4)** support and encourage active transportation modes; **(5)** create a culture of well-being for all; and **(6)** find opportunities for students to emerge as wellness leaders.

### 1. QUALITY HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Now more than ever before, foundational concepts of health literacy and physical literacy will play an essential role in student health and learning. The implementation of Health and Physical Education addresses universal health outcomes through existing provincial curriculum. In Physical Education, the focus should be on student well-being. [PHE Canada](#) recommends:

- Starting with low-intensity activities. Include proper warm ups and cool downs to avoid injury. Build slowly from where students are, reinforcing things like fundamental movement skills throughout the year.
- Spending more time covering and reviewing physical, cognitive, and social skills and materials that would have otherwise been covered in the previous year's curriculum.
- Focusing on skill-based health. Teaching curricular content through a skills-based approach (such as students demonstrating awareness and advocacy of safety guidelines through hands-on learning of pedestrian and cycling safety skills) is a proven way to support development of health literacy.

### 2. ALTERNATIVE SPACES

In a time of physical distancing, available space is a common question. Perhaps use the great outdoors: it is easier to distance and engage in physical activity, there are unique curricular learning opportunities, and it provides moments for the body and mind to restore and recover through contact with the natural environment ([Berto, 2014](#)). One study found that [the chance of viral spread is increased 18.7x in indoor spaces over outdoor spaces](#). Consider:

- Utilizing available outdoor space for health and physical education, and for other classes. If your school does not have immediately available outdoor space, a solution could be to implement a pol-

icy change: collect permission forms for teachers to walk students within a particular distance of school grounds to a nearby outdoor space. [Exploring the 2.4km walk zone](#) of your school [encourages physical activity](#), improves traffic safety skills and fosters a sense of connection to the space.

- [Connecting with a local Elder or Knowledge Keeper](#) for land-based teachings; or, exploring outdoor education or wildlife studies.
- Re-designing your indoor space when outdoors is not an option, using resources like [Don't Walk in the Hallway](#) floor decals and [Don't Sit Still in Class](#).

### 3. MAINTAIN AND PRIORITIZE RECESS

Students have the right to rest, leisure and play. To support unstructured play and time away from instructional learning so that students can reap the health and well-being benefits, consider:

- Including recess for all students, every day, [outdoors as much as possible](#).
- All the available indoor and outdoor spaces, on school grounds and nearby, to provide a range of activity options and minimize crowding. Include quiet, creative and solo activity spaces.
- Involving students in the planning and organizing of recess time, including discussion about activities, inclusion, social harm, equipment management, fair play, and hygiene practices to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- Creating and marking 'zones' to reduce the number of students who are in contact with each other and shared equipment.
- Having a list of [inclusive games readily available](#), including those that need no equipment.

### 4. ACTIVE SCHOOL TRAVEL

It is likely that more and more families will opt to accompany their children to school rather than using school buses, but this doesn't mean that everyone needs to choose a personal automobile! Active transportation modes reduce the use of cars and buses, which improves pedestrian and cyclist safety as well as air quality in the school zone. Consider:

- Identifying and enhancing common walking and wheeling routes for families to [explore within the 2.4km walk zone](#) of the school. [Stencils](#), [Trail Tales](#) and other wayfinding initiatives make an active route to school more appealing for many.
- Engaging staff and student volunteers to support with road safety in and around the school. [AMA School Safety Patrol](#) is an excellent resource to increase school zone safety and community walkability.
- Endorsing Active School Travel event days, such as International Walk to School Day (October 7, 2020), Winter Walk Day (February 3, 2021) and Wheel Week (first week of June, 2021).
- Organizing and promoting initiatives such as Park and Walk, Walking School Bus, Bike Train and Walking and Wheeling Buddies.

### 5. EMBED WELL-BEING FOR ALL

We know students and staff have been through a lot since schools closed, and it has affected well-being. It's important that students learn to name, describe and express their emotions, and that staff well-being is prioritized. The entire school community benefits from a culture of well-being. Consider:

- Using resources and activities specific to social and emotional learning, such as [Social and Emotional Shuffle](#) and [Shape Safari](#), in the classroom and with individual students.
- Providing training for staff specific to the [five core social and emotional learning competencies](#).
- Prioritizing regular and on-going check-ins with staff. Although a professional learning day dedi-



cated to wellness is great, it's important to build in team time to continually share and support.

- Encouraging the staff team to build [High Quality Connections \(HQCs\)](#), which involve mutual energy, responsiveness, engagement, trust and positive regard between people. One way to build HQCs is through [Active Constructive Responding](#), an active, authentic, quick and positive way of responding to others' good news, rather than destructive or passive responses.
- Use staff meetings as an opportunity to practice gratitude, or reflect on positive stories from the school days, rather than reflecting on the negative ones. [When we intentionally reflect on the "good" in our days](#), our brains will actually rewire to look for it in the present.

## 6. STUDENTS AS WELLNESS LEADERS

Student leadership is an important aspect of school community connectedness and individual well-being. Students are the drivers of change, and are [essential to the implementation of Comprehensive School Health](#). Their voices and enthusiasm can help engage their peers and their families. Consider:

- Engaging students in advocating and idea-generating for some of the previous suggestions.
- Teaching students how to create inclusive environments.
- Creating a [cold weather or indoor recess plan](#), for when the inevitable cold Alberta winters arrive, that includes student facilitation and choice.

There will be challenges this year, so let's work together to use this as an opportunity to grow and be creative. Please continue to value learning that nourishes the physical, social and cognitive needs of students, and remember to routinely check-in and reflect on your well-being and the well-being of others. Ever Active Schools is a partner, ready and willing to work together to live, learn and grow in a healthy and well community. If you have ideas, questions, or are unsure how we can help, [let's talk](#).

### FURTHER RESOURCES AND READINGS TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING:

- [Health and Physical Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association](#)
- [Return to School Resources](#) - PHE Canada
- [Back to School During COVID-19](#) from Alberta Health Services
- [Beyond the Binder](#) from McConnell
- [Resilience Now for Parents - PDF Handbook](#)
- [Talking to Kids About COVID-19](#) - Alberta Teachers' Association

