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Alberta Health's COVID-19 Back-to-School Guidelines are Problematic

Edmonton, AB: The EZMSA finds concerns in the recent public health school re-entry guidelines for our children and community's safety and wellbeing. On Saturday August 29th, less than one week prior to the beginning of the school year, Alberta Health released order 33-2020 with inconsistent instructions from their general public health cohort guidelines and federal guidelines. We also find the guidelines by Alberta Health create more confusion for people. We do not support last minute policy during a pandemic when we must protect our children, staff, and their families from COVID-19 infection. Days before school starting is not the time to send mixed messages creating confusion with shifting guidance that is not clear.

Order 33-2020 states the following: "An Operator of a school does not need to ensure that students, staff members, and visitors are able to maintain a minimum of 2 metres distance from every other person when a student, staff member, or visitor is seated at a desk or table:

- a) within a classroom or place where the instruction, course or program of study is taking place, and
- b) where the desks, tables and chairs are arranged in a manner:
 - i. to prevent persons who are seated from facing each other, and
 - ii. to allow the greatest possible distance between seated persons."

Inconsistency between Provincial COVID-19 Guidelines

Order 33-2020 and the Alberta Government K to 12 school re-entry plan are inconsistent with the Alberta Health stage 2 cohort guidelines released in June. The Alberta Health Guidance for Cohorts document states "the people within one cohort do not always stay two metres apart" and "child care programs may operate in cohorts of up to 30 people, including staff and children". However, the order and re-entry plan do not cap class sizes. Some Albertan classes are more than 30 students. Why are these public health guidelines contradictory? We should receive consistent orders for physical distancing and cohort size.

Inconsistent with Federal COVID-19 Guidelines

The order is not aligned with Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) guidelines. Alberta has the second highest rate of cases in Canada with 324 per 100,000 people on September 2, 2020. With a high rate, we should have more cautious guidelines to minimize risk for children. According to PHAC "physical distancing measures are the most effective way to reduce the risk of transmitting COVID-19". Rather than stating in the order an Operator of a school does not need to ensure a minimum of 2 metres distance, it should be mirroring the PHAC proactive language to promote physical distancing. It should state the same directive as PHAC for Operators to "promote physical distancing as much as possible (recognizing this is not always practical in child and youth settings)."

Simplify and Explain Guidelines

Public health guidelines are convoluted and confusing. We all have been told repeatedly to maintain 2 metres apart where possible, which is simple to follow. Different rules for different scenarios, settings, and instructions makes guidelines more difficult to follow because they are complex. People need easy instruction to minimize risk and stay safe. There has not been clear communication to explain why schools do not need to follow 2 metre distancing and a maximum cohort size when every person has been told from the beginning of the pandemic they must follow these rules. Alberta Health has also not explained what conditions need to be met to ease into more relaxed stages of guidelines. When evidence based parameters are not communicated to explain why we move between strict to lenient guidelines, the orders appear arbitrary. The decision criteria for changing guidelines must be public.

About EZMSA: The EZMSA represents 1,700 physicians for local issues in the Edmonton Zone. The EZMSA works closely with the Alberta Medical Association (AMA); however, these are separate organizations with different mandates. The EZMSA is the formal voice of advocacy for physicians in the Edmonton Zone while the AMA advocates for provincial issues.

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