



Government of Bermuda
Ministerial Statement

To The Senate

By

Senator H. Anthony Richardson, JP

COVID 19 – School Reopening Plans for September 2020

Wednesday, July 22nd, 2020

Madam President,

This morning I rise to provide my Senate colleagues with an update on the Department of Education's school reopening plans for September 2020, and to confirm completion of the earlier planning work that started two months ago in May 2020.

Madam President,

We are all aware that COVID 19 is still very present with us; and will be around in months ahead. With this in mind, opening our public schools safely, and being able to stay open requires the careful and thorough planning. The good news is that the reopening of schools safely is possible, and has been achieved in countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Denmark and others. Additionally, the reopening of schools is strongly supported by the fraternities of Pediatricians both locally and overseas. Therefore **Madam President**, I am pleased to share that technical officers in the Department of Education have worked assiduously during the past months to develop a COVID 19 System School Reopening Plan for receiving our children in September 2020. As a result of this work, all school buildings will be open.

Madam President,

The preparatory work undertaken for the reopening of our public schools commenced in May 2020 and involved the development of a System Plan comprising four components:

1. *Planning for reopening;*
2. *Preparation of School Buildings;*
3. *Recovery to transition staff and students back into normalcy; and,*
4. *Implementation of a Hybrid Learning Model*

Madam President,

Let me first speak to the reopening component. Again, in light of COVID 19 significant time and effort was put into developing the specific safety and health protocols for every public school level. The Department has observed several comments and questions on the various social media platforms, and received many queries asking what will our public schools look like in September. Parents want to know how will children be kept safe, and what is planned for physical distancing?

Madam President,

Due to the heightened concern, a separate Statement will be made on just the safety and health protocols for public school. This statement will provide our parents, guardians and the general public with an in depth account of the extensive detail officers in the Department of Education and Health have taken into consideration to ensure the safety of our public school students is a priority.

Madam President,

The physical preparation of our school buildings was another significant component of System Planning. Since the closure of schools back in March, our school custodians have consistently worked towards maintaining the cleanliness of the schools, ventilating the school buildings, and implementing the deep cleaning and sanitizing processes. However, in May, during the building walkthrough pre-testing of the safety and health protocols, teams discovered that many classrooms were cluttered with items not appropriate for classroom environments.

Also, many items in classrooms had the potential to adversely impact the air quality and were taking up much needed space. To rectify this, school staff were required to declutter classrooms to meet basic safety and health guidelines. Subsequently, inspections were carried out at the end of the school year at all 36 school sites, to ensure adherence to guidelines.

Madam President,

To start the school reopening process, in August all schools will be deep cleaned once again and inspected using a standardized inspection form. Water tanks at all schools will be chlorinated to ensure the water supply is safe for drinking and washing of hands. Safety and health signs will be posted throughout the school buildings as a constant reminder to staff and students of following safety and health protocols.

Custodians will be following a daily cleaning and sanitizing regime developed by the Department of Health. In instances where there are staff shortages for cleaning, daytime cleaners will be hired to fulfill the need of frequent sanitizing and cleaning. As such, the Department of Education will be collaborating with the Department of Workforce Development to secure cleaners for those schools. An adequate supply of cleaning supplies and hygiene essentials for staff and students has been secured and will be available at the start of the school year in September.

Madam President,

Setting up classrooms in compliance with physical distancing protocols has meant that schools needed to find additional spaces to hold classes. All students and teacher's desks were rearranged, and classrooms were reconfigured to align with the physical distancing protocol of six feet. This meant that a classroom that held 20 students previously, now only holds 10 students with physical distancing. Therefore, two classroom spaces will be needed instead of one.

This reconfiguration of the school's physical environment will impact what learning looks like in September. For example, a teacher who is teaching their class may be face to face with one group, while the other group that is physically onsite in another room, accessing the lesson remotely under the supervision of another qualified teacher. This reconfiguration will require the Department to increase the number of teachers on site. Some of our schools will be using common areas for teaching such as the assembly hall, computer lab, art room, music room, learning support room, and reading room.

However, **Madam President**, the Department of Education has not ruled out the possibility of implementing a rotational schedule for attending school, particularly for our older students in the upper middle and senior school levels. Additionally, as guidelines are evolving worldwide, the Department is also looking at the potential of installing plexiglass shields on students' individual desks at the primary school level. This has proven to reduce the amount of space needed between students in the classroom, and allow for all children to be in the same class.

Madam President,

I will shift from school building preparation to the fourth component in the School Reopening System Plan and provide details of the Hybrid Learning Model that will be implemented in our schools. When the doors of public schools open for staff on September 1st, 2020, they will participate in meetings and workshops that will focus on expanding information shared during the end of year June workshops. Some of the workshops held include:

- How to create a well-structured online lesson;
- Keeping students engaged in remote lessons;
- Formative assessment tools for remote learning;
- Schoology; and,
- G-Suite.

These workshops were specifically chosen and designed to equip staff with skills needed for a Hybrid Learning Model in September, and are being offered again during the summer months July and August, in addition to workshops for mathematics, STEAM and PowerSchool. The Hybrid Learning Model is one which involves in-classroom (face to face) instruction and remote learning for students; and was chosen to accommodate extremely vulnerable staff and students who require

shielding, and who cannot go into school buildings. Staff and students who fall in this category will be teaching and learning remotely.

Madam President,

The Hybrid Learning Model requires staff and students to be in possession of laptops and the school site will be equipped with the technology to support remote learning. All schools have increased bandwidth; middle and senior schools have Wi-Fi that can be accessed from anywhere in the building, and this summer the Wi-Fi availability in the remaining schools will be expanded to allow for school-wide access. Additionally, this summer IT staff will replace LCD projectors and ensure smartboards can be used for displaying projected content and the faces of students accessing learning via remote platforms. The Department is securing additional laptops with the aim of having all laptops and contracts ready for staff and students to sign, on site at schools, by the last week of August.

Madam President,

Additionally, school days have been adjusted to accommodate the daily safety and health protocols that will be followed, and to implement staff and student wellness activities. Schools will allocate 30 minutes each morning for entry procedures which will involve taking students' temperatures, guiding students through handwashing and other safety protocols before they arrive in their respective classrooms. This schedule will also include a staff and student morning and afternoon wellness break to support staff and student well-being.

Madam President,

Let me close by saying that to effectively support reopening schools in September 2020, a comprehensive communication plan and strategy will be implemented during the months of July and August. Communication is an area the Department of Education recognizes the need to enhance with stakeholders. A communication plan has been developed that incorporates using a broad range of social media, digital, online and media platforms. This will occur to ensure parents have sufficient information in advance of September to understand what the reopening of public schools will involve for their children.

Madam President,

We encourage our Educational Family to continue to use the BPSS Family Feedback form to send in their questions, concerns and kudos about the work taking place in our schools and at the Department of Education. Thank You, **Madam President.**