

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

No advance notice of GNWT plan to allow schools to re-open, educators and MLAs say

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Link: <https://nnsi.com/yellowknifer/education-boards-and-parents-not-informed-of-gnwt-plan-to-allow-schools-to-re-open-mla-lafferty-says/>

The GNWT's Emerging Wisely plan on relaxing some Covid-related restrictions on public life came as a relief to many people, but the news about opening schools led to confusion and surprise among the public, educators and some MLAs.

A joint letter issued on Wednesday evening from the five education boards in the Yellowknife area said they learned about the GNWT's plan to open schools at the same time as the rest of the public, and were surprised and "still processing this development" along with many staff, students, parents and stakeholders.

Yellowknife Education District No. 1, Yellowknife Catholic Schools (YCS), la Commission scolaire francophone Territories du Nord-Ouest, Ndilo District Education Authority and Dettah District Education Authority were in close communication with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment on further direction about the plan, the letter said.

Their sentiments stand in contrast to those of Premier Caroline Cochrane, who said in a news conference on Tuesday that Education Minister R.J. Simpson had been working closely with the school bodies and that they had been waiting for the new orders to be released.

MLAs reaction to school plan

Most MLAs were also surprised to hear about the plan for schools, said Jackson Lafferty, MLA for Monfwi in a Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight meeting on Wednesday morning.

"I think a lot of people were shocked. The school boards weren't notified until a few hours before the announcement (on Tuesday). Teachers and parents were shocked as well," said Lafferty, adding that parents have asked him why the government was deciding to reverse its decision to close schools.

Jackie Jacobson, MLA for Nunakput, echoed Lafferty's sentiments, saying there are five weeks left in the school calendar and added that "We should be staying the course and not opening up schools."

"We should make sure it's an option to open schools. I spoke to three of our four mayors and they said they don't want schools opened until September. We're not guinea pigs. We're still in a pandemic state here. In our communities, if one person gets sick it could affect 10 or 20. The second wave might be worse than the first. My community leaders are saying we don't want schools to open."

Kami Kandola, Chief Public Health Officer (CPHO), reiterated in the standing committee meeting the comments she made on Tuesday, that schools could only open after she approves their submitted plans on implementing health measures. Even if the first phase of relaxing restrictions can begin on Friday, that doesn't mean schools or businesses would be ready to open on the same day.

"With schools there's a significant amount of planning that needs to be done. The schools won't be ready to open on Friday but they have the permission to open. We'll work with them to ensure they can open safely," she said.

Kandola added that the rationale behind opening elementary, middle and high schools is the fact that health studies have shown that coronavirus has infected few people under the age of 19 and "children are not strong drivers of the outbreak."

"What better time to open schools and practice mitigation measures than now, with no spread (of the virus), good containment and outdoor weather (that isn't favourable to viruses)?"

Julie Green, MLA for Yellowknife Centre called the possibility of opening schools "not practical" and cited the three schools of YCS which she said are at over capacity.

"It's difficult to see how social distancing would work there. There's no space for it."

But not all MLAs are against going back to school.

Frieda Martselos, MLA for Thebacha said she knows of children who would be happy to go back to their classes because they're bored at home.

She also denied that there had been a lack of communication with school boards, saying that education minister R.J. Simpson had left decisions about opening to the school boards.

"Attendance at school is optional. I look forward to (education boards') decision. I will honour that decision. The people that distribute education to the students and with the help of parents and teachers they're the ones who have to decide what's best for the area they're representing.

We have to leave it up to the boards. They're not going to open schools if they feel there is a risk."

Cochrane acknowledged that the plan to opening schools has "benefits and drawbacks" but said she supports Kandola's approach.

"If we have a large number of kids coming back all at once in September there might be a lot more chaos than if we gradually bring them in," Cochrane said.

"However, what's key in what she said is that each school authority has the decision to do what is best for their students. (In response to the comments that) perhaps the minister of education needs to be more available to the school boards, absolutely. If school boards feel they need extra support they should give R.J. Simpson a call."

The premier clarified in an email sent to NNSL Media on Thursday that because of the "ever-evolving nature of this pandemic on a whole, it was not possible to share all of the details of the CPHO's plan with individual school boards. However now that the plan for easing public restrictions has been made public, Minister Simpson will continue to work with education Leaders to help determine the best path forward."

NWT Teachers' Association

Fraser Oliver, President of the NWT Teachers' Association said he shared the feelings "shock" expressed by others at the news of possible school openings.

If a decision was made to open schools, Fraser believes it would take about three weeks of preparation only to have another three weeks of classes before summer break.

"Is it worth all that stress? I get the feeling that the majority of superintendents feel schools should remain closed. I think the best thing is to wait for the school year to be done and spend our energies on preparing our schools and staff for September," he explained.