

Back-to-school decision different for each family

Parents weighing options over whether to send their kids to school in September

by **SUE TIFFIN**
Times Staff

Aarica Hurl feels anxious, scared, and says she has “mom guilt for sure.”

Her four-year-old already had her hairstyle and outfit picked out for her first day of school, and Hurl said, “I feel like I took away that sparkle a little,” after making the decision that both her daughter, who is starting junior kindergarten and 11-year-old son, who becomes a Grade 6 student at Archie Stouffer Elementary School this year, will stay home from school during the time of global pandemic.

Hurl is a parent in one of hundreds of families in Haliburton County deciding whether their kids will attend school in-person, enroll in school for an at-home learning program, or pursue another private option to reduce the risks of spreading COVID-19.

On July 30, the Ford government announced their much-anticipated return-to-school plan, which called for elementary schools to reopen province-wide with in-class instruction five days a week, and secondary schools with lower risk to reopen with a normal daily schedule. Students from Grade 4 to 12 and school staff are required to wear masks, while masks for students in younger grades are optional. Parents can choose between their children attending school in-person, or remote learning.

It’s a decision that has parents feeling stressed and reaching out to their social media networks to ask, “what are your plans, what are you doing about school?” For Hurl, like many others, the emotions that come along with making the decision – or not yet deciding – are intense.

“Worried if I’m doing the right thing, sad because this year I won’t have a school photo of him or her and she will miss all the fun junior kindergarten milestones – going to class for the first time, her first day of school photo at the school, making new friends.”

Hurl is able to be with her kids during the day, because she is at home from work due to being immuno-compromised.

“We have been spending lots of time going back and forth on the choices we have,” she said.

Hurl said in-person school poses a risk to her own health by her kids being part of a bigger social bubble than what is currently recommended by the government and public health units, and her family also had to consider how that could impact the people her husband works with – some considered



Landon, who is going into Grade 6 at ASES and Talia Hurl, who would be starting JK in September are opting for home school instead this year, to help keep their family’s social bubble small. /Submitted photo

to be vulnerable – at a long-term care facility. Additionally, Hurl’s son is on the autism spectrum, and does not like physical contact including that caused by a mask.

“For all of these reasons, we have decided to keep them home with us,” said Hurl, who has her early childhood education diploma and is prepared to teach her daughter as she has been, but hopes the school board will continue to supply

her son with the tools and technology he needs for remote learning.

“These are questions that most of us have and need answered before choices can and should be made,” said Hurl.

While school traditionally begins in September, Michelle Moore is waiting until after the Christmas break to decide whether or not her daughter will attend Grade 8 in person this year.

“I look at it this way, I am not willing to play Russian roulette with my daughter’s health,” said Moore.

Registration information was sent home to families Aug. 7 by the TLDSB for parents to share their intent for the school year with the board so that schools can better plan for the year knowing how many students will be registered. Re-registration is for all students, including those newly registered, and must be received by Aug. 13. Students who are not re-registered for September will be assumed to be attending at school.

“We understand that it is an immensely challenging decision to take when not all the information is known,” reads a post on the ASES Facebook page. “There are no wrong decisions in this case, just the best decisions for your family at this time.”

Those decisions look different based on a multitude of complex scenarios.


“The feeling I am getting from some of the parents I have been talking to, they have a mixed bag,” said Moore.

Her daughter enjoyed learning at home in spring, when schools were closed to help flatten the curve during the pandemic and allow the health-care system time to prepare for a possible influx of patients. In June, Sierra achieved A’s on her report card, and brought up two of her marks, noting she appreciated the chance to learn independently without distractions from other students.

Moore is joining alongside three other moms, with a total of eight kids, to look at having a tutor teach the kids in groups according to grade so the students keep up with the French immersion program they would typically be enrolled in at J.Douglas Hodgson Elementary School.

“The rest of the studies they can continue like they had for the three months there was no school,” said Moore. “I am not comfortable sending her back. Her class has 16 Grade 8 [students]...sorry, the classrooms are not big enough to keep everyone six feet apart. Now Ford said they are going to hire 500 more nurses for the school. There are over 1,000 schools just in Toronto alone. I do not see one going into our little

see TOUGH page 4



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COUNCIL MEETINGS

As a result of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) outbreak, all Council and Committee of the Whole meetings will be conducted virtually via web conference; and Closed Session meetings via teleconference, until further notice. Meetings are held virtually, starting at 9:00 AM in the Minden Council office, 7 Milne Street.

The schedule of upcoming meetings are:
August 27 – Regular Council Meeting

Please note Council Meetings are reduced to one meeting a month in July, August and December.

During this unprecedented time, the health and safety of our community is of paramount importance. Members of the Public are invited to observe Council proceedings by joining a live-stream link available on the township website at www.minden hills.ca/council/ or by using the direct link provided in the notice. We encourage those wishing to view the meeting to also download the agenda, as it will not be displayed during the streaming process. Meeting agendas can be downloaded by visiting our website at www.minden hills.ca/council/.

Please note the live-stream link provided for each meeting will only be activated while Council is in session.

RE-OPENING PLANS

The Township of Minden Hills is sharing preliminary re-opening plans for select municipal facilities as it prepares to move into Stage 3 of the Province’s COVID-19 recovery framework.

Most municipal services have continued to be available through the pandemic, and have been offered online and by phone. To support physical distancing, residents and customers are encouraged to continue to access Township services online at minden hills.ca and by phone at 705-286-1260 as much as possible.

For the health and well-being of residents, customers, and staff, facilities will be operating under modified conditions based on the specific situation at each site. Many Township services will be available by appointment only. Details on modified conditions for Township facilities are available by calling 705-286-1260.

Administration Building – 7 Milne Street

To support physical distancing, residents and customers will be encouraged to continue to access Township services online at minden hills.ca and by phone at 705-286-1260 as much as possible. Moving into Stage 3 of the Province’s COVID-19 recovery framework some Township services will now be available by appointment. For inquiries or to book an appointment please call:
Building/Bylaw/Planning – 705-286-1260 ext. 209
Finance and Tax Department – 705-286-1260
Clerks Department – 705-286-1260 ext. 212

Agnes Jamieson Gallery & Minden Hills Cultural Centre

Starting Tuesday, August 4 the Agnes Jamieson Gallery and Minden Hills Cultural Centre at 176 Bobcaygeon Road will be open to the public from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The Bowron House will be open to the public while the remaining Museum buildings will be accessible through a virtual tour. For Minden Hills Cultural Centre inquiries, please email gallery@minden hills.ca or call 705-286-3154.

S.G. Nesbitt Arena and Community Centre

The S.G. Nesbitt Arena and Community Centre at 55 Parkside Street will remain closed to the public until further notice while construction upgrades are being completed. For S.G. Nesbitt Arena and Minden Hills Community Centre inquiries, please call 705-286-1936.

Public Works Department

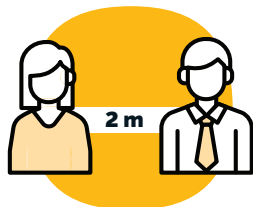
The Public Works Department office at 11445 Highway 35 will remain closed to the public at this time. The Public Works Department can be reached at 705-286-3144.

Updates and information

All dates and details mentioned in this release are subject to change. Updates will be posted to the Township website (minden hills.ca/covid-19-information/), Facebook page (facebook.com/Township.Minden.Hills) and Twitter account (twitter.com/twpminden hills). Questions about the Township’s re-opening plans can be directed to admin@minden hills.ca or 705-286-1260.

In Case of Emergency Dial 911 Municipal Emergency 1-866-856-3247

As more businesses and services reopen, we must all continue our efforts to protect each other.



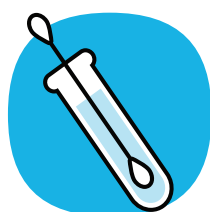
Continue to practice physical distancing, stay two metres apart even in gatherings.



Wear a face covering where physical distancing is a challenge or where required.



Continue to wash hands frequently.



Get tested if you are worried you may have COVID-19, or have been exposed to the virus.

Inside or out, stay safe. Save lives.

Tough choices

from page 3

area up here – there are four schools just in Haliburton alone.”

Moore said she was concerned with how much time could be spent in the classroom on teaching with added safety concerns and hygiene requirements in place.

“The teachers and the educational assistants are going to be too busy trying to keep the kids apart, washing their hands, bathroom breaks, etc. Is there going to be someone in the bathrooms every day for six hours a day cleaning?”

Moore said she was surprised the government didn’t opt for a different model, such as a hybrid model or one like Moore’s idea in which students are separated into two groups and physically in-class part of the week with Wednesdays off, which she said would give custodians time to clean, teachers time to plan, and would allow for smaller class sizes to maintain social distancing.

“Yes, it’s not ideal, however this isn’t going to last forever,” she said.

“It’s so layered,” said Jane Isbister, but said it was a quick decision for her and Karen Pettinella to enroll their son Rowan in school. “Right now the provincial risk is low and we have some experience of testing and tracking and isolating under our belts. So that’s encouraging.”

“And although Rowan is very complicated he can’t and doesn’t put his hands in his mouth, so although he has high risk factors if he gets COVID-19, he might actually be lower risk for contracting it. He is also in a PALS class with a population of 12 to 15 including teacher and EAs, so that’s also encouraging.”

Isbister said it isn’t sustainable “physically, emotionally or financially” to keep Rowan home while she tries to work full-time and care for other kids in the house, too, until the pandemic is one day over or through what she thinks will be rotating lock downs over time.

“So for his social engagement and development I also believe the risk benefit analysis, for us, includes going to school when able.”

Busing is on Tracy Jordan’s mind. Her daughter is 15 and attends the Adult and Alternate Education Centre in Haliburton.

“I’m not as concerned about sending her back to a school – there aren’t as many kids that attend there – as I am about sending her on the bus,” said Jordan. “I think as a county we are currently fairly safe, cases have remained low. Sending kids back to school I believe will have a greater impact on those numbers, especially in the elementary schools.”

In Haliburton County, numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases have remained low among residents – with 15 cases being reported by the Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit, and at press time, three being unresolved. In Ontario, fewer than 100 new COVID-19 cases were reported over each of seven days last week, with about 40,000 total reported cases this year, about 90 per cent of those listed as recovered.

This spring, Jordan said, AETC

students learned over the phone and worked out of booklets, or on specialized projects to suit students’ needs and interests.

“This past spring was pretty relaxed for us, as we just spent more time working on her mental health and keeping her busy with fun projects, then transitioned into English and history,” she said, noting her daughter is on the same page about not attending class in person just yet.

“For me, the decision hasn’t been that difficult, safety first,” she said. “She has lots of time to finish her education if she falls behind.”

Jordan said she thought the government’s return to school plans “are full of holes,” and said it was important for people to make their own decisions based on their individual needs, and “go with your gut as a parent.”

“I would feel more confident sending her back to school if there was a vaccine, and yes, if the holes – i.e. elementary schools had much smaller class sizes, and social distancing was able to be reached – but I think even at that, it’s going to be very difficult to stop the spread within any type of school setting, so yeah, vaccine would make me comfortable.”

Nicky Robichaud said her children won’t be getting the vaccine – one of her kids is allergic to many antibiotics and has had negative reactions to immunizations in the past.

She said she made up her mind months ago that her kids, aged four, six and seven, would not be returning to school this year. Though it’s sad to her that one of her children was not able to experience the traditional “clap-out” ceremony as he moved from Stuart Baker to JDHES, and that her JK student won’t be able to experience traditional school entry at all, because one of her children has multiple medical conditions, she said her family “cannot risk it.”

Robichaud also has a baby at home, and said she plans to homeschool her three school-aged children though it will be challenging. “[It’s] a learning curve, due to I have two with learning disabilities and require special equipment, computers, that we have from the school, but I also had to get home internet which is costing me \$150 a month for them to be able to [participate in] school,” she said.

The home learning program was stressful for Robichaud she said, and continues to be so as she has struggled in school in the past, but said she and her husband are feeling confident in their decision. “I think the government is nuts for re-opening, especially when we don’t have the room to split classrooms in half,” she said. “Where are those other half of students going to go, how are you going to keep on top of the cleaning and separation?”

Robichaud said she felt the community has been supportive of each person’s decision, and is working together.

Caroline Kooistra said her kids are feeling great about going back to school, and joked that they are “looking forward to going, for once.”

She has a 12-year-old student attending JDHES, and a 15-year-old student in Haliburton Highlands Secondary

Situation stressful for parents

from page 4

School. Working full-time during the spring while also trying to keep up with the kids' schooling was exhausting for Kooistra, who said she requires some assistance for her son's learning needs, and doesn't have the means to pay privately. The family has been enjoying their summer, her older son working at Subway and the kids being self-sufficient while she works, spending time at the skate park or in the lake at their house.

Kooistra said she is not concerned about the return to school.

"I believe it's time," she said. "They need routine and we manage daily with the new norm now, so the next step is school. I welcome it [and] won't put fear into my kids so they manage well ... I feel 100 per cent confident. I believe that this is going to be around for some time and maybe just the first of many pandemics to come – who knows – and their education is also important."

Kooistra said the conversations she sees in some forums can be polarizing.

"I just have a different point of view on the matter but you can't argue it, there's no right or wrong as far as I'm concerned," she said.

Kooistra said those who make the choice to send their kids to school shouldn't be seen as being reckless, echoing a call on social media for parents to support each other through decisions.

"...it's an individual choice. Please don't judge."

Marg Cox, executive director of Point in Time Centre for Children, Youth and Parents said it's certainly difficult for parents, or anyone, to know what's best during a time of pandemic, when fear and anxiety can be heightened.

"Parents in the end are the ones that know their children best," she said. "They are also the ones that know themselves

best. Families have to make the best choice they can with the information they have access to."

Cox noted that as with any decision, weighing pros and cons is important. "For some families however, the necessity of getting back to work might make it very difficult to choose any other option than sending their children back to school," she said. "Lack of childcare and in-school options have really added to the financial hardship for many families. In addition, students have suffered from lack of routine, lack of stimulation, lack of peer interaction. Social isolation has a huge negative impact on the mental health of many. Parents feeling like they are in pressure cookers, juggling working from home, trying to help their children with home schooling and figure out how to navigate grocery shopping plus financial stress on top for many has not been good for most people's mental and physical health."

Cox said school boards are working closely with public health and will do their best to keep students as safe as possible.

"We know that students will quickly adapt to wearing masks and following new protocols," she said. "We also know that for some students they really feel like they need to be there, be with their friends, and that they learn better in a classroom setting. Lack of connectivity and social isolation for some has presented an uneven playing field for school."

"All factors to be considered but at the end of the day, we all have to do what we think is best with the information we have at the time," she said. "It doesn't mean we can't change our minds later or adapt."

For more information regarding re-registering for school and the information about a return-to-school plan thus far, visit: <https://tdsb.ca/return-to-school-re-registration/>.

For parents and caregivers interested in tips, support or help, Point in Time can be reached Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 705-457-5345.



Emma Gillam, a student at AETC works on a woodworking project outside of school during the coronavirus pandemic./Submitted



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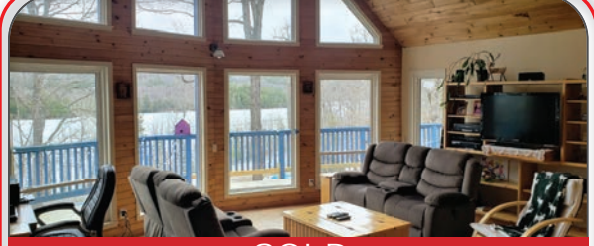


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