

NORMAL, FOR RIGHT NOW

Back to school planning typically brings feelings of anxiety, fear, nervousness, and excitement. This year, in the middle of a worldwide pandemic and global uncertainty, these feelings can have us parents feeling completely overwhelmed, vulnerable and hopeless.

What is a parent to do? So many decisions, confusion and few places to find unbiased information. Do we send our child to school with a flippant wave “sayonara, kiddo, may the odds be ever in your favour?” or do we mask up, bubble wrap, bathe in sanitizer and invest in a hazmat suit. Perhaps we should board up our windows and doors and hibernate until it is all over. All joking aside, our reality is truly no laughing matter. The stakes are high and the consequences grave. I cannot say what the right answer is. Every family has different circumstances. Whatever you decide to do with your child, I can share with you my perspective as a Division Office staff member and a parent, and perhaps that will calm your fears.

Every District Office staff, Administrator, and school staff member at Northern Gateway Public Schools have been working around the clock since March 15 to ensure that children and staff will be as safe as absolutely possible, while continuing to provide a high quality education. **Education and safety has been the number one priority** and what is being accomplished is outstanding. Each risk factor has been analyzed and discussed with solutions being found. If you decide on the at-home, on-line learning format for your child, be assured that there is ample support and dedicated teachers to connect with, build a relationship with and make the experience successful.

On a personal level, I am sending 3 of my children back to school for in-class learning. I am confident that our school division and staff are prepared for a safe and healthy environment. Trust me, as a school division, the last thing we want is to have a student or staff member become sick. **We need EVERYONE to be healthier than they have ever been:** staff, student, parent.

The schools are doing their part. **As parents, there is much we can do to prepare our children** for back to school in the middle of this pandemic.

- The most important thing: MODEL CALMNESS and CONFIDENCE; in our words and actions. Our children are watching and listening.
- Practice having children put on and take off their mask on their own. Practice storing it properly. [Listen to this catchy song about masks.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMVsCwKeARQ) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMVsCwKeARQ>) Or you can read [a social story about wearing masks.](#) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InP-uMn6q_U)
- We have heard this a thousand times already, children must be able to practice good hand cleaning and hygiene on their own. We cannot leave it to teachers. [Here is a cute little "Hand washing Hero" video.](#)

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/video/covid-19-hand-washing-heroes-dv.html>)

- Keep the immune system strong. Get enough sleep, eat a large variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, drink plenty of water, exercise regularly, get outside for healthy doses of sunshine, and try to keep stress to a minimum.

As September approaches and we send the ones most precious to us to school, either in person or on-line, be confident that they will be safe. Our children's **teachers, school and district office staff are completely and wholeheartedly prepared** for them.

There are many arguments, attitudes and thoughts about COVID-19. You may have your own personal opinion on the virus, masks, social distancing, whether schools open or not, etc. As a school division, we are following the direction and guidance of the Government of Alberta and Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Deena Hinshaw.

School in September will not be normal and we hear the words "new normal" tossed about. I do not like the term "new normal"; there isn't anything normal about this! Wearing masks everywhere, sanitizing our hands a thousand times a day and staying 6 feet apart is not normal! I prefer the term: "**normal for right now**". We are hardwired for connection, structure, stability and collaboration. But, FOR RIGHT NOW, we must follow provincial guidelines and mandatory health instructions. **We are all in this together and together we can get through this pandemic** with as few long term negative effects as possible.

Despite all our School Division is doing, remember, as parents, **we have the most influence on resilience and the psychological wellness of our child**. It is critical that we manage our own discomfort and angst, because our children pick up on our feelings. Yes, we are terrified and feel we are not ready. We may fear what is to come. **But we (children too!) are strong, brave and adaptable**. Have faith that the leaders of our schools are prepared, excited and ready for September!

This article was written by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She advocates for students and parents, providing a link to other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for over 20 years and is a mother to 4 teenagers.