

BCTF Brief for the Minister of Education, the Honourable Jennifer Whiteside

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BC Teachers' Federation

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Preamble

The BC Teachers' Federation is pleased to welcome a new Minister and appreciates the opportunity to provide context and recommendations for action on key issues of concern in our public education system. We appreciate that the new Minister has substantial background in both union leadership and public sector work. We offer this Education Brief to bring together in one place many of the BCTF's concerns and proposals that require action as we work to make our schools safe places of learning during the current pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis has amplified many of the longstanding inequities in our society as well as highlighted the importance of the public sector, community, and care work. Public schools are a key part of every community, but they have been underfunded for decades. An already stressed public education system has been stretched even further to deal with a global health pandemic. As British Columbia experiences a second pandemic wave with cases surging across the province, teachers continue to clearly communicate their anxiety and concerns for the health and safety of everyone in our schools.

It is time for a thorough, stakeholder-led review of the processes, guidelines and policies that have been put in place for the K–12 sector during the pandemic. This Education Brief outlines four key areas of concern that BC teachers are looking forward to working with the new Minister to address: health and safety in schools, equitable and inclusive access to learning, fair and equitable working conditions, and effective communication and consultation.

A fresh orientation to working with the BC Teachers' Federation opens the door for resolving the serious, ongoing concerns that teachers have about the working and learning conditions in BC's public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to ongoing discussion about these with the Minister and other Ministry education officials to make the school system as safe a place as possible during the remainder of the pandemic.

SECTION 1

Supporting health and safety in schools

Daily exposure events and cases of in-school COVID-19 transmission are increasing in BC schools. The layers of protection British Columbians are asked to implement in their day-to-day lives are not adequately provided to teachers in schools. Within the current Stage 2, classroom density remains the same as before the pandemic. Proper physical distancing in many classrooms is impossible due to the limitations of space. While the Ministry has provided important health and safety guidelines, their implementation is not equitable and in many cases the guidelines are not properly enforced in schools. The BCTF provides the following recommendations to work toward ensuring the health and safety of all in the BC school system.

Recommendation 1

Conduct a comprehensive review of the K–12 Restart Plan—with specific attention to health and safety protocols and the equitable and inclusive access to learning—and make required changes to the Plan in consultation with stakeholders.

Recommendation 2

The Ministry review each individual district COVID-19 safety plan each time that they are updated.

Recommendation 3

Implement enhanced health and safety measures to support a safe return to work following the Winter and Spring Breaks, including an expanded expectation of mask-wearing in education worksites and communication from the Ministry and school districts about the need to follow Provincial Health Office recommendations, restrictions, and orders during and after the breaks.

Recommendation 4

Provide adequate funding to enable school districts to implement the following health and safety measures:

- Reduce class sizes to provide for physical distancing and minimizing physical contact.
- Improve school ventilation and HVAC systems to ensure worksites meet or exceed COVID-19 requirements as defined by the Ministry Provincial COVID-19 Health & Safety Guidelines for K–12 Settings, Provincial Health Office guidelines, and WorkSafe BC.
- Provide individual student classroom supplies, manipulatives, and resources to reduce sharing and contact between students.
- Increase counsellors in support of trauma-informed practice.
- Install plexiglass barriers and provide voice amplification systems where required.

Recommendation 5

Respond to the dramatic rise in cases in the Fraser Health Region by implementing smaller class sizes of no more than 15 students per class in Fraser Health Region school districts.

Recommendation 6

Ensure adequate funds are made available for planning, training, and implementation of any potential blended-learning model necessary during any stage of the pandemic plan.

Recommendation 7

Prior to transitioning to any new stage in the Ministry's pandemic plan, provide Teachers Teaching on Call (TTOCs) with the health and safety training and orientation necessary to ensure that they and their students can work and learn safely in a pandemic environment.

Recommendation 8

Ensure all staff working in the K–12 and adult education system to be among those prioritized for early COVID-19 immunization.

Recommendation 9

The Ministry work with the Public Health Office, local health authorities, and WorkSafeBC to perform environmental assessments of schools where there are multiple cases of COVID-19 in the same cohort and/or grade.

Recommendation 10

The Ministry request that the Provincial Health Authority do asymptomatic testing at selected schools with high numbers of recent exposures beginning with the Fraser Health Region.

The strength of our health and safety measures is critical for the protection of all those who interact within the BC public school system. Since the return to school in September, teachers have repeatedly expressed that many key health and safety measures are not being implemented or enforced in their schools. Fundamental measures for protection used in other sectors, such as physical distancing, physical barriers such as plexiglass, and masks to name a few, are not being implemented consistently in the K–12 sector.

The BCTF is recommending a comprehensive review of the Ministry's K–12 education pandemic plan, in collaboration with key education stakeholders, to help identify key challenges and make the necessary changes to the plan so that the safety and well-being of BC's teachers and students are ensured.

Districts must be enabled to guarantee the health and safety of students, staff, and their communities. Adequate funding must continue to be made available to enable school districts to follow all relevant provincial health guidelines. More specifically this means dedicated funding for the full range of health and safety measures identified above and those contained within the Ministry's Provincial COVID-19 Health & Safety Guidelines for K–12 Settings document.

With specific regards to our call for reduced classroom density, the Federation is particularly concerned by the dramatic rise in cases in the Fraser Health Region. Reducing classroom density is one of the most important ways to ensure appropriate physical distancing in schools. Capping class

sizes at 15 in Fraser Health Region school districts would help limit the risk of transmission in schools.

Teachers shifted their entire classes online in the Spring of 2020 often with inadequate support, training, resources, and preparation time. This experience also demonstrated that hybrid teaching models, with an individual teacher supporting students in class and remotely at the same time, were unrealistic. While the pandemic presents us with uncertainties, the funding to ensure teachers receive the supports, resources, and preparation time they need to adapt to all potential learning situations during any stage of the pandemic plan should be planned for and guaranteed.

Furthermore, the necessary use of masks and shields by teachers since the beginning of the pandemic has resulted in a significant increase in the incidence of teacher suffering issues with their voice. Priority needs to be given to providing voice amplification systems to teachers on their request.

Special consideration needs to be given to support for TTOCs and other itinerant teaching staff who travel from school to school, some of whom work in multiple districts. Working in many different locations significantly increases the risks to them, their families, and the students they teach. It is vitally important that TTOCs are provided the necessary PPE and health and safety training prior to starting every new teaching assignment.

Given the rising number of COVID-19 contacts and cases involving schools, especially in the Fraser Health Region, environmental assessments and asymptomatic testing would provide useful data to better understand the dynamic of these outbreaks and help inform changes to the guidelines to prevent future outbreaks.

SECTION 2

Equitable and inclusive access to learning

COVID-19 has impacted BC students' education in numerous ways. Students from marginalized communities and students with special needs have been disproportionately impacted by changes to their education due to the pandemic, resulting in less access to supports and accommodations that are necessary for their educational success. There has also been a significant negative impact on student mental health that needs to be addressed urgently. Inclusion and equity considerations must be central in the Ministry's pandemic response plans. The BCTF provides the following recommendations for implementing an equity lens in BC's education pandemic plan.

Recommendation 1

Immediately suspend the Foundations Skills Assessments and the Graduation Numeracy and Literacy Assessments.

Recommendation 2

Ensure that any scheduling model adopted in response to the pandemic has built into it the same access to the full curriculum that existed prior to the pandemic, including access to a full range of electives.

Recommendation 3

That students for whom medical concerns, either personal or family related, prevent them from participating in any in-class instruction be provided with full-time remote learning by teachers assigned solely to remote learning. These students should have the ability to stay registered at their home school during their remote learning period. In addition, a full range of supports and services should be made available to all students in the district.

Recommendation 4

The Ministry work with stakeholders to develop minimum guidelines for district remote learning programs to ensure equity of access and services for students, a reasonable workload for teachers, and the ability for families to keep their child's spot at their home school through the end of June 2021 and to the start of the 2021–22 school year.

Recommendation 5

Establish consistent expectations for K–12 reporting during COVID-19, including parameters for students whose families chose a transitional or remote learning opportunity.

Recommendation 6

The Ministry investigate, in collaboration with all stakeholders, the steering committee, and work groups the impacts on both teaching and students' education resulting from changes made to school delivery due to the pandemic.

Full consideration to any potential negative impacts on the learning opportunities for all students must be provided in the Ministry's pandemic plan. In addition to dealing with disruptions in their school year, BC's students have all been impacted by the ongoing pandemic in different ways. Subjecting students to standardized testing, such as the FSAs and the Graduation Assessments, in this current environment adds an unnecessary burden of stress and anxiety in an already stressful time. These largely summative assessments are of little value to direct student learning and serve more as a Ministry data collection tool.

The student transition programs have played an important part in supporting students since the return to school in September. However, the inconsistency between districts in how these programs have been run and which students are eligible for them has caused much concern. While some districts have extended these programs into 2021, others seek to wind them down due to lack of funding. This is at a time when the number of students not attending school, due to the fear and anxiety of increasing provincial COVID case numbers, has been on the rise. In several districts, those students who did not start the school year in a transition program cannot now enter the program and instead the unrealistic expectation is that their classroom teacher provides a hybrid program so that they can continue to learn from their home. These issues need to be addressed urgently and equitable access to transition programs needs to be provided to all students, in all districts. In addition, sufficient funding needs to be provided to ensure that programs are properly staffed and this needs to be a clear part of each district's COVID-19 plan. Increasing collaboration and working with all education stakeholders to develop guidelines for district remote learning and transition programs—grounded in equity of access and service for students, as well as a reasonable workload for teachers—will help minimize the negative impacts of the pandemic on BC's education system as well as lay the foundation for greater equity going forward.

At this stage in the pandemic plan, it is vitally important to be able to dedicate time to fully explore and unpack the impacts on students' education resulting from program delivery changes and increased levels of student absenteeism due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These include access to education for students with disabilities, altered timetabling (specifically quarter and octet systems), graduating students' access to and transition to post-secondary, the inequities experienced by vulnerable students, and the impacts of continued standardized testing during the pandemic, to name a few. Part of this investigation should encompass a survey of student experiences since the beginning of September. This survey should be made available in multiple languages and formats and the results should be shared publicly.

SECTION 3

Fair and equitable working conditions

During these difficult times, it is important to do everything possible to maintain fair and equitable working conditions for all who are employed in the K–12 sector. The changes to school timetables, the adaptations that teachers have had to make to their teaching practices, the enhanced cleaning protocols, and the increase in students seeking alternative delivery methods, such as Distributed Learning (DL) and District Transition Programs, have increased teachers' workload unevenly. Strong guidance provided by the Ministry would help ensure school districts uphold reasonable and equitably distributed workloads, and that those who are more vulnerable in the system are properly supported. The BCTF provides the following recommendations to work toward this goal.

Recommendation 1

That any hybrid learning model under the five-stage plan requires discrete teaching assignments for in-class and remote programming. The remote teaching component can be supported by teachers requiring accommodation, where appropriate to the accommodation, and additional teachers be hired as required.

Recommendation 2

Any planned staffing changes during the Ministry's five-stage pandemic response plan should not include any redeployment of non-enrolling teaching staff.

Recommendation 3

In the event the K–12 sector is required to provide Essential Service Workers childcare, additional staffing is required to cover this need.

Recommendation 4

The Ministry and Public Health Office engage in thorough consultation with the K–12 stakeholders regarding the time and resources needed to support any potential shift to remote and/or hybrid learning, or any extension to breaks.

Recommendation 5

Establish a special COVID-19 leave to provide additional sick leave for teachers who run out of sick leave or are required to self-isolate or quarantine, or who need to care for their dependents who have been required to self-isolate or quarantine.

Recommendation 6

That supports and resources be provided to teacher education programs to increase and diversify teacher candidate practicums in order that they can continue during pandemic conditions.

Recommendation 7

Ensure all new employees and teacher candidates in school districts are provided with the health and safety training as per the Ministry Provincial COVID-19 Health & Safety Guidelines for K–12 Settings, and that the training be paid time for employees.

All workers deserve fair and reasonable working conditions. Throughout the course of this pandemic, BC teachers have seen a significant increase in their overall workload. Often this means juggling in-class teaching along with providing support to students learning remotely or covering the class of a colleague and losing much needed prep time due to TTOC shortages. In addition, teachers have had to make significant changes in both teaching methodology and course content to adjust to new school timetables and the significant increase in the use of technology.

The move by many students to Distributed Learning programs has had a significant impact on the workload of distributed learning teachers, to the point where many have total unmanageable caseloads. This has an impact on both the health and wellness of the teachers and an impact on the quality of student education. There needs to be sufficient staffing provided in these programs to make the workload more manageable.

Moreover, some teachers with underlying health conditions have been denied requested accommodations, putting both themselves and others at greater risk from the virus. Ensuring safe teaching conditions means providing accommodations to all teachers who require one.

As cases increase and teachers are instructed to self-isolate, either because they have symptoms of COVID-19, have been identified as a close contact of someone with COVID-19, or are caregiving for someone with COVID-19, access to sick leave is essential to ensure teachers can actually follow those public health orders and not suffer financially. Many teachers, especially those new to the profession, have a limited number of sick days available and one period of self-isolation can eliminate their entire sick bank. Establishing a special COVID-19 leave for this purpose will not only alleviate stress and worry, but also ensure equity amongst all who may need sick leave during this time.

It is vitally important to be able to dedicate time to fully exploring and unpacking the impacts on teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, and more specifically, on the physical and mental health and wellness of people working in schools, and to address any revealed negative impacts in consultation with stakeholders.

Finally, the teacher candidates currently in teacher education programs are having difficulty finding practicum placements during the pandemic. Thought needs to be given to how practicums could be offered in different ways to ensure that students can complete their programs and join the workforce. It is also vital that teacher candidates attending in-person practicums and other new district employees who missed the initial COVID-19 health and safety orientations are provided this essential training and that for new employees that it be on paid time.

SECTION 4

Engaging in effective communication and meaningful consultation

Clear, transparent, and timely communication and meaningful consultation with all education stakeholders are key for the continued safety of all who work and learn in the K–12 sector. Throughout the spring and summer, the BCTF had anticipated the opportunity to be fully involved with ongoing consultation and meaningful collaboration around BC’s return to school plan. Unfortunately, there were delays in the start of the process and insufficient consultation. The result was a plan that was rushed and left teachers, and the public more broadly, with many unanswered questions and fears about the health and safety of those in BC’s schools. The current moment presents an opportunity to change course, ensure meaningful avenues for consultation, and in turn implement a transparent and accountable framework for BC’s education pandemic response plan. The BCTF provides the following recommendations to work towards this goal.

Recommendation 1

Continue regular meetings of the K–12 Education Restart Steering Committee and the associated working groups.

Recommendation 2

Make clear for all education stakeholders that the expectation for collaboration is not limited to developing health and safety protocols, but includes all plans related to the reopening of schools during the pandemic.

Recommendation 3

That government and the Provincial Health Office provide public and transparent reporting of COVID-19 cases in BC public education, including online reporting, as part of the COVID-19 media briefings.

Recommendation 4

To strengthen the contact tracing process, the Ministry needs to work with the Public Health Office to:

- include teachers when identifying close contacts in schools.
- ensure effective communication networks are in place in schools to capture itinerant, district, and Teachers Teaching on Call (TTOC) staff in contact tracing.
- improve timelines between initial confirmation of cases and official communication with school communities.
- increase transparency regarding the criteria for close contacts.
- ensure equitable and consistent access to medical services, rapid COVID-19 testing, and information.
- ensure additional information be provided to school staff and the public where there is evidence or suspicion of in-school transmission connected to confirmed cases.

Recommendation 5

Share with the BCTF and provincial partner groups all K–12 education COVID-19 expenditures, including but not limited to the provincial and federal grants.

Recommendation 6

Establish and communicate clear criteria for the move between stages of the Five Stages Framework for K–12 Education, based on a transparent threshold of COVID-19 exposures and/or transmissions occurring in the school and/or community.

Recommendation 7

Provide simultaneous distribution of both French and English versions of all COVID-19 policies, guidelines, and related information documents.

For any plan to be successfully implemented in the K–12 sector, there needs to be a transparent stakeholder consultation process along with a thoughtful and well-organized communication strategy. It is understood that initially, the pandemic response was of an emergent nature and there was not always the time for full consultation. However, 10 months into the pandemic, there is still the sense that decisions are being made without full stakeholder consultation. Continuing regular meetings of the K–12 Education Restart Steering Committee and the four associated working groups will allow for more opportunities for meaningful stakeholder consultation. The working groups are vitally important to the process, as they allow for more in-depth discussion with stakeholder representatives that actually work in schools. The elimination of the working groups would take away the workers' voice and also overwhelm the Steering Committee with work.

As the Federation calls for more regularly held stakeholder meetings, it is vital that all workgroup members have equitable access to the meetings and that they are compensated for their time by the Ministry if not being paid by their employer to attend the meetings. Teacher representatives were not compensated for the advisory work they did during the summer and they are now expected to meet after school. In the call for improved stakeholder collaboration, the Federation urges the Ministry to remind all partners involved in the education pandemic plan that the expectation for collaboration is not limited to developing health and safety protocols, but includes all pandemic-related plans as well as the supports required to meet the needs of students and families requiring remote learning opportunities. Teachers, through their local unions, should be part of these conversations with school district administration and school-based administration, to ensure that the right supports are in place without creating additional workload for classroom teachers.

While there have been understandable modifications and adjustments to public health information and recommendations as health officials have learned more about COVID-19, teachers have found that many guidelines for the broader public differ from those applied to school settings, leading to significant confusion and frustration. Where different guidelines have to occur, there should be comprehensive and effective communication to explain the rationale behind the differences. Furthermore, within the education system, there have been changes to health screening and safety protocols, as well as unclear directions for students and staff who may be experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. Again, these need clear explanations.

As exposures in BC's schools increase in line with the overall rise in cases across the province, the current practice of contact tracing in schools has been shown to be insufficient. There have been many instances where teachers receive letters indicating they need to isolate over a week or more after the exposure. Improving communication and transparency around COVID-19 cases in BC's public schools and including teachers more meaningfully in plans would go a long way towards restoring confidence in the pandemic response plan.

Finally, all Ministry pandemic documents should be available in both English and French. In addition, when the Ministry surveys parents, such as the survey done in Spring 2020, these should be available in multiple language to allow for equitable access to the survey and more accurate results.

CONCLUSION

The current moment presents a critical opportunity to resolve the serious anxieties of BC's teachers, students, and families, and forge a more collaborative approach to BC's pandemic education plan going forward. Implementing the recommendations provided in this Brief will substantially help improve both the health and well-being, as well as the teaching and learning conditions of BC's teachers and students during the remainder of this pandemic. Many of these recommendations will also help inform the much-needed comprehensive review of the K-12 Restart Plan as it evolves from planning for the restart of schools to the ongoing operation of schools under the current pandemic.

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