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**Serious Concerns During First Week of  
Reopening of Schools in Quebec**

**The Challenge that Teachers and  
Education Workers Are Facing**

- Geneviève Royer -



Montreal demonstration August 23, 2020 calling for a safe return to school.

- Teachers Demand Accelerated COVID-19 Testing in Schools and Accurate Data on Infections
- More Maintenance Staff Needed to Ensure Hygiene
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**Interview**

- Concerns for Preparedness for Second Wave of COVID-19 - *Jeff Begley*

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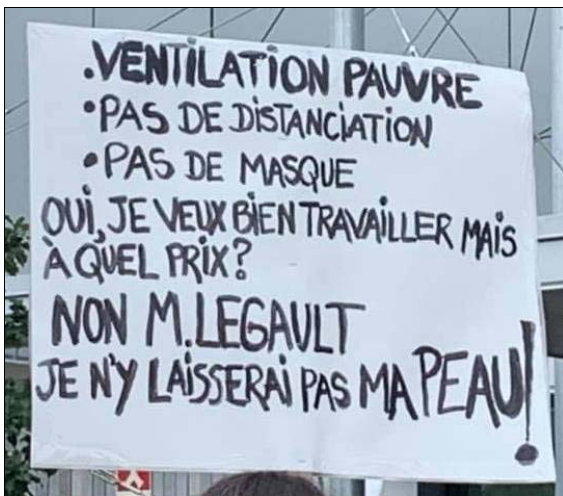
On August 31, schools in Quebec reopened, from kindergarten to high school. There are 2,736 public educational institutions with 1,216,791 students, 107,744 teachers, and more than 60,000

support staff and education professionals.

The first feature of this back-to-school period, with COVID-19 not under control, is the immense social love and enthusiasm that teachers demonstrated when welcoming their students. As soon as they set foot in the school, they made sure that hand sanitizer and personal protective equipment were available for everyone, and every day since teachers have been working collectively on initiatives that ensure their health and that of their students, thereby also looking after the health of the community. They have only had a few days, working together, to ensure that the back-to-school period is as safe as possible to protect the health of young people and is also appropriate for teaching. The students, especially those in secondary school, many who worked in food and retail during the summer under COVID-19, are using their experience and are very disciplined in following and enforcing safety rules.



However, the return to the classroom was also marked by anxiety. The anxiety is not just because of the seriousness of the COVID-19 crisis, but also because the government is evading its responsibility to protect the health and safety of everyone in the school system. Teachers are very concerned about the clash between the actual conditions in the schools and what the government claims are appropriate measures in place at the beginning of the school year. Indeed, despite all the proposals from teachers on how to organize for students to be in school while respecting physical distancing, essential to the control of the pandemic, the government and its Ministry of Education have declared that physical distancing is not necessary in classrooms and nor is the wearing of masks. The concept of the whole class as a bubble disregards all the efforts of teachers to have smaller class sizes and physical distancing within the classroom to protect everyone. The efforts of the teachers were rejected without explanation or justification.



The other phenomenon that adds to the anxiety is the constant public relations assault of the Quebec government. In this very difficult situation they tell the public that the situation is under control and the teachers are satisfied. Minister of Education Jean-François Roberge was quoted in the media on September 3, saying: "The echo I get is that teachers and staff are satisfied, things are going well, and with each passing day, the level of anxiety is decreasing and people are more and more reassured." He said this on the very day the government made public the list of 47 schools that had reported cases of COVID-19 during the first week of school. In elementary schools over 20 students, and in secondary schools often more than

30, spend more than five hours a day together in classrooms without any physical distancing! Teachers are concerned because these are conditions that promote the transmission of the virus.

At the same time the government is talking about laxness in the schools and even talking about closing them down if things get worse, for which it will blame education staff or young people and avoid public scrutiny of its own decisions. This type of public relations cover-up is despised by teachers and their colleagues who have to teach and ensure the safety of all on a daily basis without any confidence or sense of security that the government is taking concrete action to support them.

This convinces teachers that they need to step up their actions to hold the government accountable and to force it to assume its responsibilities. At the same time, they have taken ownership of the issue of health and safety for all, a responsibility they have taken up from the moment they set foot in their schools. Teachers see the need to create opportunities to collectively discuss and exchange views and share experiences to work out what can be done to change the situation in a way that benefits the people.



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## Teachers Demand Accelerated COVID-19 Testing in Schools and Accurate Data on Infections

As of August 31, Quebec students are back in schools from the kindergarten to high school levels. Already, cases of COVID-19 infection have been reported in schools in many regions of Quebec. Most who have tested positive are teachers, but students have also been affected. Entire classes have been sent home for preventive isolation, in addition to the teachers who have tested positive and colleagues with whom they were in close contact.

So far, the government has imposed a code of silence on the COVID-19 cases in schools. The Ministry of Health and Social Services waited a whole week, until September 4, to release only limited data and did so in a way that does not allow anyone to get a clear picture of what is happening and what measures are being taken.

The data released gives the names of 47 schools where at least one case of COVID-19 infection was reported between August 26 and September 3. However, the list does not reveal the number of known cases per school, only the name of the school, the board or service centre that oversees it -- which helps indicate the region -- and the date the case was reported. Nothing useful can be done with this information. After this limited information was made public and teachers and parents firmly denounced the government for not doing its duty to inform them, the government committed that it will soon publish a table showing the number of new cases among both students and staff, by health region, school service centre and school.



La mise en place  
d'un mécanisme de  
**dépistage accéléré**  
de la Covid-19 pour le  
**réseau scolaire:**

**ÇA PRESSE!**



Sylvain Mallette, President of the Autonomous Teachers' Federation (FAE), spoke to the press after the list was posted and said: "The government cannot pretend that it was ready for the new school year when it waited until September 4 to give an incomplete picture. It's a potentially deadly virus, and they are pretending that things can just fall into place as we go along."

He blamed the Quebec government for wanting to "minimize" the current situation. According to him, the list circulated on September 4 obscures the fact that there have been upheavals experienced in several classrooms due to the reported cases.

"Students are currently facing educational breakdowns," he noted, referring to infected children and teachers being quarantined. He gave the example of the Polyvalente de Deux-Montagnes, in the Laurentians, where six teachers have contracted the disease and 20 others are still in preventive isolation.



The FAE is asking for the publication of more information including whether an infected staff member is a teacher or other education worker (while preserving his or her anonymity), as well as what measures have been taken when infections are detected to do contact tracing and implement quarantines.

In these circumstances, teachers are also taking action to demand accelerated testing for COVID-19 in schools and for public disclosure of data on infections in schools. According to the FAE, the Minister of Health and Social Services announced, on August 10, the implementation of an accelerated and effective screening mechanism in schools. "There is no evidence that such screening is in place," says the FAE. The Federation therefore announced on September 2 that it will apply to the Quebec Superior Court to force the government to establish the requested mechanism and provide all the documents related to the health plan that apply to the school system, in particular the data concerning cases of infection.

Accelerated screening services in schools and the publication of data on cases of infection would allow for rapid action in the event of an infection and an accurate assessment of how these cases happened so as to remedy the situation.



The government is more than reluctant to implement a systematic screening plan in schools and to provide the information that the teachers are asking for. Many teachers are saying that this is because systematic screening in schools is seen by the government as a cost that they don't want to pay, under the hoax of maintaining the so-called balance between safety and the economy. This is not acceptable. Safeguarding the health and the safety of the people is a matter of principle, a matter of upholding rights, and all measures must be implemented so that this right is guaranteed. It

cannot be a matter of "balancing" and gambling with people's lives.

Sylvain Mallette had this to say to *Workers' Forum* on the issue of accelerated testing for teachers:

"Right now there are teachers and other education colleagues who have to wait more than 48 hours to get an appointment to have a test and 48 to 72 hours to get a result," he said. "The domino effect is very strong in the school environment. There is no mechanism that allows someone who has symptoms to be tested quickly and get a result very quickly. The lack of an accelerated screening mechanism causes a serious health and safety problem in schools and creates conditions for the spread of COVID-19. It also causes a disruption in student learning and a disorganized work environment. It is unacceptable that the government has not provided any means to deal with the consequences of the type of back-to-school program it has chosen, which does not involve physical distancing in the classroom."

He added:

"At the FAE, we have a legal duty to ensure the health and safety of our members. We also have a moral duty because if our members get sick, our students can get sick and their parents can get sick. However, we must be given the means to ensure the health and safety of our members, which is not currently the case. The government is not doing its duty to fully protect the health and safety of our members as well as of the staff, and it is not providing us with the means to do it either."



# More Maintenance Staff Needed to Ensure Hygiene

School maintenance workers have a critical role to play in preventing the transmission of COVID-19. In addition to their usual routine, they have increased duties. The Quebec National Institute of Public Health recently published a document entitled "COVID-19: Cleaning and Disinfection of Surfaces" which lists some of these:

- The most frequently touched surfaces (e.g.: door handles, chair armrests, tables, light switches, electronic equipment control levers, water faucets, elevator buttons, stair railings, toilets, etc.) are more likely to be contaminated and special attention must therefore be paid to the frequency and effectiveness of their cleaning and disinfection.
- Electronic devices, such as computer keyboards, tablets and cell phones, can be disinfected with alcohol wipes (at least daily) or follow the manufacturer's recommendations for cleaning and disinfection products compatible with the device.
- Waterproof gloves should be worn to protect hands during cleaning.
- Hands and forearms should be washed with soap and water when gloves are removed.
- After cleaning and disinfection, gloves that are washable should be thoroughly washed with water and detergent and dried, or discarded and replaced with a new pair if necessary.
- Hand washing should be done before and after wearing gloves.
- After cleaning and disinfection work, clothing worn should be removed and washed.

In April, one of the unions representing these workers, the Federation of Public Service Employees (FEESP-CSN), stressed the need "to provide specific hygiene and disinfection measures and sufficient housekeeping staff to implement them." On August 30, Éric Pronovost, President of the Federation of School Support Staff (FPSS-CSQ) made the same point and told the press that "it takes an average of 25 to 35 per cent more time for a maintenance worker to disinfect a school, and to do so in accordance with public health standards."

Maintenance staff are expressing concern that the lack of staff is resulting in a huge workload, and that some school principals have actually reduced the number of hours and the frequency of cleaning.



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## Insufficient Measures to Ensure School Transportation Safety

At the end of June, the Ministry of Education announced new measures regarding the transportation of students on school buses for the new school year, the main feature being the inadequacy of the physical distancing between students. The number of students who can sit on the same bench is reduced from three to two, bringing the maximum number of students that can travel on a school bus to 48 instead of 72. The other measures are:

"Students should, as much as possible, remain together on the same bench each day;

"Wearing of face coverings inside the vehicle is voluntary for students in pre-school up to grade 4 and mandatory for those in grade 5 through to the end of high school;

"Antiseptic hand gel is made available to students as they enter the bus;

"Complete cleaning of the bus is performed daily;

"The basic disinfection of the areas most frequently touched by students (e.g., seat backs and ramps) is carried out for vehicles that are used for more than one transportation route in the morning or at the end of the day."

School bus drivers must wear a mask and face shield as they will not be separated from their young passengers by two metres. Among the concerns that workers and their organizations shared were the fogging of glasses and the reflections caused by face shields, both of which pose an obstacle to safe driving. The government did not require the addition of a Plexiglas shield between drivers and students, and left this as a matter of "a choice" by the various school bus companies. The companies have refused to add this barrier because the government has not committed to paying for it.



The Federation of the Public Services' Employees (FEESP-CSN), which represents more than 3,000 school vehicle drivers in Quebec, also pointed out that the Minister of Education's bubble-classroom concept will not be respected on buses. In a press release, the organization said, "It's as if the school service centres wanted to give priority to transporting as many students as possible by cutting corners for safety. We would have liked the [Labour Standards, Pay Equity and Workplace Health and Safety Board] to consult with us before approving changes in interpretation that do not represent the best choices in these circumstances. These types of decisions are normally made following joint consultation ... If the school system wants to maximize the number of students on school buses, it must be done safely, that is, by installing physical barriers in all school vehicles."

Another consequence of these measures is that thousands of students will not have access to school transportation. There is a need for new buses and the hiring of drivers, in addition to providing real physical distancing, to relieve the burden on families to transport their children to school.

*(Quotations translated from original French by Workers' Forum)*



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## Doctors and Health Specialists Question Safety of Back-to-School Plan

*On August 26, Quebec media published a letter by Dr. George Thanassoulis, Director of Genomic and Preventive Cardiology at the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC) and Assistant Professor of Medicine at McGill University, and Sonia Tremblay, a family physician. The letter was co-signed by more than 150 health specialists and is addressed to the Premier, the Minister and Assistant Deputy Minister of Health, the National Director of Public Health, and the Regional Director of Public Health in Montreal.*

Dear Premier Legault, Ministre Dubé, Ministre Roberge, Dr. Arruda and Dr. Drouin,

As physicians, scientists, and parents of school age children, we were largely disappointed with the

government's return to school plan that was disclosed to the public on August 10. We believe the current plan is inadequate and needs to be improved. As described, the return to school plan may put children and teachers at risk of contracting COVID-19. Furthermore, the plan could lead to outbreaks within their families and their communities. This could, ultimately, undo much of our efforts to control this epidemic that have been made collectively in the last six months.

We believe the majority of Quebecers want their children to return to schools come September. However, this must be done safely. Therefore, the objective should be to optimize the school environment to ensure that the risk of SARS-CoV2 transmission is as low as possible. To do so, the government should carefully review its back to school plan with the view of implementing the following:

1. **Social distancing:** Social distancing must be prioritized for all children (i.e. separation of at least one metre between students), in all areas of the school and for all grade levels. The government's plan to not encourage social distancing within classes (some having more than 30 children) is contrary to current recommendations by many expert groups. The number of students per class should also be reduced as much as possible and the appropriate resources should be provided to make this possible. Denmark and Norway succeeded with their back to school plan with reduced classes of 12-15 children. Childcare programs should also be modified to limit interaction between children of different classes.

2. **Mask wearing in all indoor school areas:** Several studies demonstrate that masks effectively reduce the transmission of SARS-CoV2. However, the Quebec return to school recommendation to wear masks does not include time in classrooms, where students spend most of their day in close proximity to their peers. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently recommended masks in primary and secondary schools to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV2.

3. **Mandatory daily symptom screening:** The best way to prevent outbreaks in our schools is to ensure that the virus is kept out of schools. To do so, parents, teachers and students must remain vigilant to any potential symptoms that suggest SARS-CoV2 infection, and if present must stay home. Daily mandatory symptom screening should be undertaken by parents before sending their children to school. Given the expected high rates of absenteeism due to possible symptoms, schools must have measures in place to ensure students can continue their learning from home. Quebec should also encourage new active screening strategies such as use of saliva-based tests and rapid point-of-care tests.

4. **On-line learning option:** The government should consider expanding the online option to allow parents the choice for online learning, given the current situation. Each family should have the right to determine whether their child should attend school in person this fall based on their own specific set of circumstances. This option would also have the effect of reducing class sizes and improving social distancing, as a sizeable minority of parents would likely select this option.

5. **Air quality/ventilation:** Many schools in Quebec are in older buildings and are overpopulated. Therefore, every effort should be made to optimize air quality and ventilation. School ventilation systems should be evaluated and updated as required within the shortest possible timeframe. In the meantime, simple solutions to improve ventilation should be recommended (e.g. opening windows, use of outdoor spaces and addition of temporary air filtration devices).

Based on the experience of many countries around the world (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany, south Korea), we know that students can return to school safely with the appropriate plans in place. However, in other countries (e.g. Israel), the reopening of schools led to major outbreaks and triggered a massive wave of infections in the community, demonstrating how precarious the schools can be. Since it is impossible to accurately predict the impact of the reopening of schools in Quebec, a careful and prudent approach is strongly recommended.

The current back-to-school plan in Quebec needs to better consider all the available scientific evidence to prevent outbreaks in schools, to avoid jeopardizing the safety of our children, teachers and parents, as well as, to prevent a resurgence of SARS-CoV2 in our community. It needs to be promptly reviewed and revised to ensure a safer return to school for all.

To see the list of signatories, [click here](#).

(Translated from original French by Workers' Forum)



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## Interview

# Concerns for Preparedness for Second Wave of COVID-19

- Jeff Begley -

*Jeff Begley is President of the Federation of Health and Social Services (FSSS-CSN).*

**Workers' Forum:** What are your main concerns at the FSSS-CSN at this time?

**Jeff Begley:** Our two main concerns right now are the state of preparedness for a possible second wave of COVID-19 and the negotiations between the public sector unions and the Quebec government.

**FSSS CSN**

**REHAUSSER LA PROTECTION**

Monsieur Legault, vous voulez de la relève? Faites de la protection du personnel la priorité en vue de la deuxième vague.

**Pour se tenir informés**

[Site internet de la FSSS-CSN](#)  
[Foire aux questions de la CSN](#)

**f** [facebook.com/FSSSCSN/](https://facebook.com/FSSSCSN/)  
**t** @FSSSCSN

**#AuFront**

If there is any preparation for a second wave being done by the government right now, we are not part of it. Whatever the government is doing in Quebec it is with a small group. It is not working with the unions. We don't know what it is doing.

We lived through the first wave. We lived through the failure to provide personal protective equipment. Are we going to have the N95 mask in the residential and long-term care centres when there is an outbreak? We don't have an answer to that. We know we must have them but it is far from certain that

we will.

The question of personnel going back and forth between areas where there are many COVID-19 patients to those where there are none, is an important issue. At the moment, there is no outbreak, and if there is a second wave we will probably have enough orderlies on hand, with the new recruits coming in, so that orderlies will not have to go back and forth. But what about the other types of jobs, the maintenance workers, for example, for which there has been no hiring? COVID-19 may very well infect these workers. We don't see the plan to make sure that in these types of jobs there is not going to be back-and-forth.

There is no transparency in what the government is doing. I suspect that most employers receive information in dribs and drabs. Our members have been on the ground throughout this first wave. They have things to propose to improve the situation. We have asked for meetings at all levels to discuss the situation. We are not being listened to. We need meetings at the Quebec-wide and local



levels. Not everything requires a solution at the Quebec-wide level. Of course, some things, like the issue of personal protective equipment, have to be dealt with at the Quebec-wide level. But when it comes to the deployment of personnel, a lot can be worked out at the local level. Our impression is that not only the union but the employers have been left out. As a result, workers have no assurances and they are worried. All they are being told is that we will be ready for a second wave. Throughout the first wave we have seen how disconnected the public discourse is from what has been happening on the ground. The government is good at public relations, but in direct relations with the people who do the work, it's a different story.

**WF:** What is new with regard to public sector negotiations?

**JB:** It's not going well. Again, what the government is saying in the media does not match what is happening at the negotiating table. Because of the urgency of the situation, it is not possible this time to put forward a settlement that is not entirely satisfactory. It seems that the government is playing the card of trying to find some weak link, whoever it may be, that will accept a settlement that is less than satisfactory. The government should not try to divide and rule. It should start negotiating to reach a settlement that satisfies us, and, above all, makes serious improvements to the public health and social services network.

We must resolutely move forward on the wage issue. As we have already discussed, for this round of negotiations the CSN has put forward fixed amount wage demands: \$2.00 per hour in the first year -- \$0.75 in the second year, \$0.75 in the third year. The reason we have put forward fixed amounts is to narrow the wage gap. If you earn \$20 per hour, \$3.50 over three years equals a 17 per cent wage increase. If you earn \$60 an hour, the increase is about six per cent. This would be a real wage catch-up for low wage earners.

In addition, there is the question of undoing the effects of Bill 10 which was brought in by the previous Liberal government and its Health Minister Gaétan Barrette. Bill 10 centralized all the powers of the network in the hands of the Minister and, in particular, removed staff members and citizens from any participation in decision making.

We also have demands regarding working conditions and a lot of health and safety demands. We are asking for an improvement in work organization, which includes the hiring of more staff, including the maintenance staff that I mentioned earlier. We are also facing a situation where many employers -- not all, but many -- are pressuring people who are on sick leave or people who have been injured on the job to return to work before they have fully recovered. This does not make sense from a human point of view, and it also costs the health care system a lot more in the long run when workers come back to work too soon. The main issue in all of this is prevention. Prevention in the workplace must be improved to make sure injuries and illnesses don't happen.

As far as the FSSS-CSN is concerned, we are very far from an agreement. The government should concentrate less on public relations and more on negotiating seriously with us.

This fall is going to be very intense. We must fight for our members and for the entire health and social services network.

*(Translated from original French by Workers' Forum)*

