

September 29, 2020 - No. 65

Reopening of Schools

Action of Nova Scotia Teachers Union for Safe Reopening



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Action of Nova Scotia Teachers Union for Safe Reopening

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) severely criticizes the government of Nova Scotia for rejecting their demands for safe reopening of schools.

The NSTU writes that on September 8, students returned to classrooms for the first time since March when COVID-19 restrictions were put in place. It notes that in spite of promises from government that it would ensure the safety of students, teachers and their families, the final back-to-school plan fell well short of even the public health guidelines that are in place in other workplaces across Nova Scotia.

According to NSTU President Paul Wozney, the government held consultations with the union on the plan, but ultimately refused to take the advice of teachers on critical issues.

"The key to reopening school safely is reducing class sizes so physical distancing is possible and also ensuring adequate ventilation," writes Wozney. "Unfortunately, Nova Scotia schools reopened without any of those elements in place and instead teachers are standing in front of stuffy, crowded classrooms, just like they were in February."

According to the union, since the release of the final back-to-school plan the NSTU, along with other unions and Nova Scotia Parents for Public Education, have been calling for drastic improvements.

At a press conference hosted by the provincial Federation of Labour on August 19, Nova Scotia Nurses' Union President Janet Hazelton said Nova Scotians worked hard to keep COVID-19 out of hospitals and suggested a similar approach should be taken in schools.

"It was taken very seriously in hospitals and for the most part we knew what was going on and we were assured that all of those things were happening," she said. "I'm not hearing that with the education system which is very unfortunate, because even with all of that the level of anxiety for hospital staff the first month was through the roof."

During the month of August the NSTU also launched a #SafeSeptemberNS campaign calling on Government to take the necessary steps to keep COVID-19 out of schools. These steps include:

- smaller class sizes
- two-metres of physical distancing for everyone
- masks for all who can wear one
- clear protocols for informing families in the event of an outbreak at a school
- transparency about what conditions would necessitate a return to remote learning
- proper ventilation systems

In early August, Education and Early Childhood Development Minister Zach Churchill angered Nova Scotians when he made the irresponsible suggestion that classrooms lacking proper ventilation should just leave their windows open year-round, and turn up the heat in the winter months.

"It's clear to teachers that schools are not prepared to handle a second wave of COVID-19 and that the government's current plan is just not sustainable. Ventilation checks have not been completed. Teachers and students with underlying health conditions have not been provided with proper PPE. There is a bus driver shortage that was not disclosed until after school resumed. And while it's not safe for MLAs to resume work at Province House, students are crowded into classrooms with only a few inches of space between desks," says Wozney.

The union says that it is the province's duty to ensure safe learning environments for students and their teachers, but this is not what is happening and the government is rejecting their demands. As a result, the union announced that it will deal with pandemic-related health and safety violations by presenting their concerns and demands under the framework of Nova Scotia's *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. Ontario teachers' unions have undertaken similar action as part of fighting for a safe reopening of schools, by suing the Ontario government for failing to meet its health and safety obligations under that province's *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. The NSTU is asking its members to bring all safety concerns to their school's Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee. It also announced that it will be filing a policy grievance over the government's unsafe back-to-school plan.



Quebec Government's Irresponsible Stands

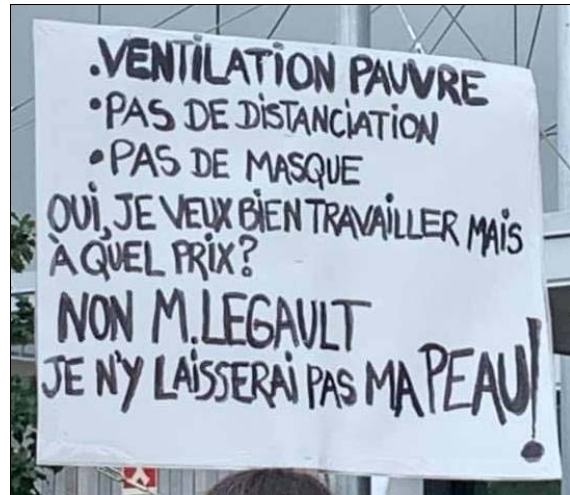
- Geneviève Royer -

Quebec's 107,744 elementary and high school teachers and their 1,216,791 students are entering their fifth week of school under the pandemic. Elementary and secondary school teachers and education workers are continuing the initiatives they have been taking since they went back to

school to ensure their safety and that of their students. Every day, they make sure they wear their masks and stay two metres apart from each other and their students. They ensure a presence in public areas to remind young people to wear their masks, and provide them with one in case their mask is forgotten, lost or damaged. Teachers add this task to their work to provide quality teaching and educational activities in a context where travel is limited -- students hardly leave their class all day and have little or no access to extra-curricular cultural and sports activities.

These efforts come up against the irresponsible stands of the Quebec government which are aimed at ensuring that teachers and education workers cannot decide on the conditions in schools in order to defend the health and safety of all.

On September 24, the government counted 722 confirmed cases in the schools -- 632 students and 90 staff members. This brought the total number of positive cases since schools reopened to 1,163. Currently, 427 classes have been closed across Quebec and there is no indication that the frequency of outbreaks and class closures will decrease.



This has not convinced the Quebec government that the teachers' demand for physical distancing between students in the classroom should be implemented. The government has stated that the problem of outbreaks is a problem of "community transmission" of the virus and, according to the government, schools are not part of the community. The problem is said to come from outside, so the safety measures that are required in the community outside the schools, including physical distancing, have no place in schools.

A school is a living social environment where hundreds, or sometimes even more than 2,000 people, live together for more than eight hours a day. School are integral part, and a most active part, of the community.

The government would rather do anything else but reduce class sizes in order to make physical distancing possible in the classroom. The refusal to reduce class sizes is actually part of the anti-social offensive on education which has been going on for over 30 years. To introduce physical distancing into the classroom and reduce class sizes would mean working with teachers, education workers and students to make these changes then assess and improve them as the situation evolves. This would create an atmosphere of enthusiasm and a high level of consciousness among everyone in the schools and in society as a whole. Teachers are more than eager to contribute so that such changes can be made for the well-being of all and students would also be eager to participate. Teachers have made that clear over and over again yet have been ignored by the government.

The government's determination to keep all the power to make decisions in its hands, even if it makes no sense, has led it to propose the criminalization of youth as a solution to the problem of halting the spread of the pandemic.

For example, a letter to parents from the School of Service Centre in Portneuf (in the Mauricie region) informed them that the Sûreté du Québec now has a mandate to impose \$560 fines on young people who do not stay two metres apart when outdoors. It is totally irrational to pretend that if the students' conditions in school do not include physical distancing, that physical distancing will miraculously occur once the students are out of school and back in the "community," and, if not, a fine will solve the problem.

The Quebec government is now suggesting that if the outbreak statistics are not going the way it

wants, including in schools, it may well consider closing some or all of them.

This morbid obsession with defeat does not represent the spirit of teachers, education workers, students or the public. Teachers and education workers do not want schools to close. They want to teach and protect the students during the pandemic. This can only be done in accordance with high standards of health and safety in which teachers and support staff must have a decisive say.

The government must abandon its "my way or the highway" approach and respect the right of those who teach young people and maintain the schools to define the conditions under which they practice their profession and trade, including, and especially, in a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

(Photo: N-H Nadeau)



Alberta Schools Resume Under Difficult Circumstances

- Kevan Hunter -

Schools reopened in Alberta during the week of September 1. The start of a new school year is always full of energy and excitement, and teachers are enthusiastic to be back in the classroom where the interactions so crucial to learning take place. Teachers and all the school staff worked very hard to prepare for the reopening under the very difficult conditions imposed by COVID-19. To make matters worse, they are faced with a government which can only be called indifferent to making schools safe. What keeps the teachers and all the staff going is the enthusiasm of the kids to be back in school, and how important it is to students to keep the schools open.

Already, there are 152 schools in Alberta with at least one COVID-19 case, 36 schools with an outbreak (defined as two to four cases), and five schools on "watch" with five or more cases. In three schools, there is evidence of in-school transmission.[1]

CBC reported on September 18 that 67 staff and 831 students in Edmonton public schools were in isolation. As of September 21, 1,400 students and over 90 staff in Calgary public schools are in isolation. That does not include students with symptoms who are staying home but have not tested positive nor been linked to a case.



This will have a serious impact on the availability of substitute teachers to cover all absences. When teachers are absent and there is no sub available, other teachers have to cover those classes, giving up their prep time. This could stretch teachers to the limit and lead to violations of the collective agreement limits on instructional time. Many retired teachers who are normally available part-time as substitute teachers are choosing not to work under the present conditions.

The government has mandated that all students from Grades 4-12 must wear masks at all times in the school. Intensive cleaning and hand washing/sanitizing are practiced. However, there is no physical distancing and the government has contemptuously dismissed the demands of teachers that class sizes be reduced, claiming "It can't be done," which means that they intend to continue robbing education of funding in order to pay the rich. Nothing is being done to improve ventilation, one of

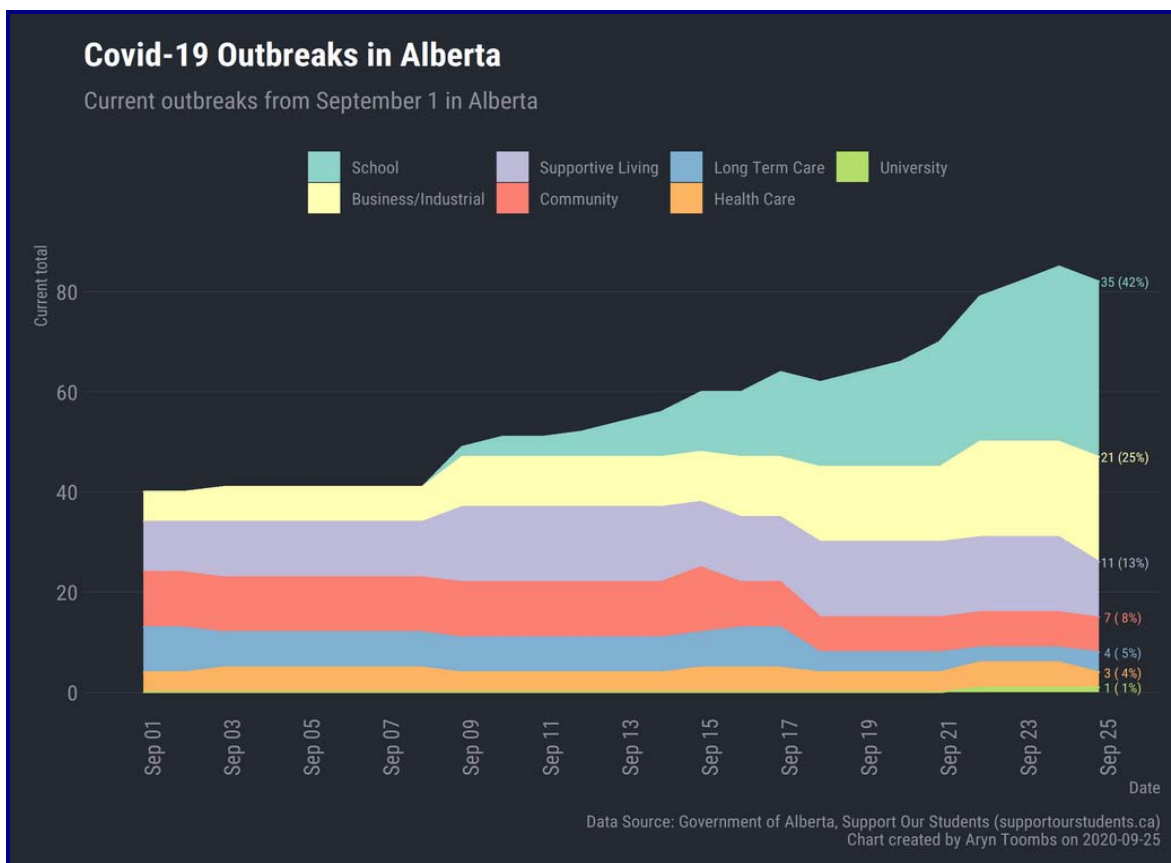
the clear guidelines from public health authorities.

The Kenney government accepts no social responsibility for a safe return for students. "Alberta's belief is we're not going to micro manage our way out of this," Kenney said. "We're only going to get through this if people exercise personal responsibility, and that's what we call on Albertans to do."

In keeping with this theme of "individual responsibility" and "choice," parents and students can elect to attend school or remain at home and enroll in online learning.

The United Conservative Party government has reduced funding for education, and the budget remains below 2019-2020 levels, despite all the needs to deal with COVID-19. One quarter of classrooms have more than 30 students. As for not "micro managing," what the government is actually doing is concentrating all power and decision-making in the executive power. For example, it has threatened to fire school boards which don't toe the line, and thrown out the work of thousands of teachers who devoted their time and effort to develop a badly needed new curriculum.

The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) is carrying out a weekly survey, the Pandemic Pulse Research Project, in partnership with Alberta doctors and infectious disease specialists. The ATA reports that more than 90 per cent of teachers report extremely high levels of anxiety and exhaustion. Students are also affected by the stress, not only worry about getting sick or bringing COVID-19 home, but the difficulties of wearing masks at all times and remaining at their desks for long periods. As cold weather sets in and it is too cold to go out for lunch, or for teachers to take their classes outside, the situation will become even more stressful.



Forty-two per cent of COVID-19 infections in Alberta are currently related to schools (click to enlarge).

Teachers and education workers, parents and concerned citizens are taking up their social responsibility within this situation. Teachers have taken many initiatives, including making their own protective barriers, working out how to stagger the return to school one grade at a time, and having teachers move from room to room while students stay in place. There has been a great deal to

figure out, with little time to do it.

Information is needed on the measures taken when students are identified with COVID-19 so that there can be public discourse and confidence in the system. When a student attends school with COVID-19, what are the criteria to decide who must isolate? How much time elapses between a student getting tested, a positive result, and students being told to isolate? In the absence of a public authority providing this information, students, parents and teachers turn to the website of the organization Support Our Students to get data on COVID-19 in the schools. This information should be front and centre as part of a public education campaign and accountability of the authorities.

Teachers and education leaders are speaking out. The principal at Bowness High School in Calgary publicly challenged Jason Kenney and Education Minister Adriana LaGrange to come and spend a day at the school, wear a mask, sanitize, sit in a typical classroom and follow a student for a day.

The actions of the government raise a serious question that the failures are by design, and intended to create an atmosphere where people think the public system is failing and cannot guarantee a safe education. Kenney is simply saying, if you don't want your kid to be in a class of 35 or 40, you have a "choice" and that is your personal responsibility. "Choose" home schooling, or for those with the financial means, a private or charter school, and for those who do not, fend for yourself.



Solutions come when people take up social responsibility as they are doing. It has never been more important to provide information and develop discussion as to the way forward. The idea that there are those who govern and those who are governed is unacceptable in a modern society. Members of the polity have a right to participate directly in taking the decisions which effect their lives and those of their colleagues, families and neighbours and the polity itself.

Note

1. For the latest data on cases of COVID-19 in Alberta schools, [click here](#).

(Photos: K. Hertlein, A. Toombes, K. Campbell)



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