



Surrey Teachers' Association

Providing Educational Leadership

December 15, 2020

Dr. Bonnie Henry,
Provincial Health Officer
PO Box 9648
STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, BC V8W 9P4

RE: Open Letter to Dr. Bonnie Henry from the Surrey Teachers

Dear Doctor Henry,

We are the 6,000 teachers in BC's largest school district. We teach 75,000 K-12 kids in 130 schools. Some are so severely overcrowded that there are as many as 20 portables on the fields or parking lots. Every small prep room, cupboard, and alcove is being used as a teaching space or workspace. In normal times, overcrowding is the source of almost every problem and tension in our school district, and in the pandemic the overcrowding is hazardous.

We are not safe.

We teach in the Fraser Health region, and Surrey schools are impacted daily by COVID-19. We are all doing our best to meet the guidelines, but we implore you to change the requirement for all students to be attending at the same time. We urge you to reconsider mandating masks in all indoor spaces, including schools, and to implement 50% density in classrooms. Cohorts have been established but there is intermixing that can't be controlled in hallways, playgrounds, and at lunch hour. We simply don't have the space to ensure physical distancing in our schools, and we require a reduction in density to make that possible.

We have heard you say that there are layers of protection to ensure our safety, but these measures have holes in them for teachers in Surrey.

In the **Public Health** measures layer, the hole is that the virus is at the highest level in Fraser Health. In the **Environmental** measures layer, plexiglass has been installed in offices but there are no barriers in classrooms. We have changed many routines, but outdoor education, for example, becomes more limited as the weather worsens. **Administrative** measures can only do so much if we are still teaching 100% of the kids face to face. In elementary classrooms teaching involves a lot of close personal contact with students who need their noses wiped or help putting on shoes or may need to be comforted. In intermediate and secondary classrooms, it's impossible to support a student who is struggling to learn a concept or skill without being close to them. **Personal** measures such as hand washing, using sanitizer, and physical distancing are limited in effectiveness, mostly because we have many people in our classrooms for long periods of time. We also can't control whether kids are sent to school sick, especially if COVID-19 victims are infectious before they are symptomatic. Finally, although **PPE** is the last and least important measure to control the virus, masks are also visible, symbolic, and enforceable. Teachers know that the vast majority of children and youth can learn to wear masks effectively and consistently. We wear masks to protect our colleagues and our students but without a mask mandate we cannot insist that everyone wears one everywhere. This would afford the greatest protection for all of us.

We are not safe. Teachers have contracted COVID-19 at school. One (that we know of) has been in the ICU. Two schools have closed with outbreaks. Other schools have had cohorts required to self-isolate. There are daily staff meetings to address exposure notifications, and there have been hundreds of those. There is a lack of TTOCs, which is a symptom of the teacher shortage, but mostly because so many are retired teachers who are afraid of getting COVID-19 at school. We have chronic failures to fill, along with exhortations to not attend work while sick, even with mild symptoms. Failures to fill mean teachers lose their precious prep time, or students lose vital services when their counsellors and special education teachers have to cover classes. Our levels of daily stress are almost unbearable.

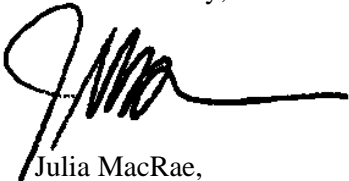
The new Minister of Education's mandate letter reinforces the relationship of care that teachers have with their students. Minister Whiteside is expected to work with the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Ministry of State for Child Care in processes that involve schools in a continuum of care for BC children. We are also pleased that Minister Whiteside has also been tasked to work with the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions because of the key role that schools can play in supporting students' mental health.

We are asking that the Ministry of Health join the other ministries in helping teachers take care of students by ensuring that the safety measures in place in all indoor public spaces in BC also apply to schools.

We need to have a mask mandate. We need to be able to physically distance students by reducing classroom density to 50%. In any other indoor public setting, there would be fines to have 30 people sitting close together in one 75 square meter space without masks. In jurisdictions across the world, students wear masks inside classrooms. It's one of the most important layers of protection against the transmission of the virus.

We are asking that the Ministry of Health listen to us about the reality of our experiences. It is vital for educators to be consulted about what we are facing in schools. Every day, we continue to put ourselves, our loved ones, and communities at risk. It is dangerous and unfair to be expected to continue in this way without appropriate measures to ensure our safety.

Yours sincerely,



Julia MacRae,
1st Vice President,
Surrey Teachers' Association

CC: Dr. Jordan Tinney, Superintendent
Dr. Ariella Zbar, Fraser Health
Jim Sinclair, Chair of the Board, Fraser Health
Laurie Larsen, Chairperson
Terry Allen, Vice Chairperson
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