



Surrey Teachers' Association

Providing Educational Leadership

November 27, 2020

Dear Chairperson Larson, Vice-Chairperson Allen, and other members of the Board of Trustees:

I am writing, on behalf of the Surrey Teachers' Association, to call for action from the Board to confront the COVID-19 crisis in our community to ensure the continuity of education with greater safety for employees and students. I am pleased to bring forward to you a series of specific demands that teachers want. At our recent general meeting of the Surrey Teachers' Association, we carried the following motion:

THAT the STA demand that the Surrey school district implement the following actions immediately:

- 1) All students and staff be **required to wear a non-medical mask** when physical distancing is not possible in all places in schools, with exemptions for those who are not able to do so.
- 2) All Surrey schools need to immediately move to implement a variant of Stage 3, involving **maximum 50% density** for all classes.
- 3) Surrey school district needs to **reopen online learning programs** for those families that choose not to send their children to school.
- 4) **Accommodations need to be provided** for immunocompromised teachers and/or with medically supported health concerns. These same teachers could teach remotely rather than being forced to take unpaid leave.

I will elaborate upon each of these points.

1. Stronger mask mandate for staff and students
Face masks are an important layer of protection for everyone in schools. At present, the health and safety protocols do not require anyone to wear a mask in a classroom, unless they are an adult who is not part of the cohort and it is not possible to maintain a 2 m distance from others. In our view, these protocols do not go far enough to protect people in schools from COVID-19. They appear to be based on an assumption that members of a cohort pose little risk of transmission to one another. The existence of school transmission shows that this is not the case. Further, given crowded conditions in Surrey schools, it is typically not possible to maintain a 2 m distance from others in a full classroom.

For that reason, Surrey schools must have a stronger mask mandate, applicable to adults and students in school buildings, at all times where 2 m physical distancing is not possible (subject to medical exceptions). Although younger students may need guidance and practice in wearing masks, our experience has been that they are capable of doing so. In our view, it is open to the school district to impose a mask policy that goes above and beyond that required by the provincial health regulations. It would, of course, be essential also to ensure that all schools have a sufficient supply of masks to ensure that everyone has access to them, with spares for situations where students lose or forget masks. District management has been encouraging greater use of masks in schools, and in fact there is a high level of mask use all around our district, so imposing a district mandate would reinforce these efforts and provide clarity to everyone about how all members of a school community can take care of each other.

2. Reduced classroom density

The evidence is clear that physical distancing is one of the most effective layers of protection. I need hardly tell you that our schools remain overcrowded. Even with lower enrollment than was projected, classes have generally been organized near, or above, the class size limits. As a result, most classrooms are crowded, and do not permit 2 m of physical distance between people. The school district has already recognized the importance of physical distancing by having the afternoon Gr. 10-12 classes meet with only one third of the students present face-to-face, so that physical distancing can be maintained between students from different cohorts.

As the numbers of COVID-19 cases in the community and of exposures in schools continue to mount, the time has come where more radical change is required to how schools operate, to ensure that physical distancing is possible in all classes, including those where all students belong to the same cohort. What we demand is a variant of the provincial Stage 3 plan. As you know, that plan calls for 50% school density. However, that would permit half the classes to meet at their full size, which would do nothing to reduce the risk to people in those classrooms. So the STA is calling for a maximum of 50% classroom density for all classes, to ensure that physical distancing can be maintained.

We recognize that the result of such a change would mean a hybrid model for everyone. There would be challenges to be addressed about teacher workload and equitable access to education by all students. However, Vancouver secondary schools have had such a model since September, and have found it to be workable. Given the prevalence of COVID-19 in Surrey, such a model is required for all grade levels, to ensure parents, students, and staff can have confidence in the safety of schools. Since this isn't part of the district's plan this year, the school district needs to return to discussions with the Ministry of Education to permit it to shift to a hybrid model until levels of virus in the community decline, and potentially for the rest of the current school year. The alternative, if positive cases in the community continue to rise at their present rate, may be a shift to completely remote learning for all students, which would deprive students of the benefits of face-to-face education at their neighbourhood schools.

3. Continue access to online learning programs

The school district acted quickly in the summer to meet parent demand for a remote education option, creating the transition programs for elementary and Gr. 8-9. Although these programs were intended to help students transition back to face-to-face education this year, it now appears as though they will likely remain in place for the rest of this school year.

Although the existing transitions programs are working for some people, they can be improved. Grade 8 and 9 students do not have access to the full range of courses in a remote format, which becomes problematic if the program continues throughout the balance of the school year. Parents also have concerns about their limited ability to move between blended and face-to-face schooling. While we have concerns about the blended programs—such as workload and the District's position that class size and composition limits do not apply to them (which is the subject of a grievance), we are also concerned that parents not feel compelled to withdraw their children from school entirely to keep them safe.

4. Accommodations to work remotely from home

Many STA members either have underlying conditions putting them at greater risk for complications from COVID-19, or have people in their households who are vulnerable. Many have sought accommodations to be able to work remotely from home. However, with very few exceptions, their requests have been denied. Such members then face a choice between a) using sick days (if they have

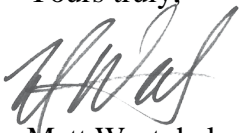
any), b) going on an unpaid leave of absence, or c) going to their worksite in fear for their own safety, or that of their loved ones.

Our understanding is that other districts, such as the Burnaby school district, have made a greater effort to organize services to make it possible for more teachers to work remotely from home. Thus, the question is not whether such accommodations are possible, but whether there is the willingness and creativity to adjust work assignments to enable teachers to continue working in a safe manner. To have teachers who are not actually sick, and who are ready and willing to work, on sick leave or unpaid leave, is a waste of talent and resources. There are many students learning from home who need greater support, which could be provided remotely by teachers working from home. Given all the challenges families are facing in this pandemic, it is vital that the school district both ensure as much support to students who are learning at home, and provide work opportunities to enable vulnerable employees to work more safely without putting their own health, or that of their households, at risk.

Trustees engage their communities in building and maintaining a school system that reflects local priorities, values and expectations. School trustees listen to their communities, guide the work of their school district and set plans, policies and the annual budget. Our members are urgently seeking action – now is the time!

We request an opportunity to meet and discuss these issues with you.

Yours truly,



Matt Westphal,
President



surrey teachers' association

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