



Richmond Teachers' Association

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December 11, 2020

Board of Education
School District No.38 (Richmond)
7811 Granville Avenue
Richmond, B.C. V6Y 3E3

Dear Sandra,

Re: Transitional Remote Learning

On behalf of the Richmond Teachers' Association, we thank you for the opportunity to submit a brief with respect to Transitional Remote Learning. We understand the Board will be considering the extension of Transitional Remote Learning at the December Board Meeting.

In August, the RTA supported the implementation of a Transitional Remote Learning program for those families who were not ready to return to school in September. However, this support was conditional on the transitional nature of the program to act as a temporary bridging structure to allow students to return to in person instruction and ensure a sustainable workload for teachers. It was always known that creating a transitional program inside the cohort structure was going to be formidable. The current workload for elementary teachers working with Transitional Remote Learning is overwhelming and unsustainable.

The RTA anticipated large interest in a transitional program, given the many unknowns about COVID-19 and the Ministry's models of learning. As expected, grade levels without lower density targets saw the highest registration rate for remote learning (~10 % at grade 8 and 9, ~35 % at elementary). The RTA acknowledges the models of learning required approval by the Ministry of Education where the Ministry would not approve lower density targets for any Richmond classes at grade 9 or lower. It is unfortunate the Ministry didn't recognize the need for a staged return to school in September. Both the RTA and BCTF advocated for a return that included lower density targets to both understand the transmission of the virus in schools and to build confidence in COVID safety plans in schools.

We anticipate that the Board will consider extending Transitional Remote Learning for the remainder of the school year. Once again, the RTA does support remote learning options, but

we cannot support the current elementary model that is being offered in Richmond. The workload on teachers is not sustainable and is coming at a cost to in-school instruction and teacher stress. The current Transitional Remote Learning model has significantly impacted many important and necessary supports that are provided by teachers at both the school and district level. We also have concerns regarding the Transitional Remote Learning model for grade 8 and 9, which we will address as part of this brief.

Elementary Transitional Remote Learning

Teachers at elementary schools are currently being asked to support learning in multiple modes, without any additional preparation or collaboration time. Transitional Remote Learning is yet another addition for teachers in a year of extras. Elementary teachers are juggling new, disrupted schedules, composed of 75 to 90 minutes of handwashing per day, supervising eating times and necessary cleaning and short lunches or “runches” with no time or opportunity to connect with many of their colleagues or rest during a hectic day. In addition to their regular workload of teaching the full mandated curriculum, assessing, reporting and communicating with families, teachers have the added responsibilities of planning, preparing, assessing, connecting and supporting students both in-school and at home, coping with scheduling changes and a new cohort structure, loss of support or preparation time due to TTOC shortages, equity of workloads within and between cohorts. All of this is experienced in an environment of change with respect to reporting structures, use of district technology and resources, all while experiencing the personal loss of connecting with their colleagues. This additional workload is embedded in a culture of constant vigilance and anxiety that is necessary to ensure our guard remains elevated as we navigate the pandemic in our working and home lives.

Many elementary teachers have reported they are physically and emotionally exhausted and cannot maintain this pace to the end of December, let alone to the end of the year. Any decisions made by the Board must include direction to senior management to ensure teacher wellness and learning supports for in-class learners are a high priority.

Should the Board decide to extend Transitional Remote Learning, the program should be renamed to “Remote Learning 2020/21”, where families notify the District by January 15, 2021 of their intent to either remain in the program to the end of the school year or to return to in-class instruction in February for quarter 3. This timeline will allow schools the necessary time to revise and make concrete and permanent plans around in-school and remote learning, with the staff that is available to the school. Additional staff should be dedicated to supporting students who chose to continue learning at home. Additional staffing will allow in-school learning to continue without additional interruptions. This will help to support the emotional and learning needs of all students, while reinforcing health and safety practices that are imperative to keeping our schools safe and maintaining the confidence of staff and students in the building.

The RTA acknowledges that dedicated staff requires additional funds and we urge the Board to advocate for increased funding from the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education decided to maintain full-time instruction at all levels while requiring Districts to provide a remote education plan. In doing so, they have an obligation to all learners to provide the necessary funding. If the Ministry intends to see all learners return to in-school instruction, they need to ensure families are aware of the current health and safety measures in schools and need to seek to understand if additional measures are necessary and whether these can be accommodated with additional funding. The RTA does believe that in-school instruction is generally the best place for all students to learn and be supported.

Regardless of what the Board recommends to district staff, the Board should understand the disparities between remote learning environments and the in-school experience. There continues to be growing gaps in learning opportunities. It was always understood by parents, teachers and district staff that the learning opportunities for children in Transitional Remote Learning would be necessarily different than children attending the in-school option. The RTA has concerns about the social/emotional well-being for many of our learners as they are not with their peers in a structured and supportive environment. Teachers are doing their best to support all learners and their families and the current remote structure does not afford teachers the ability to provide the same rich learning environment offered to in-school learners.

The RTA strongly believes that remote learning cannot continue as part of an elementary teacher's day. Students in the classroom deserve the full-time attention of their classroom teacher and other specialist teachers that provide valuable services to everyone. At the same time, remote learners deserve the attention of dedicated staff; learning from home should *not* continue to be piecemeal, as it would no longer be serving a transitional purpose. Staffing our schools to a level that meets all learners is always a challenge and will continue to be a challenge, but all avenues need to be explored. Currently, there are a number of teachers who are unable to work in schools but would be fully able to support learners while working from home. By moving to a remote, rather than a transitional plan, the District would have the flexibility to engage the services of all available staff. The RTA has been advocating for remote teaching accommodations throughout the pandemic.

The RTA also acknowledges the tireless work of the many Teacher Consultants and Coordinators from Learning Services who were reassigned to support the cohort structure, provide transitional learning check-ins or District-wide webinars and learning plans to help support teachers and families with elementary Transitional Remote Learning. These RTA members were temporarily reassigned to support elementary schools, effective September 21, with the expectation that most members would return to their regular assignments as early as Thanksgiving or by the end of November. At this time, these teachers have not returned to their positions and this has negatively impacted the delivery of District programs and other vital supports required by teachers for their learners. The Board has proudly supported these positions in multiple budgets. Consultants and Coordinators are integral to making Richmond a unique community that provides support for a range of District priorities including but not

limited to professional learning, technology, ELL support, social-emotional learning and unique student programs. The RTA also recognizes the essential roles many of these teachers will play in supporting the Board's Strategic Plan and Vision going forward. Any ongoing remote program requires the return of Teacher Consultants and Coordinators to their regular assignments.

Secondary Remote Learning

Unlike elementary, secondary students that have not returned to in-school instruction are being supported through a centralized model. This model is accurately described as remote learning where additional staffing (~16.5 FTE) has been allocated to support students in the curricular areas of Science, English, Math and Social Studies. At the end of February, students will have received credit for these grade 8 and 9 classes. This model is effective as workload (instruction, planning, assessment and reporting) has not been downloaded onto existing secondary teachers. From a workload perspective, the RTA is supportive of this model. However, this model was designed to support learning for the first two quarters in only four subject areas – Math, Science, English and Social Studies. The questions that arise at the end of January are: What courses will be offered to these students? In what mode? And, how will they be staffed? Currently, at the end of quarter two, any student in grade 8 or 9 that does not return to in-school instruction will be required to enroll in a Distributed Learning program and withdraw from their neighborhood school. The RTA has significant concerns with a requirement to withdraw from the neighborhood school, as well as with continuing the program to the end of June. This remote program, if it is to be extended, must be supported with the current level of additional staffing, and the courses or options available to students will need to be tailored to current staffing and resources. Consequently, this could result in the District not being able to offer a full grade 8/9 program with options such as ADST, Fine Arts, French and/or PE, which are vitally important to many of our learners. Instead, the program may need to focus on literacy and numeracy across curricular areas. The District would then have to offer necessary courses next year to accommodate in-school learning.

The RTA recommends to narrow the focus of curricular options because we are fully aware that there is a continued teaching shortage in many of these hard to fill secondary areas. Deploying staff to teach in these areas would likely mean students would not have access to a qualified TTOC in the event of staff leaves or TTOC shortages. This could impact in-school instruction for students in grade 8 and 9 who are enrolled in ADST, Fine Arts, French and/or PE during quarter three and four. It is important to note that the RTA strongly believes that all subject areas, but especially ADST and Fine Arts, are best served by students learning in our well-staffed and equipped schools. We also have concerns that students who do not access these in-school learning opportunities may not appreciate the elective offerings in secondary schools, and this may further erode enrollment in ADST and Fine Arts programs. Again, we caution that temporary solutions may have lasting impacts on learning and secondary programs.

Other Considerations

In Summary, the RTA understands the Board will likely pass a motion to extend Remote Learning because of the current requirements of the Ministry of Education, and because families need assurances that options will be available. However, because it is critical that students return to in-school instruction, we strongly encourage the District to take the remaining time in December and early January to meet with families who express interest in continuing with remote learning to:

A. Fully explain:

- the COVID safety plans that exist in schools
- the exposure notification process
- and have conversations about exposures and transmissions in Richmond schools (to date the RTA understands there have been no known transmissions in schools)
- the effects of a prolonged absence, from in-school instruction, on academic opportunities and social-emotional well-being (there is significant research that can be shared)

B. Survey parents to fully understand:

- what further safety improvements are required to return their children to in-school instruction; this could include a mask requirement, the addition of protective barriers or reduced density options.

With the knowledge obtained, the District should make all possible safety improvements and communicate these changes to families. These changes could include additional requests for model/safety changes at the Ministry level. The RTA strongly believes that listening, and acting where possible, may see an increased return to in-school instruction. This would then decrease the need for additional resources and allow for a smaller and more robust remote program of instruction that does not continue to add to the workload of cohort teachers, nor take away from the necessary District level support provided by Teacher Consultants and Coordinators.

The RTA understands this brief requests significant work that will need to be undertaken by the District in a very short time. However, implementing an easy solution by continuing with the current transitional model, or tinkering on the surface, will have the effect of continuing to download the work to teachers and staff in schools.

The RTA firmly believes supporting families in order to return to in-school instruction must be part of the work leading up to the end of January – teachers have expressed they welcome the return of students to their classroom and they know that their classrooms are the best places to provide both a rich and safe learning environment. Teachers have, and will, continue to work tirelessly to ensure that safety protocols are adhered to because they care greatly about the safety of their students, their students' families, their own health and that of their family and friends.

Teachers are exhausted, and the District must find a sustainable solution for the remainder of the 2020/21 school year. The continued success of our students depends on the efforts and professionalism of teachers every day. The RTA is gravely concerned that continuing with the current model will lead to staffing challenges in early 2021. These challenges will undoubtedly impact the learning of all students.

The RTA appreciates this opportunity to share our concerns and advice with regards to Transitional Remote Learning. The RTA remains committed to working with the District to finding better solutions for RTA members and our learners.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Liz Baverstock', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Liz Baverstock, RTA President

cc: Scott Robinson, Superintendent of Schools
Roy Uyeno, Secretary-Treasurer
Kelly Greene, MLA Richmond-Steveston
Henry Yao, MLA Richmond South Centre
Teresa Wat, MLA Richmond North Centre
Aman Singh, MLA Richmond-Queensborough
Tim McCracken, 1st VP, RTA
Steve Wenglowski, 2nd VP, RTA
JW Cho, 3rd VP, RTA