

Teachers' associations across Vancouver Coastal Health region call for vaccination of all school-based workers

As COVID-19 caseloads rise to record levels in British Columbia, presidents from the teachers' associations in school districts throughout the Vancouver Coastal Health region are calling on the province to vaccinate K–12 school staff.

BC's health officials promised to vaccinate essential workers, including teachers, by the end of April. That promise is not being fulfilled beyond some school districts in Fraser Health, such as Surrey. Teachers say it is time for Vancouver Coastal Health to follow suit and vaccinate school staff in districts with high numbers of school exposures.

"We have been collaborative, we have been patient, and we have been understanding," said Liz Baverstock, President of the Richmond Teachers' Association. "During spring break, the province committed to vaccinating K–12 staff. We have already seen the province change the vaccination strategy in other ways, so we are asking BC to shift its current vaccination plan and focus on vaccinating all K–12 staff and other essential workers whose jobs require them to interact closely with the public."

Essential workplaces, including schools, are exempt from the new Public Health Act WorkSafeBC closures, which allow for a workplace to be closed when three or more workers test positive for COVID-19. If schools are essential and keeping schools open is a priority, then everyone who works in schools must be vaccinated. After health care, the education sector has had the most COVID-related WorkSafeBC claims. Schools will have to close if too many staff are sick.

"Teachers have continued to work directly with students in full classrooms since September," said Carolyn Pena, President of the North Vancouver Teachers' Association. "With the sharp rise in cases and the widespread prevalence of variants now in BC, the risk to the health of teachers and their families is escalating. Access to vaccinations is vital to ensuring the health and safety of teachers, so that schools can continue to support students."

"Given that variants seem to infect much younger people, and that they are more contagious, those who work in schools should be given priority," said Renée Willock, President of the West Vancouver Teachers' Association. "We have heard reports of Pfizer and Moderna being used to target localized hot spots in BC, and we'd like to see that extended to school staff."

The provincial government has opted to keep schools open. Now they need to ensure that schools can remain open by vaccinating the adults who work in schools. The pandemic has shifted, the case numbers are climbing, and the vaccination strategy must change.

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