

Teachers' associations across Vancouver Coastal Health call for BC to come into alignment with mask policies across Canada and around the world.

As classes resume today, presidents from the teachers' associations in each school district in the Vancouver Coastal Health Region are calling on the province to expand Surrey's new mandatory mask mandate across the region.

BC's health officials are refusing to come into alignment with mandates in most of the rest of the country, and numerous jurisdictions around the world, even as COVID-19 caseloads are rising to near record levels in British Columbia. In addition, variants of concern pose new risks that are not yet fully understood. In the face of these factors, Dr. Theresa Tam has stated that stronger public health measures are needed to prevent a resurgence of COVID-19 infections. Dr. Anthony Fauci in the United States has continually recommended masks be mandated in schools. Numerous jurisdictions in North America and around the world have successfully implemented stronger mask mandates in schools.

It's time for Vancouver Coastal Health to follow suit and implement the same mask mandate announced for Surrey schools late last week.

"We have been collaborative, we have been patient, and we have been understanding," said Liz Baverstock, President of the Richmond Teachers' Association. "We have asked again and again for a mask mandate and we have been consistently disappointed. This is about adding layers of protection to ensure we have done everything possible to protect the health and safety of teachers and students. This is about increasing confidence in school safety and reducing anxiety."

"Through encouragement, teachers will ensure students understand how to wear a mask properly and we will all benefit when students pass on this knowledge to adults in their lives. We have been told that we are entering a difficult few weeks. Therefore, expanding the mask mandate is a logical response."

Parents, teachers, and union leaders have been asking for better answers than "school transmission is low" for months. Teachers' association presidents across Vancouver Coastal Health have been meeting with senior health officials monthly since asking for better communication in October. Despite some progress in building understanding across the health and education sectors and a collegial approach, the mask mandate remains a key unresolved issue.

"Recommendations aren't enough," said Renée Willock, President of the West Vancouver Teachers' Association. "We've heard from the province that masks can inhibit learning. As teachers, we know that learning is also inhibited by inconsistent rules and an excessive number of transitions in a day. Every time a student gets up from their desk, the rules change. Having one clear rule makes it easier for the kids to feel the success of following it so they can focus on the important work of learning."

As hundreds of thousands of students and tens of thousands of school staff across the region return from spring break amidst a growing third wave, the correct balance is clear: schools in Vancouver Coastal Health need every measure available to improve safety.

The provincial government has opted to keep schools open, with all elementary schools running at full capacity. The very least they should do is ensure every available layer of protection is in place and come into alignment with much of the rest of Canada and the world.

There is no downside to this request. Children are wearing their masks in every other public setting. Teachers can help our children with this expectation and will continue to educate them on the importance of mask wearing, in addition to the current preventative measures.

Now is the time to be clear.

Now is the time to be compassionate.

Now is the time to be consistent.

It's now time for Vancouver Coastal Health to come into alignment with prevailing public health advice and implement a real mask mandate in schools.

For more information, contact:

Liz Baverstock, President, Richmond Teachers' Association, 604-278-2539

Treena Goolieff, President, Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association, 604-873-5570

Izi Loveluck, President, Powell River and District Teachers' Association, 604-485-5212

April Lowe, President, Sea to Sky Teachers' Association, 604-892-3056

Carolyn Pena, President, North Vancouver Teachers' Association, 604-988-3224

Joanne Sutherland, President, Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association, 604-873-8378

Renée Willock, President, West Vancouver Teachers' Association, 604-926-1617