



Richmond Teachers' Association

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October 1, 2021

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

Dear Sandra,

Brief to the Board: Expanding Mask Requirements to include K-3 – Immediate Action Needed

On behalf of the Richmond Teachers' Association, we are writing to demand the Richmond Board of Education takes immediate action to expand mask requirements to include K-3 students. The following motion was **unanimously** passed at the Richmond Teachers' Association Staff Representative Assembly on September 28, 2021:

The RTA demands the Richmond Board of Education take immediate action to ensure a mask mandate is implemented K-12.

Teachers continue to work incredibly hard to ensure students are learning in a safe, healthy and supportive environment. In BC, school staff have kept schools open, and teachers are the front line of these efforts. Teachers are therefore demanding the Board of Education enhance the safety of schools by implementing a K-12 mask mandate.

Currently, the Provincial Health & Safety Guidelines for K-12 only require mask wearing for students in grades 4-12, when indoors and while on school buses. In contrast, the Provincial Health and Safety Guidelines only "encourage" mask wearing in these same settings, but fall short of making this a requirement. The Richmond Teachers Association remains concerned the guidelines emphasize that mask-wearing "remains a personal or family/caregiver choice for these students, and their choices must be respected."

Despite efforts and adherence to the current health and safety guidelines, the pandemic continues to evolve. This school year is remarkably different and, in many ways, more challenging for schools. Last October, approximately 4000 Richmond students were learning remotely, the highest percentage in the province, with the highest percentage being primary age students. As a result, many primary classes had 15 or fewer students, making it possible for teachers to control environmental pandemic measures, such as rearranging furniture and creating space within the classroom. The cohort model also reduced the number of students contacts within a school.

This year, Richmond has seen the highest return of students to our schools, which is excellent news for learning, but has resulted in full classes that are unable to implement environmental measures that were successful in reducing the risk of COVID-19 in our schools.

Teachers can understand the changes in prevention and exposure control measures in grades where students are eligible for vaccination, especially in Richmond, where community vaccination rates are high. However, teachers do **NOT** understand or support the lack of consistent prevention and exposure control measures across all grades. Wearing a mask is not required at the grades where students are currently ineligible to be vaccinated and where the latest data indicates that exposures are occurring more often in young children.

With these exposures, unvaccinated students who are deemed close contacts are required to self-isolate for 14 days. Teachers are requesting that the Richmond School Board enhance the layers of protection to ensure that together, we are doing everything within our control to reduce transmission and loss of in-person learning time and illness.

Further, there are many elementary schools in Richmond without modern mechanical HVAC ventilation systems. Schools without mechanical ventilation systems must rely on keeping doors and windows open to enhance air circulation. Obviously, this system is not as effective because there is no ability to filter or force the circulation of air. The RTA recognizes the District continues to ensure all mechanical ventilation systems meet or exceed the current Provincial Health & Safety Guidelines for K-12, and that few upgrades were possible last year due to the fact that most of the federal and provincial funding was required to address increased staffing and resources to support transitional remote learning and daytime cleaning protocols. The RTA also recognizes the Board of Education and Richmond stakeholders are working together to secure additional funding to improve ventilation systems across Richmond. Despite these efforts, this work will take years even if the District could secure all of the necessary funding from the Ministry of Education.

The above reasons are why the RTA Staff Representative Assembly unanimously supports mask requirements across all grades. When implemented, teachers will continue to “utilize positive and inclusive approaches to engage students in the use of masks” and will continue to ensure all other infection prevention and exposure control measures are fully supported and implemented.

We are demanding the Board of Education take immediate action to ensure a mask requirement is implemented across all grades. Ideally, the action should result in a province-wide mask requirement from K to 12. However, we understand that as of Tuesday, September 28, 2021, the Order of the Provincial Health Officer allows for Districts to add additional requirements for face coverings.

The Order does not prevent further requirements:

13. Nothing in this order prevents an operator, school or post-secondary institution from having additional requirements in relation to face coverings.

Given this information, there is no reason preventing the Richmond Board of Education from immediately acting and passing a motion to ensure a mask requirement is implemented for grades K-3. Richmond teachers are looking to the Board to act swiftly on this issue and join other Boards of Education, who are taking immediate action to see a K-3 mask requirement is in place for Monday, October 4.

In addition, the RTA is requesting the District once again secure COVID-19 gargle testing kits for families to take home in the event their child becomes symptomatic. Easier and faster testing will help families address equity of access to testing.

Trustees must do everything possible to ensure primary students can be in classrooms and not self-isolating at home. It is time the Board of Education provides extra support for teachers and students because we all believe the best place for students to be is learning in classrooms in front of a teacher, and the Board of Education needs to bolster confidence in the system. Otherwise, we could see an exodus of families from our schools, which would have dire consequences for students due to the lack additional resources to support learning from home.

In recent weeks, there has been a significant increase in COVID-19 numbers in schools. Together, we must take immediate action to ensure we do not miss the window of opportunity to enhance and secure safety and confidence.

Sincerely,

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

Liz Baverstock
President, RTA

cc: Scott Robinson, Superintendent Of Schools
Cindy Wang, Secretary-Treasurer
Catherine Cleary, Executive Assistant, Senior Leadership and Governance
Tim McCracken, 1st VP, RTA
Steve Wenglowski, 2nd VP, RTA
JW Cho, 3rd VP, RTA