

**Richmond Teachers' Association**

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Via Email

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Dear Honourable Jennifer Whiteside,

On behalf of the Richmond Teachers' Association, I would like to congratulate you on your recent election and appointment as the Minister of Education. We look forward to working with you to make Public Education even stronger for the diverse student needs that require constant support. As a professional association, we value the long-standing, collaborative relationship we have cultivated with the Richmond School District – this foundation has proved to be valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also important to acknowledge that the Richmond School District and all its employees are working hard each day to comply with the current health & safety guidelines.

Today, I am writing to request your attention, but more importantly, immediate action to make schools safer both physically and mentally for all students and employees. Before addressing any requests or recommendations, I must first acknowledge that you and I do not work in busy school environments with 20 to 60 students each day. Rather, we work in the safety of offices and in the safety of our homes, which allows us to maintain smaller groups and keep greater distances. However, we are required to wear masks in all common areas. In other words, our lives follow the key preventative measures recommended by the Provincial Health Officer. The Richmond Teachers' Association itself does not generally receive exposure notices, let alone multiple notices that leave staff with more questions than answers. Moreover, we are also not experiencing, and cannot even begin to imagine the significant day to day anxiety that exists for teachers and support staff, who work directly with students. Unfortunately, this is compounded by the mixed, and at times, contradictory public health messages and advice, which create an environment of confusion and skepticism for teachers.

Each day, teachers and school employees are repeatedly told by public health that busy and crowded schools are different than other settings, and are therefore deemed to be safe spaces, in terms of exposure to COVID-19. This is in juxtaposition to the public health messages that the general public receives, which demands that we must conduct our lives with fewer faces, greater spaces and must wear a mask when we cannot maintain physical distance. Staff are also told that schools are not public spaces; rather, they are controlled spaces where everyone stays home when sick and that younger students are significantly less likely to contract or spread COVID-19. This also creates another set of mixed messages because staff are also told that students are often asymptomatic or exhibit fewer observable symptoms. How can we be sure that COVID positive students are staying at home when sick? How can we be sure that COVID positive students who are asymptomatic do not transmit the virus in the same way that adults do? These are the common questions circulating each day in schools. Now, staff have new questions – what about the new variants? Are they more contagious? Will students transmit COVID more easily, similar to the common cold and flu? Will British Columbia be the first test case for fully operating schools with a new variant?

Since the beginning of the school year, teachers and school staff have seen increased prevention measures added to all sectors except education. As a chemistry teacher, given my observations over the last several months, I see many areas that need immediate attention and improvement; this is especially true with the new COVID-19 variant, which may yield greater transmission between students and between children and adults. At this time, it cannot be known in any definitive way, what the coming months will bring. Despite the continuing uncertainty, the Ministry of Education has the ability to improve risk mitigation in schools, and can thereby help ensure our schools remain open to students. A simple change that can be implemented immediately is a mask requirement. This requirement would ensure schools are aligned with the current public health messages about wearing a mask when distancing is not possible. As you are well aware, teachers and all school staff have worked hard throughout the pandemic to ensure current health and safety measures are followed each day. Teachers understand that a mask mandate is not a solution on its own, but we believe it will play a vital role with respect to complementing the risk mitigation factors that already exist in schools. Put another way, it is time for Government to honour and act on teachers' request for a mask mandate in schools.

The time has also come for the Ministry of Education to increase confidence in school safety plans by demonstrating to teachers and school staff that Government is receptive to change, with respect to health and safety measures. The Ministry has received much feedback from the BCTF and the Provincial Steering Committee but has yet to implement any meaningful changes that would address concerns from teachers. The next section of this letter will address specific areas that need attention and change.

1. Additional funding to help Districts such as Richmond support a large number of remote learners. Currently, Richmond has over 3000 remote learners and almost 2800 of these are elementary-aged. These students are being supported by existing staff, but this model is not sustainable and requires additional funding and solutions to ensure that in-school and at home, learners have full access to support. Please see the attached brief that was submitted to the Richmond Board of Education in December. Richmond requires additional funding to ensure the current staffing levels are not only maintained but enhanced. The Ministry also needs to help Districts access additional staffing to support remote learning, including teachers who are retired and teachers who are unable to work for exactly the same reasons families are not sending students to school. The current transitional model requires a link to a school in order to retain funding – this is a barrier when it comes to considering all available staffing. Richmond needs permission to create a remote program for the balance of the school year while maintaining the current staffing at each school.
2. Self-isolation provisions that do not require any teachers or school staff to use their sick leave entitlements. Self-isolation is a key preventative measure, but it is not being supported with a specific leave or provision. Unlike those of us who work in offices, not all teachers and school staff can simply work from home. Instead, some must immediately use paid sick leave. A specific self-isolation provision would support all staff to work from home as they can.

For teachers, working from home may include:

- continued planning and preparation for TTOCs
- time to assess student work and opportunities for more communication with families
- additional time to engage in professional learning or training

When considering the above, it is our belief that a self-isolation provision requires specific targeted funding, guidelines and direction from the Ministry of Education. The Richmond School District does provide some ability to work from home during self-isolation, but this accommodation does not work for everyone. No teacher should be required to access sick leave for this key preventative measure.

3. A mask mandate for K-12 schools. Alternatively, a mask mandate for common areas in elementary schools and for all schools when students and staff are moving within classroom spaces. Teachers are either experiencing or hearing about school exposures on a daily basis. These notices always date back a minimum of three days and sometimes almost 14 days. News of an exposure automatically causes immense fear

for teachers, staff, students and families. Immediately, everyone moves to review all the recent interactions they have had with their family, especially with anyone who is older or living with chronic health conditions. Teachers and staff worry about themselves, their families, their students and the families of their students. This is a heavy burden being carried each day by all school staff because we do not know if or when we will be exposed. Furthermore, teachers are unaware if any exposure has resulted in transmission because many cases in young children are asymptomatic. Imagine living with that knowledge. Moreover, when exposed, teachers are asked who they may have been in close contact with for a cumulative 15 minutes or more over the course of a day. Teachers and staff want a mask requirement to know everything possible is being done to keep schools safe and open.

4. The Ministry must ensure that all regional health authorities implement an early exposure notification. This will allow everyone to heighten their work and home safety plans immediately. Teachers and support staff are frontline workers with respect to COVID-19 and should be encouraged to develop home safety plans while they wait for additional information.

5. The Ministry must direct health authorities to ensure that second exposure notifications provide more detailed information. Once contact tracing is completed, a second notice is needed that includes more information about the exposure event. Richmond School District provides all the information they can provide, but the current lack of information inevitably creates many questions. In the absence of clarity more confusion and anxiety are created. Imagine receiving an exposure notice on Wednesday, December 2, with exposure dates on Friday, November 20, Tuesday, November 24, Wednesday, November 25 and Tuesday, December 1. A close contact of that individual, who is notified on December 1 about an exposure is required to stay home for 14 days, while the individual that has tested positive is able to return on Thursday, December 3. In this case, one can begin to understand why there are immediate questions – the first concern that arises is if this is a single exposure event? If so, why did the positive case attend school sporadically? Why didn't the person get tested earlier? What made them get tested? Who is holding back information? Are we safe? Teachers and staff are working in an environment where they know COVID-19 could be lurking, and if it is, they may not know for a week or more. This constant and repeated strain is creating immense anxiety on already overworked staff. Teachers are routinely provided information that is confidential and private; the current messaging with respect to COVID-19 leaves people feeling there is a lack of trust in teachers and staff.

6. Concrete information about the criteria used to determine the movement between stages. Is Public Health considering regional changes? Or is the decision based on hospital capacity?
7. Detailed school exposure data and increased testing. Trust us is not enough when the message to the community is to band together and adhere to all the public health orders and recommendations in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The messaging directed at teachers from the Provincial Health Office and the Ministry of Education emphasizes a trust in the science and the current health and safety measures that are in place. Simply asking teachers to trust Government is not enough when teachers are working in crowded classrooms, where many students will be asymptomatic and have the potential to spread the virus. Provincially many exposure notices and most closures have involved elementary schools. Is there an explanation for this pattern? What is the breakdown of exposures by grade? Do more exposures occur in primary or intermediate classes? Do classrooms with lower student numbers and greater distancing see less exposure events? How many exposure events involve asymptomatic cases? What is the source of the exposure event – home or school, and how is this determined? When school transmission occurs, what is the root cause – ventilation, lack of masks, over-crowding, lack of access to sinks, etc.? How can Public Health be so confident that transmission is not occurring in schools when no random tests are being done? What is the data to support these conclusions about school transmission?
8. Immediate cancellation of the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA). The Ministry of Education is repeatedly requesting flexibility by Districts and school staff as we all work to manage schools in a pandemic. It is time the Ministry demonstrates flexibility with respect to the FSAs. This annual standardized assessment is completely unnecessary and adds another level of work to an already overburdened public education system. In addition, classrooms and schools need the current technology to support both in-school and remote learners, rather than the distraction of the FSAs, which takes away valuable teaching and learning time in our schools.

In addition to these recommendations, the Richmond Teachers' Association would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the willingness of Dr. Daly to meet with Local Presidents who work in the Vancouver Coastal Health region. These meetings have provided the opportunity to ask questions and make specific suggestions such as adding specific FAQs for school exposures and improving communication protocols for exposure events. I greatly appreciate the time and commitment from Dr. Daly and her staff – they have demonstrated a willingness to give us specific updates and have listened and responded to our concerns.

The Richmond Teachers' Association is putting forward these recommendations because we are in this together and require each other to support K-12 public education in British Columbia. Change is needed to help support teachers and school staff that are working and living in these uncertain and anxiety-provoking conditions. Teachers need to see additional layers of protection to sustain their ability to continue working in a pandemic during the cold, wet and dark winter months.

Together we can do better and ensure schools continue to remain open for all learners who need to learn in our buildings.

Yours sincerely,



Liz Baverstock
President, RTA

cc: Scott Robinson, Superintendent of Schools
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