



## Government leaves it up to divisions to decide on masking when classes return

Within days of first having unveiled its *Saskatchewan Safe Schools* plan, the Government of Saskatchewan had already made significant changes in its approach when it came to the wearing of face masks when schools are slated to re-open in September.

Originally, Minister of Education Gord Wyant had indicated the Ministry was not making masks mandatory for students, teachers or school staff. However, he and Chief Medical Health Officer Dr. Saqib Shahab both hinted that this was the first of a four-level contingency plan.

Four days later, the same two addressed the media and announced additional guidance following considerable backlash from a concerned public. For those school divisions exploring measures in Level 2, it means students in Grades 4 through 12 and school staff are to wear masks in high-traffic areas such as in hallways and on school buses. Meanwhile, students in Grades 9 through 12 and staff may also be required to wear masks in classrooms where it is not possible to maintain physical distancing.

Wyant went to great lengths to stress that ultimately it will be up to the province's 27 school divisions to decide on masking policy, while divulging as of August 11 that at least 10 of the more populous divisions had already opted for the use of masks.

Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation President Patrick Maze was left bemused by what he termed the

inconsistency between school re-opening plans and the guidelines provided in other sectors as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

"In a time of crisis, we should be able to rely on public health directives rather than suggestions to ensure a healthy and safe return to school," Maze said.

"We had hoped for a more definitive response and consistent approach across the province. Planning and implementation will also be extremely challenging. It's frustrating how the government thinks this can be acceptable and they are just stickhandling around the whole situation."

Wyant ensured that, while the ultimate decisions will rest with school divisions, they will not be made in isolation but rather through regular consultation with the Chief Medical Health Officer and the other education stakeholders.

Citing the vast diversity of school divisions in terms of student numbers, Wyant said that some decisions will be made on a community-by-community basis. He outlined some of the "creative solutions" that might be on the table such as block scheduling, staggered times or alternative days depending on the numbers.

### National teacher survey reveals all is not well in education during time of COVID-19

The Canadian Teachers' Federation pandemic survey provides a look into how the closure of school buildings and an emergency transition to distance and online learning have affected teachers and students in every province and territory.

The responses, from nearly 18,000 teachers from coast to coast to coast, show how current solutions are potentially detrimental to health, safety and learning.

"We have vulnerable students who have challenging home lives," reads one submission. "For some of our students, school is their safe place and where their connections are to feel safe and secure."

One teacher shared that they "worry about students' well-being when they never,



Minister of Education Gord Wyant (left) and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Saqib Shahab are shown from one of the various media briefings that have been held to update the latest on schools re-opening.

According to Wyant, each of the school divisions had submitted their own respective reports as to how they envision proceeding.

Dr. Shahab stressed the importance of establishing cohorts, with a focus on cohorting teachers to a limited number of students and keeping students in one cohort as much as possible. He elaborated on this concept by saying that in elementary schools, the classroom would be the cohort, while in high school settings it will mean applying the aforementioned creative solutions.

Dr. Shahab emphasized that COVID-19 is "a marathon, not a sprint" suggesting that these measures are likely to be in place until next June at least. "We want schools

to mirror society as much as possible. If possible, we need to be flexible and not rigid. It is important we all work together to make sure students and staff are safe."

Maze maintained that what he has heard in this whole saga amounts to mixed messages.

"Teachers want to get back in the classroom, but many of our members are compromised and feeling uneasy. If the government had just come out and said masks are mandatory, it would have become second nature and people would have adjusted. I mean it's good to hear that they have stockpiled masks, but it still seems like they [government] are kicking the can down the road."

The Federation acknowledges a return to

school will not be completely risk-free, but should be made as safe as possible by exploring all options to avoid the Three Cs—closed spaces, crowded places and close contacts—in schools.

"A successful return to school is important for students, families, communities and the economy," said Maze. "Student safety goes beyond the classroom. Parents, teachers and students deserve to be confident in the plans. Resources to prevent transmission, access to testing and capacity of public health to handle large volumes of contact tracing are imperative."

Wyant underscored the fact the government has procured six million disposable masks for a cost of \$2.3 million.

It is expected this will be a sufficient supply until the end of the calendar year. Wyant also added that they are actively sourcing more masks.

Although he allowed that this situation changes almost daily, Wyant said, "I feel very confident in the plan in terms of being able to respond to local situations as they arise. I feel we're in a good place and I feel like we have added some more certainty to make sure our schools are safe environments." ■

or seldom, connect on line," while another said that "the current model only widens the gap between the haves and have-nots."

Responding to open and closed questions, teachers shared the reality of teaching and learning since school buildings were closed in March 2020. The findings make it clear that distance and online learning have not only led to a fall in quality education, but have also revealed existing inequities and posed other challenges on teachers, students and families.

The survey confirmed several of the main concerns teachers are grappling with in anticipating a return to their respective classrooms.

• 74 percent are concerned

with the mental health and well-being of their students.

• 73 percent have concerns or questions about getting their students what they need to be successful with online instruction.

• 44 percent state that they have concerns with their mental health and well-being.

Of the teachers who responded to open-ended questions:

• 92 percent say that access to technology and learning materials was a barrier to equitable quality public education.

• 89 percent report concerns about student emotional health. Educators note that students are isolated and missing social connections with their classmates

and schools, and they are concerned with students returning to school after a period of detachment.

• 99 percent have concerns about the return to school buildings. They discussed anxieties around not knowing the plans, adding that constant changes from ministries of education, without proper time and supports to adapt, have taken a toll on their mental health and well-being.

With the participation of the CTF/FCE's 18 member organizations, the survey was completed in English and French between June 1 and June 18 and sought to capture the experiences and observations of the teaching profession during the pandemic. ■

### Government to provide additional funding resources for school divisions

Acknowledging the sense of widespread anxiety among members of the public and the province's teachers, Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe announced on August 17 that the province will allocate \$40 million from its \$200 million COVID-19 contingency fund to ensure the safety of students and staff.

He also confirmed that the start of the new school year will be pushed back to September 8 in order to provide additional time for teachers and staff to receive training on the new protocols. That might include reconfiguring classrooms if class size is an issue at some of those schools with higher enrolment numbers.

Premier Moe pointed out that \$20 million would be made available to school divisions on an application basis for pandemic-related

costs, with another \$10 million earmarked for non-classroom options such as distance learning to help ensure immunocompromised and medically fragile students have continuous access to learning, and \$10 million for the Ministry of Education to centrally procure masks, personal protective equipment and other related supplies.

In his address, the Premier noted the \$40 million would complement the \$40 million school divisions realized in savings while schools were closed.

According to Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation President Patrick Maze, the announcement is "better late than never," while adding that "I think they [the government] has been in damage control from the start."

Commenting to the mainstream media, Maze suggested this latest announcement by the government amounts "to a shell game."

Maze also specifically questioned whether this cash injection will be enough to make sure the ventilation systems in schools are working properly.

As part of Premier Moe's briefing, he indicated the province is working toward a daily testing capacity of 4,000 tests by the beginning on September. All teachers and school staff are being encouraged to seek testing prior to returning to school and at frequent points throughout the school year. Moe noted that priority access to testing will be established for teachers and school staff through the 811 helpline. ■

## Wall named new STS Executive Secretary

As you read this, the Superannuated Teachers of Saskatchewan is being headed up by longtime educator and public figure Murray Wall as the new Executive Secretary.

Perhaps not so strange on the surface, but consider the fact that at the end of June Fred Herron stepped aside from the position having held the office for two decades. In fact, until his retirement, Herron was the only Executive Secretary in the STS's history.

As the two men sat in the STS office, Herron pointed to Wall, a former President of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation from 2003 to 2005, with the unwavering belief that "you can see the STS is in good hands right there," Herron said.

Vividly recalling the interview process, Herron said the clincher for him was "when Murray indicated he was a listener, learner and leader—that's exactly what I wanted to hear," Herron confirmed, acknowledging that earlier he had phoned his would-be successor to contemplate applying for the half-time vacancy.

"With his experience and the relationships he has built over the years, Murray is the ideal person for this position," Herron reaffirmed.

Suffice to say this is a mutual admiration society

with Wall maintaining that "it's ideal, and you couldn't ask to step into a better situation with the governance, administration structure and the office staff that is in place. Things are always going to evolve and change, but there isn't anything that I can see where there are any glaring areas that need immediate change."

Wall indicated the transition will be that much easier in that he has had a six-month mentoring period, which he praised the STS for having that kind of insight.

"I've tried hard to absorb as much as I could and this is a great opportunity for me to stay involved in education," said Wall, who in addition to a lengthy teaching career, also spent a decade as a senior administrative staff member with the STF.

"The time commitment is about right and the more I thought about this and reflected on it, everything seemed right and there were no kinds of red flags. I know the organization [STS] has a strong reputation and is valued. I've always been aware of the strong sense of involvement and commitment the STS has demonstrated so I'm looking forward to my involvement," Wall added.

Reflecting back on his time in the position, Herron recalled how things were not quite so rosy when he

assumed the role, citing the fact the organization was mired in a very dire financial situation with membership on the decline while premiums were on the rise and the health and dental plan was in need of an overhaul.

The latter was ultimately much improved thanks to the work of a committee of STS and with help from the STF—eventually Saskatchewan Blue Cross became the new provider. Today, Herron said the organization's finances are in an extremely strong financial position with 11,700 members. He noted that among provinces with self-funded plans, the STS is able to provide equal or better coverage with considerably lower premiums than other jurisdictions in the country.

Aside from those more tangible gains made during Herron's tenure, Wall also pointed to the valuable aspects of being an STS member, particularly in terms of the social aspect and the ability for retired teachers to remain involved.

"Retired teachers will have an opportunity to be involved in the profession and this organization gives them advocacy and a chance to have their voice heard when it comes to issues that are important to them, and when you look at the pre-retirement lifestyle seminars as an example of



Fred Herron (left) has packed up his trusty, venerable briefcase while stepping aside as Executive Director of the Superannuated Teachers of Saskatchewan. His replacement is Murray Wall (right).

how this organization helps assist in the transition for some folks. It's a very vibrant organization."

Both attributed that in large part to the invaluable work of the three-member administrative office staff.

"I can tell you what has strongly impressed me in the time I've been here is how well members' requests and questions are answered in a thoroughly professional, respectful manner—and believe me we get a lot of calls," Wall noted.

Herron was equally effusive, adding that "Probably the most important part of making this work is the dedicated people we are lucky enough to have here. From my point of view, that has been just tremendous. Yes, the buck stops here, but in the vast

majority of cases I just got out of the way and let the staff do their job because they do it so well."

While he said it's just the right time to catch his breath, "I'm going to miss the people, but I'm leaving in peace and I know everything is where it should be."

If somewhat reluctant to sing his own praises, Herron, always the historian, pointed to one of the many key decisions made by the venerable Dr. Stirling McDowell who was the one who advocated for the STS to have its own executive secretary.

"It's just another example of his contributions and how his hand [McDowell] is still on the history of this organization—and that of the STF," Herron emphasized. ■

## Saskatchewan Principals' Short Course enhances its reach by resorting to online format

Normally, the Saskatchewan Principals' Short Course conference is a hub of activity with a wide array of educators milling around at the University of Saskatchewan.

However, the most recent version was akin to many other scheduled events, in that it was cancelled due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. That meant it was Plan B, and while still maintaining the usual myriad of sessions, now it was done remotely.

So did it work, you ask? Well, days after the event had concluded Program Director Michelle Prytula, dean of the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan, was speaking in staccato-like sentences due to the evident enthusiasm she had derived from the altered version.

"Honestly I was shocked that it went as well as it did and amazed at the number of participants," Prytula said in sharing how the four-day event had attracted 149 participants, while not only a sizeable increase from past years, but it was double what Prytula and her organizing committee colleagues had been hoping for.

The fact that the conference became available to a number of schools from the remote areas of Northern Lights School Division, for example, will in all likelihood mean that in future there will always be a need for an online component.

"I don't see us ever going back to how it was before, because this just showed there is an absolute need to make this conference available to a wider audience."

Prytula vividly recalled her opening address when there were 160 folks signed up, which she said "blew me away."

Once the decision was made to offer the conference in an online format, Prytula was full of praise for the work spearheaded by Kevin Sharp, the IT coordinator for the College of Education, who was able to make the transition seamlessly while also being available to fix any glitches.

*"It was challenging but at the same time humbling to have so many people interested and committed. Education has never meant more than it does right now and this was a real eye-opener in a lot of ways."*

Michelle Prytula

Among the innovations that proved highly successful was people not having their microphones on during sessions, which would have presented too much of a challenge in terms of bandwidth for some of the participants.

"Kevin [Sharp] is just one of those people who doesn't see a start and an end to a project. He just makes it happen even though it was



Kevin Cameron was among those who presented at this year's highly successful online version of the Saskatchewan Principals' Short Course conference.

a lot of preparatory work for sure," Prytula added.

For that matter, Prytula shares those same qualities, adding that once the commitment was made, she was confident in her team.

She indicated that the concept overall was purposely not meant to be high-tech in nature with the emphasis being on engagement and sharing above all. This included sessions held over lunch hour when colleagues could use the time to share among themselves.

As Program Director for the past six years, Prytula said, "I know the quality of people we have on the team and I knew they would come through. For sure, I was nervous initially, but I have a bad habit of jumping into things. This was one of those opportunities I

just couldn't pass up because we know how important this conference is to education, and there is of course so much going on right now.

"It was challenging but at the same time humbling to have so many people interested and committed. Education has never meant more than it does right now and this was a real eye-opener in a lot of ways. There was a lot of heavy lifting, but the way our team responded—they are just heroes in my mind."

Prytula noted how timely the conference was in terms of its topics. There were sessions on anti-racism, building trusting relations, delving into truth and reconciliation, as well as having the Ministry of Education give a presentation on their *Framework for a*

*Provincial Education Plan 2020-2030* that is to be the blueprint for the next decade in the province.

By her own admission, Prytula had a sneak peek at the feedback, which was incredibly high in terms of ratings.

"But there are things where we have a bit more work to do. My primary goal in reading the feedback is what we can do to make it better. I'm excited about it already. If you had asked me two months ago how I imagined this would go, I would have said it should be OK. I can say now that we pulled it off and it exceeded my expectations. If we had missed this opportunity, it would have been a horrendous mistake," Prytula noted between breaths. ■

# STF provides funding for Book Mobile program at children's hospital

The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation is helping provide kids in hospital with opportunities for continued learning and creativity with a gift of \$75,000 to the Jim Pattison Children's Hospital Foundation.

The gift will go towards establishing The Book Mobile program at Jim Pattison Children's Hospital, which encourages the love of reading by providing a variety of books to children and their families in hospital. Children of all ages will enjoy the benefits of the program, as it encourages not only silent reading for those who are able to read to themselves, but also opportunities for parents and caregivers to read with their child, promoting bonding experiences.

the magic of a good book helps make the hospital stay a little easier for our province's youngest patients and their families."

The new program is based out of the Child Life Zone at the Jim Pattison Children's Hospital, a 2,800 square foot state-of-the-art therapeutic play area. All books are housed in a special library area known as the Book Nook in the Zone and a special mobile library cart is filled with books and wheeled to patients in their rooms.

The Book Mobile program has been designed in collaboration with child life specialists and teachers at JPCH. The selection of books on the cart changes daily to keep long-term patients engaged with new material. After books are used, they are cleaned and returned to the library in the Zone, or provided as a gift if the child is in isolation or has been discharged.

"Good health and education are essential to a child's development. The Jim Pattison Children's Hospital Foundation believes that specialized programs are essential, especially when a sick child requires a hospital stay," said Brynn Boback-Lane, President and CEO of Jim Pattison Children's Hospital Foundation.

"We know this new reading program will help children and teens develop literacy skills, as well as find a sense of normalcy and comfort when being treated in the hospital. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation has partnered with us to ensure that patients in the children's hospital receive this opportunity and for that we are grateful for their important contribution to the overall wellness of Saskatchewan kids." ■



The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation has donated \$75,000 to the Jim Pattison Children's Hospital Foundation to be used towards establishing the Book Mobile program at the facility.

*"We know this new reading program will help children and teens develop literacy skills, as well as find a sense of normalcy and comfort when being treated in the hospital."*

*Brynn Boback-Lane*

"As educators, we are passionate about literacy and are extremely proud to support The Book Mobile program," said Patrick Maze, President of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. "Books can teach us, provide comfort, make us laugh and transport us to faraway places. We hope

## Province's teachers have concerns about returning to classrooms

Results from a national survey conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation show Saskatchewan teachers are not confident adequate precautions are in place to ensure a safe return to school in the fall.

"Our teachers want to return to the classroom, but are very worried about the health risks and impact on student learning," said Patrick Maze, President of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. "It is difficult to understand why precautions are necessary everywhere else—such as physical distancing and personal protective equipment—but not in our schools. Adults work in schools, and the students

who are deemed low-risk go home to their families."

The top three concerns are the mental health and well-being of students and staff, equity supports for teaching and learning, and access to technology.

To address these concerns and risks, four clear priorities emerge to ensure the health, safety and mental well-being of teachers, students and staff are protected:

1. Clear, consistent, specific guidelines and communication about the resumption of classes and safety protocols from both the provincial government and school divisions.
2. Adequate supports for students with intensive needs.

3. Physical, mental and emotional supports for all students.

4. Confidence that schools are safe places for teaching and learning and that appropriate cleaning and social distancing protocols are in place.

"There are serious concerns about what seems to be two sets of standards for preventing transmission of COVID-19," said Maze. "Teachers, students and parents are anticipating the release of the plans in order to be assured their health and safety has been considered and properly addressed."

Additional results from the survey are available in the Education Today section of the Federation website. ■

## Special project grant pivotal for Prairie Spirit teachers embarking on wellness journey

If ever there was going to be a catalyst to bring greater awareness to the importance of wellness, the COVID-19 global pandemic surely accomplished that.

With that in mind, the Prairie Spirit Teachers' Association recently was the initial recipient of a \$20,000 Local Association Special Project Grant from the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation Executive to delve more deeply into the whole issue of teacher wellness.

This was an issue that was front of mind even before the cataclysmic effects of COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of schools in the province.

According to outgoing PSTA President Brian Knowles, the grant will allow teachers to gain increased release time to attend events focusing on wellness among teachers in the division.

Kim Cooper, who teaches at Delisle Elementary School and has experienced her own serious health issues, has been a tireless promoter of enhanced wellness awareness for her colleagues in the teaching profession.

She said the grant "provides a great opportunity and in education so much

can be out of control in terms of teachers staying healthy and looking after themselves. Especially when you look at the current situation there is a lot of worry out there. It's going to be overwhelming for a lot of teachers and there is so much anxiety. We have to look after each other by creating that culture."

Knowles said that while COVID-19 has obviously put wellness in the spotlight, "even in a normal year this [wellness] is something that as a local association we have been very mindful of. We need to take care of ourselves. We are looking at ways to develop a plan and we've had some of this discussion in terms of changes that we need to implement. That work is more important than ever right now."

Cooper, who has experienced at least a couple of traumatic episodes which ultimately led to her losing her voice, said that painful journey has actually meant that she is feeling OK regarding the prospect of potentially returning to the classroom in the fall.

"I feel like I'm in a good place; but I feel for those teachers who have not

experienced the journey already," she shared.

Cooper has been a strong advocate for teachers to embrace more fully their personal wellness, while noting that all too often teachers wear badges akin to the fact they can "deal with it." However, she said that she has definitely seen teachers taking the issue more seriously.

"There is a stronger realization that it's OK if as teachers we sometimes need to do some stuff for ourselves and to ask for help."

Knowles concurred that all too frequently in the past teachers have had an almost martyr-like mindset, which he said is actually ironic. "Maybe it's because we are serving kids and so you put their needs before your own. But, when it comes to mental health issues, we are waking up to the fact that as teachers we need to model a healthy lifestyle for our students. We know we can do a better job when we are healthy."

Knowles and Cooper both lauded the support they have received from their division office with Knowles citing the interest he has seen from both the board and senior administrators at the



Kim Cooper

schools in terms of trying to figure out what can be done in order to de-intensify the workload for teachers so that they can achieve a better work-life balance.

Cooper indicated that some steps that would lead to change in overall culture can be quite inexpensive, while at the same time noting the invaluable insight she has gained by reaching out to colleagues in New Brunswick and British Columbia, in particular.

Philosophically, Cooper said things would probably already have been further along, "but life happens [COVID-19]. So with some of our plans we have to wait and see, but I

feel good about where we're going and to consider what things will look like. It's about making the connections and sharing ideas."

Knowles stressed the importance of this being a grassroots initiative without any sort of one-size-fits-all prescriptive plan. "It's more a matter of making people aware of what resources are out there and how you access them," he indicated, while adding that there are also plans to bring in outside experts to offer their insight.

Cooper sees rich potential by just opening the dialogue.

"I guess you could say that with the pandemic, it aligns pretty well. People are really looking at opportunities that we can work together. I think we can create something cool and that we can get to where we need to go."

Knowles, who is going to become principal at Pike Lake School in the fall, said he is optimistic that the committee is making inroads. "I think this is just the first step and we need to continue to make changes and look at the overall picture. This grant is an important part of the puzzle." ■

# Need a plan to re-open schools? Ask the teachers

By Shelley L. Morse,  
Canadian Teachers' Federation  
President

Instead of the long, hot, carefree days of summer that we have experienced in years past, trepidation and anxiety fill the air for teachers; questions abound of what is next.

The countdown towards September is quickly underway and in too many parts of the country there are no concrete plans on how to re-open schools properly. What plans have been divulged are light on details and fail to answer many of the same questions raised when this crisis began.

Namely, with physical distancing and the resulting reduced class sizes and fewer days at school, how will all students receive a quality education? And, if learning together rather than remotely on screens is possible, how can it be done safely? Some authorities point to distance or online learning as the answer, but as the majority of teachers, students and their families have discovered, learning in front of a screen is not a long-term solution for anyone and it seriously disadvantages many.

When the COVID-19 pandemic descended upon us, most were caught flat-footed. Over the span of a couple of weeks in March, a health crisis on the other side of the world crashed Canada's borders like a tsunami. The lives of Canadians were turned upside down, seemingly overnight. School buildings were shuttered and working from home and distance learning became a way of life for countless families. Those who were deemed essential workers were left with few options when it came to childcare, and safety concerns did and continue to cause undue stress for a vast number of people.

Those forced into unemployment struggle to put food on the table, the threat of violence targeting the most vulnerable increases as tensions within households grows and the lack of access to Wi-Fi or digital devices has left countless children cut off from learning.

Now, the element of surprise is gone. Whether we like it or not, the reality in which we are living has settled in—masks and physical distancing are a way of life. But, as September looms large anything resembling concrete plans for how children and youth will head back to classrooms remains unknown. This is the case in virtually all provinces and territories where teachers have been largely kept in the dark, shut out from discussions focused on how to get our kids, teachers and education support personnel back into schools safely.

Governments at all levels across the land have had ample time to look toward the fall, winter and beyond. Unfortunately,

that opportunity appears to have been neglected. The education community is left wondering how that may happen, and parents and guardians are growing concerned about lost learning while they scramble to arrange alternative learning options amidst great uncertainty.

Even with little time left to prepare, together we can work to develop a plan that helps guarantee our children and youth have equitable access to the quality, publicly funded public education they deserve, while ensuring that they and the adults we entrust them with are as safe as possible.

This is a moment that requires creativity to break free from what was once the norm in order to adapt to what we are dealing with today. We know that online distance learning is no replacement for in-class learning. In fact, learning solely on a screen is detrimental to quality learning and an affront to building a more equal society.

*"... we need to look at rethinking what constitutes a school building. Physical distancing is with us for months to come and knowing that distance learning is not quality learning or equitable learning, it is time to consider looking at other spaces available in our communities where quality education can occur in person safely."*

Shelley L. Morse

Distance learning, while decreasing the threat of spreading COVID-19, has ignited crises of inequity and mental health among students and teachers. According to our national survey of members, two-thirds of teachers expressed concerns on how the impact of screens relied upon to learn during the pandemic is having on the physical, mental, social and emotional well-being of children and youth. And more than eight out of 10 respondents who shared their views are concerned about returning to public school buildings. Of the teachers who responded to open-ended questions, 99 percent have concerns about the return to school buildings and discussed anxieties around not knowing the plans, adding that constant changes from ministries of education, without proper time and supports to adapt, have taken a toll on their mental health and well-being.

At this point from the teachers' perspective, and we



Shelley L. Morse, Canadian Teachers' Federation President

believe for most families too, it is evident that the current conditions are unsustainable and rushing back to pre-COVID-19 methods of face-to-face instruction simply may not be an option until there is a vaccine.

So under these circumstances we need to look at rethinking what constitutes a school building. Physical distancing is with us for months to come and knowing that distance learning is not quality learning or equitable learning, it is time to consider looking at other spaces available in our communities where quality education can occur in person safely. Offices, arenas and university campuses may all be empty or underutilized after Labour Day weekend making them the perfect alternatives to holding reduced class sizes. And when the weather permits, outdoor classrooms are good options too.

At the same time, we need to address the mental health and well-being of many students and teachers too. National standards for access to mental health services will need to take into account that this pandemic is causing significant and not yet fully understood impacts on psychological health.

This is why more, not fewer, teachers and education support personnel, including trained counsellors, are going to be needed when school is underway. A significant focus of teaching for this next while will need to be rooted in trauma-informed practice, so additional supports for teachers and education support personnel to effectively address how the COVID-19 crisis has affected students' behaviour and mental health will be needed.

Until our children and youth get back to learning together, we must ensure that those who need breakfasts receive them, that those who face difficult situations at home have a safe outlet and adults they can confide in and that all students have the same opportunity to learn.

This is why moving on from distance learning, something that should only be deemed a temporary solution, is so important. Also, getting children back learning together means that parents and guardians who are able to work can do so without the constant stress about the learning needs and well-being of their children, or the stress that comes with having to work and support remote learning day in and day out.

This is why publicly funded public education matters, and these are

## EDITORIAL



### Trust can be elusive when it comes to politics

Quite honestly, in this case it doesn't matter one bit whether you are wearing a mask or not. Either way your head might be spinning as if on a swivel.

The days blur, but the unmasked reality is that even when it comes to something as monumental in scope as the COVID-19 global pandemic, there's always room for politics.

Recall, if you will, the first salvo when it was announced by the Government of Saskatchewan that students and teachers would be returning to school for face-to-face learning sans the masks that have been mandated elsewhere.

Well, it took three days until there was a significant role reversal when Education Minister Gord Wyant proudly proclaimed that the government has procured six million disposable masks for schools in the province at an investment of \$2.3 million.

Less than a week later we have Premier Scott Moe sitting in the big chair to champion the fact that \$40 million from the \$200 million COVID-19 contingency is going to be available to help ensure a safe return to schools. Oh yeah, maybe it was also in response to heat from the general public.

Now, you can choose whichever theory you want—that the hue and cry from an incredulous populace was enough to send the Saskatchewan Party folks into what ALMOST was a complete turnaround. Or, my own thought was that the first announcement was ostensibly a trial balloon to gauge the reaction.

When watching the first announcement with Wyant flanked by Chief Medical Health Officer Dr. Saqib Shahab, I felt that if you read between the lines, they had come up with a previously unknown four-phased approach. The more the two gentlemen spoke, the clearer it became that they were all but ready to proceed to the second phase, including the recommendation of considering a mandatory mask policy.

You see, in my cynical world this was akin to the Saskatchewan Party showing just how earnestly they are listening to the public and whatever the cost, they are going to make this harrowing scenario as safe as possible for students, teachers and staff members in the province's schools.

Then we have the Premier tossing \$40 million into the equation. Isn't that just so heroic—if not somewhat unexpected. Understand that I am apolitical in every sense. My distrust for politicians of any stripe is based on four decades in this game and everyone plays it, albeit under some nuances in terms of the rules.

To be sure, I have met politicians along the trail whom I have grown to quite like and respect, but trust is decidedly more elusive. All too often, the scenario plays out the same whether you're in the position of power or the Opposition. It's a shared trait that whatever public announcement comes out, you can't help but think the next step has already been carefully plotted. In the majority of cases it's commonplace to wait until the other shoe is going to drop when it best suits their needs.

Having something like this clinging to your party is not good news when you consider that there is going to be a provincial election, in all likelihood it will far precede any approved vaccination for COVID-19. You might say that this reversal is the best way for the government to try to wash their hands of the situation that they somewhat unwittingly created themselves. ■

SASKATCHEWAN  
**BULLETIN**

The Saskatchewan Bulletin is published 10 times during the school year by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. Contributions to the Bulletin are welcome and will be used when possible.

All material is subject to editing. Requests for coverage by Bulletin staff should be received at least three weeks before the event.

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Publications Mail Agreement No. 40064493  
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Member of the Canadian Educational Press Association and the Educational Press Association of America.  
Return postage guaranteed.

just some of the ideas and insights that teachers can share with governments to ensure that our youngest, our most vulnerable, and most importantly, our future leaders are able to continue the quality education they need. Governments at all levels simply need to consult and

work with us to make these ideas a reality.

I hope that governments and teachers can stand together knowing that shared expertise will make a return to school possible for all students and something for them to look forward to as we navigate our way through a crisis that is far from over. ■