

June 22, 2020

Dear Members:

The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation has been an active and vocal member of the education sector Response Planning Team. The RPT's role was to make recommendations to the Chief Medical Health Officer and the Government of Saskatchewan for consideration in development of the guidelines. While we were able to share our perspectives, concerns and solutions, the final guidelines announced June 18 are from the Government of Saskatchewan.

We share the concerns and confusion about a return to school that many of you have expressed. We know the lack of clarity, specifics and, in some cases, contradictory guidance has created more uncertainty and unease for many.

Over the last few months, we have been inundated with directives and reminders from public health offices globally, including Saskatchewan's own Chief Medical Health Officer, of the critical importance to remain two meters apart, and to be cautious about how many people we interact with. As a province, we have listened to and followed those directives. In fact, the Government of Saskatchewan credits our actions as a whole in adhering to these new social norms as the reason why COVID-19 has remained manageable in our province.

The guidelines issued June 18 seem to disregard government's own advice and put teachers, students, other school staff and their families at increased risk. There will be no distancing required on school buses. Those students who ride in close proximity on a school bus will then enter their school and disperse to various classrooms for the day. Many of the suggestions also have limited practicality in our already overcrowded schools and will be very difficult, if not impossible to implement.

We also heard that school-aged kids are not a high-risk group. This assessment seems to minimize the fact that the majority of kids who have COVID-19 are either asymptomatic or have only mild symptoms, and will be in contact with people who do not share the same low-risk factor. Those students will also go home at the end of each school day to their families and bring that risk with them.

School divisions are already underfunded, classrooms are overcrowded and lacking resources. Managing community transmission of a global pandemic inside our schools cannot and will not become the responsibility and duty of teachers. Teachers will play an important role; but a teacher's job is to educate. It is not to manage isolation rooms or disinfect school and student property.

The desire to get back to some sort of normal is understandable, and we know you are eager to get back into classrooms and deliver your best to your students every day. But you cannot do so at the cost of your own health and safety.

The Federation will continue to advocate actively and vocally to ensure teachers' health and safety are protected and collective agreements honoured as schools reopen in the fall. At this time, participation on the RPT is a mechanism to do this. As divisions begin developing detailed plans, representing teachers' interests in a more regional way will become necessary. And, in some cases, individual representation may be required.

As we prepare for the return to classrooms, we ask that you keep us informed of any extraordinary requests that are made of you with respect to the reopening of schools, such as additional cleaning or teaching virtually while also instructing students in a classroom setting. It is critically important that we are aware of issues that impact your working conditions and potentially impact your personal health. The information may be shared with your senior administrative staff member or emailed directly to the Federation.

In the meantime, updates will be provided to members as information becomes available.

Thank you for your continued patience and support as we navigate these uncertain times.

Sincerely,

Patrick Maze, President

Randy Schmaltz, Executive Director