

Canadian authorities to reopen schools, facilitating COVID-19 spread

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With the full support of Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government in Ottawa, provincial governments have unveiled back-to-school plans in recent weeks that will accelerate the COVID-19 pandemic across Canada and endanger the lives of teachers, students and their families.

Despite the minor differences over details, the provincial reopening plans have met with widespread opposition from parents and teachers. Some governments have had to announce last minute changes in an effort to dissipate opposition in order to impose their reckless policies on a reluctant population.

In general, the essential content of these plans can be summarized as follows: classrooms at elementary school and the first three years of secondary school will reopen full-time and remain as crowded as before the pandemic, without any real protective measures being put in place.

For the last two years of secondary school, the situation varies depending on the region of the country. While most provinces will require all students to attend school in person, Ontario has identified some school boards in urban areas that will allow half of the student body to attend school in person and the other half to do online learning.

No province will seriously increase the education budget for the smaller class sizes required to ensure social distancing, or even support the so-called hybrid model, where some students are in the classroom and others take courses online.

Ontario has indicated that parents worried about the pandemic will have the option of keeping their children at home to receive online instruction. To the extent that this is put in place, it will lead to greater social inequality since not all families can provide their children with the space and equipment for distance learning or afford taking time off from work. The province has not even considered subsidizing parents who take time off, let alone protect them from being fired.

In the province of Quebec, which was the hardest hit by the pandemic, there will be no social distancing between students in classrooms, and barely any in common areas. Other provinces, such as Ontario and British Columbia, will create "study groups" of about 60 students in which contact will be allowed on the playgrounds and in some common areas.

On school buses, students will have an assigned seat, but will be seated two per row. The safer option of having fewer students on the buses, which would involve hiring more drivers and buying new buses, was discarded for purely economic reasons.

Under conditions where the country's public schools have been the target of major budget cuts in recent decades, only paltry sums have been earmarked for protective equipment and cleaning materials. This is the case in Ontario, where public schools, which accommodate more than two million students, will have to use an additional \$500 million from their own reserves to fund safety measures.

In all provinces, masks will not be mandatory for students under the age of 10. For older students and adults, masks will be mandatory in public places, but not in classrooms.

There will be no systematic testing done in schools for either teachers or students, even though recent studies have shown that children infected with COVID-19 can be even more contagious than adults. The criminal indifference of Canada's ruling elite was summed up in Ontario Premier Doug Ford's words, "We have full control of our plan and yes, I pray to God no one gets sick."

The back-to-school drive shows that the government's response to the pandemic is based on the deadly principle of "herd immunity," that is, allowing the virus to run rampant through the population. This was all but admitted by Quebec's national director of public health, Horacio

Arruda, when he said, “If we want the schools to work, the virus will circulate.”

Schools will reopen to force working parents back to work. Having received in March \$650 billion from Ottawa in various bailout packages, the corporate and financial aristocracy is now demanding the premature resumption of all economic activity to resume the flow of profits and force workers to pay for the bailout.

Governments know that the coronavirus is still very present in Canada and that the hasty reopening of schools will lead to a massive spread of the virus and thousands of preventable deaths across the country. At a recent press briefing, Montreal’s director of public health, Dr. Mylène Drouin, stated darkly, “[W]e must prepare for the worst.”

The politically motivated back-to-school campaign poses an immense health, educational and workload challenge to teachers, a significant portion of whom are older and have health problems.

To justify this, government officials are feigning concern for the mental health of children and the learning problems of more vulnerable students, even though they have been imposing decades of brutal spending cuts on education, health and social services.

Another lie is that children are little affected by COVID-19. Arruda has even gone so far as to say that “depriving a child of schooling, of socialization, is more serious than the potential risk of him or her catching the disease.” Quebec’s minister of education, Jean-François Roberge, said that “the information we have about COVID-19 assures us that children, most of the time, do not get sick and do not transmit the disease.”

In fact, recent research indicates that children not only can get sick and even die but are also important vectors for the transmission of the virus. Even asymptomatic children can and will infect adults both at school and at home. Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US have also found that hospitalization rates for children increased steadily between early March and the end of July.

The procedures to deal with COVID-19 outbreaks are unclear or non-existent, as authorities are determined to keep schools open even if the coronavirus circulates freely. School boards have until mid-September to develop emergency protocols, well after the start of the school year. In Quebec, Minister Roberge indicated that if there is a second wave, “There is no question of closing schools across Quebec.” Outbreaks will rather be managed on a “case-by-case” basis.

In several provinces, groups of parents who are

skeptical about reopening the schools have emerged on social networks. Many denounce, among other things, the lack of resources for preventive measures.

In Alberta, the Coalition for a Safer School Relaunch, a group representing “parents, physicians and educators,” has called the province’s plan “reckless.” The group issued a list of demands, including the provision of all necessary personal protective equipment to workers at no cost and clear protocols for regular testing and outbreak management.

In Quebec, a petition demanding that parents be given the choice between sending their children to school or online education collected 18,000 signatures. In Ontario, an online petition demanding a reduction in class ratios collected nearly 170,000 signatures.

While parents and educators are speaking out against the reopening of schools, it is being planned with the direct involvement and sanction of teachers’ unions. For example, Ontario’s four teachers’ unions issued a statement last Thursday describing the back-to-school plan as violating the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Yet despite this, all they did was request “an immediate meeting” with the minister of labour and officials from the Ministry of Education, i.e., with the same right-wing government that has spent the past two years gutting education budgets and attacking education workers.

The fight against the criminal back-to-school drive of the ruling elite depends entirely on the initiative of rank-and-file workers themselves. In every school, teachers must establish their own safety committees, independent of the unions, to unify parents, students and every section of the working class to oppose the school reopenings.

These committees must demand that schools close or remain closed throughout the country, and that the necessary resources be deployed for distance learning and psychological support for students. Such a campaign must also demand the cessation of all non-essential economic activity, with full financial compensation for the workers affected, until the pandemic is brought under control.



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