

British Columbia's NDP government presiding over mass COVID-19 infections in schools

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As COVID-19 infections surge in schools throughout British Columbia's lower mainland, the province's New Democratic Party (NDP) government, with the aid of the unions, is determined to keep kids crammed into unsafe classrooms.

On December 1, *CTV News Vancouver* reported that at least two in five Metro Vancouver area schools, or 41 percent, had experienced COVID-19 "exposures"—the term the province uses to refer to one or more infections in a school—since K-12 schooling resumed in September.

The news outlet's list of schools with infections reached 403 out of a total of 974 public and private schools in the region's two largest health authorities. The real number is likely higher, since it does not include schools with COVID-19 infections identified in letters sent to CTV by concerned parents.

Throughout the pandemic, the pro-big business NDP government has pursued the policies of malign neglect and prioritizing profit over human life that characterize the ruling class' response everywhere.

Since March, when the province declared a state of emergency and a public health order was issued partially restricting social activity, the government has expended its energies on keeping the economy—especially the province's lucrative natural resources, manufacturing, construction and agribusiness sectors—"open." In keeping with its longstanding commitment to continuing the austerity agenda of its Liberal predecessor, the John Horgan-led NDP government has likewise refused to sequester even a small portion of the bloated fortunes of the financial oligarchy to fund a massive expansion of a health care system ravaged by decades of cuts.

The inevitable result has been a "second wave" resurgence of the pandemic in communities, long-term care homes, hospitals and now schools.

The government's reckless back-to-school plan, first presented in July, involves full-time in-person learning, with

students organized into "social bubbles" of up to 120 students, within which social distancing is deemed unnecessary. Moreover, these large "cohorts" are not maintained in most common areas, such as cafeterias or school buses, and students are still free to engage in extracurricular activities, such as organized sports. Despite public health authorities' mid-November introduction of a provincial mask mandate in all indoor public spaces, mask wearing in schools remains voluntary.

This has led to at least six school closures for in-person learning due to COVID-19 exposures, including a private school, Regent Christian Academy in Surrey, where 30 cases were confirmed on Friday.

Since the school year began in early September, the province's COVID-19 caseload has risen exponentially. In late August, a week before the school year began, there were 40 infections per 100,000 people in the Fraser Health Authority, British Columbia's largest health region. By late November, infections in the region were six times greater than that, at more than 250 infections per 100,000 people.

Faced with growing opposition from parents, students and teachers, the BC NDP has resorted to secrecy, distortions of the facts and outright lies in an effort to conceal the link between the surge in infections and its reckless back-to-school policy.

As of this writing, there have been almost 40,000 infections in the province. Currently, there are 65 outbreaks at long-term care and assisted living homes and acute care facilities. To date, almost 600 people have lost their lives to the virus. Last Thursday, the province reported 28 more deaths, the highest number of deaths in a 24-hour period since the pandemic's start.

These grim figures have forced the BC government to impose new social distancing restrictions that extend into the new year. Yet Horgan and provincial health officer Bonnie Henry continue to insist that schools must stay open. Henry has rejected teachers' call for an extension to the normal

holiday break to allow for more quarantine time before coming back to class, arguing that “schools really are a safe place.”

When teachers and students first reported climbing infection rates in their schools in September, the government delayed warning parents, teachers and the public at large. Even when infections became so pervasive that they could no longer be denied, they were reported only in part and only to parents, with critical details omitted. The term “exposure” was introduced by the government to avoid the need to publicly declare how many infections have been recorded at a given school.

In August, government officials made the thoroughly hypocritical argument that schools must open for students’ well-being. Yet the province’s Ministry of Education has provided schools with just one counselor per 960 elementary students, one counselor per 380 secondary students, and one psychologist per 3,400 students. Even if the paltry \$45.6 million in funding that is earmarked for the “safe restart” of schools were to be used solely for sanitation and hygiene equipment, that would amount to just \$2 per student per week of the academic year.

This is under conditions where the education system has been starved of funding by the NDP, Liberals and Social Credit alike for two generations and left in ruins with overcrowded classrooms in derelict buildings. Teachers are complaining about a lack of drinkable water, warm water and soap.

Despite concerns from teachers of poor ventilation and much evidence that the virus spreads more readily indoors, the government maintains the lie that “there is no evidence” that a ventilation system in “good operating condition” could contribute to the spread of COVID-19. It has merely instructed school districts to upgrade their filters, move students outdoors when possible, and open classroom windows “if weather permits.” These are absurd recommendations when many parts of the province are experiencing subzero temperatures, and many schools either do not have windows or windows that have been sealed.

The real motivation behind the government’s back-to-school drive is not concern for students’ mental health, but it is bound up with the broader effort to keep the economy open no matter the cost to human life. At the behest of the corporations, the BC NDP government, like its counterparts across Canada, the US and globally, is prioritizing the further accumulation of profit and wealth by the financial oligarchy. K-12 schools are viewed as holding pens for children during the workday so their parents can be freed to produce surplus value for their capitalist employers.

Despite the mounting opposition from parents and teachers, the procapitalist trade unions are bitterly opposed

to any organized opposition to the criminal back-to-school policies. From the beginning, the unions have played a key role in facilitating the back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns. (See: **Opposition grows to British Columbia NDP government’s reckless school reopening**)

In August, the BC Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) engaged with government committees planning the reopening of schools. Top union officials also ruled out strikes or job actions, which they view as “illegal.” One week after school started, to pacify angry teachers, the BCTF filed a grievance with the provincial Labor Relations Board citing concerns about “inconsistent and inadequate” health and safety precautions in schools. When the LRB, after making some perfunctory recommendations that did not address any of the teachers’ key concerns, referred the case to a third party with no timeline for a settlement, the BCTF termed the ruling an “excellent outcome.”

Most recently, the BCTF sent a letter to Bonnie Henry demanding half-measures, such as mandatory mask wearing, but made clear that if their concerns were not addressed, strike action would not be an option.

Teachers and parents are responding to the BCTF’s complicity in placing their lives at risk by taking matters into their own hands. In August, a group of concerned parents organized a rally in Vancouver to protest the back-to-school drive. One week before school started, a petition signed by 40,000 people demanded mandatory masks, physical distancing in all schools and classrooms, adequate provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) to all schools and “fair options” for anyone who needs to stay out of school until the pandemic ends.

On December 1, a group of BC parents pulled their kids from school for the day in protest. The 3,200-member group, whose Facebook page is called BC Student SICK OUT, is demanding classes be capped at 15 students, more online learning options and the mandating of masks in schools.

Dysfunction with the government contact tracing program, including serious delays in notifying parents of exposures, has prompted parents to devise their own methods of sharing timely information about infections. One mother has set up the BC School COVID Tracker Facebook page, which has almost 40,000 followers and receives hundreds of messages a day.



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