

British Columbia school officials order windows screwed shut to stop teachers from ventilating classes amid raging pandemic

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Officials at Godson Elementary School in Abbotsford, British Columbia ordered classroom windows at the school bolted shut in late January. Teachers at Godson had been opening the windows to increase air circulation out of fear that the school's existing ventilation systems were not providing an adequate fresh air supply to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

The school sent contractors into the building who, according to the school, found "safety issues" with the windows and proceeded to seal them. Some windows were screwed shut, while others were fitted with wooden blocks to prevent them from opening more than a few inches.

School officials also claim that "gaping" open windows had put increased strain on the boiler used to heat the school.

This came as a disconcerting shock to staff, who began opening the windows—even during the colder winter months—after discovering last December that the older wing of the school had no ventilation system at all.

The older 18-room wing houses roughly 200 kindergarten to fifth grade students and staff.

On February 14, one division taught in this wing was instructed by health officials to self-isolate after a known COVID-19 exposure. A teacher who works in the wing has also tested positive for the virus.

The subpar and nonexistent ventilation systems in the school are in direct violation of the already inadequate provincial COVID-19 health and safety guidelines imposed by the Ministry of Health. The guidelines state that schools in British Columbia (BC) are required to ensure that school heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems are designed, operated and maintained as per standards and specifications for ongoing comfort for workers.

The guidelines also state that schools should have site-based safety plans in place with provisions for when a ventilation system breaks down. None of these guidelines has been adhered to at Godson Elementary, yet the Abbotsford School District claims that the air filtration system in the school meets the required standards and using windows to circulate fresh air was found to be a "potential safety hazard during opening and closing functions on some of the windows."

It is well known among educators and school staff in BC and across Canada that a great number of schools have faulty ventilation systems, a result of years of governments gutting education budgets and attacking teachers' working conditions.

Older buildings and portable classrooms often have no HVAC systems in place whatsoever. A mere \$10 million has been budgeted by the province's New Democratic Party government to update HVAC systems in 2021.

The callous disregard shown by the authorities for the health and safety of staff and students at Godson Elementary is symptomatic of the ruling elite's prioritizing of corporate profit over the health and lives of working people across Canada. Governments of all political stripes, from Doug Ford's hard-right Tories in Ontario to the New Democrats in BC, have recklessly ordered schools to reopen and remain open, even as new and more infectious variants of the virus take hold.

The reason for this is clear: The ruling class wants schools providing in-class instruction so that their parents can be forced back on the job to churn out profits for big business.

In British Columbia alone, COVID-19 "exposures" have been announced for a staggering 620 schools since students went back to class on January 4. Godson Elementary is among 29 schools with exposures in

Abbotsford alone, and many schools have recorded multiple exposures throughout the eight-week period since reopening.

Exposure announcements, it should be noted, are part of the NDP's systematic coverup of the extent of COVID-19's spread. They do not list how many people within a school have tested positive for the virus but only record whether positive tests have been registered. This means, for example, that one "exposure" could, in fact, refer to dozens of COVID-19 cases.

BC's seven-day average COVID-19 case count has been rising steadily since the middle of February. Variants of the faster spreading and potentially more lethal strain of the coronavirus first detected in the UK were recently found in seven BC schools. Six of these cases are concentrated in schools in Surrey, a Vancouver suburb.

On February 23, staff at one of the affected locations staged a "solidarity walk-in." Education workers at École Woodward Hill Elementary sported red shirts bearing the hashtag "RedforBCED" as they marched outside of the school before classes began. Educators, school staff and their supporters have encouraged the wearing of the colour red every Friday since December 4 to draw attention to the unsafe working conditions faced in schools.

While this initiative undoubtedly expresses mounting opposition among rank-and-file educators to the potentially deadly working conditions they confront, the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) is intervening to make the #RedforBCED" campaign a futile public relations stunt. This past week, the union released a statement promoting #RedforBCED as an initiative aimed at pushing for "decisive action by government and health officials to counter [the] new threat" posed by the spread of the new more contagious COVID-19 variants.

But the union, which has close ties with the NDP going back decades and stumped for the party during the 2017 and 2020 provincial elections, bitterly opposes the only realistic measure capable of bringing the pandemic under control—the closure of all schools for in-person learning and the only means whereby this can be realized—the mobilization of the social power of the working class, beginning with teacher job actions.

Instead, the statement issued by the BCTF was a pathetic appeal to the government to impose a stricter in-class mask mandate, and for school districts "to be given the authority to go above and beyond the health and safety guidelines when necessary."

The BCTF's urging of its members to appeal to the

NDP government to "take action" is a futile exercise. The Ministry of Education and the provincial government have continuously downplayed the risks the virus posed to school staff and students alike and even made a point of reopening schools prior to the end of the last school year.

Education Minister Jennifer Whiteside arrogantly dismissed the BCTF's request for more stringent public health measures in schools, declaring Tuesday, "We have very robust health and safety plans in place. Where our safety plans are adhered to, we see very low rates of transmission."

This is an unambiguous attempt to place the blame for rising COVID-19 rates on people failing to do as they have been told, with the government washing its hands of any responsibility for its calculated decision to expose teachers, students and their families to dangerous conditions.

The relentless push of governments across Canada to prioritize corporate profit-making over human lives is paving the way, as numerous epidemiologists have warned in recent weeks, for a third wave of the pandemic even more deadly than the first two.

If the spread of the virus is to be halted and lives saved, the working class must intervene as an independent force. Educators and support staff must form rank-and-file safety committees at every school to fight for an end to in-person learning until the pandemic is brought under control, the shutdown of all nonessential production, a massive investment in online education to ensure all have access to quality education and social support, and the provision of full wages to all workers forced to shelter at home to avoid infection.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is supporting teachers across Canada in establishing an educators rank-and-file safety committee to take forward this struggle. We urge our readers in British Columbia and across Canada to contact us today to join and help develop this critical initiative.



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