Canada’s governments press ahead with school reopenings as fourth COVID-19 wave accelerates

Dylan Lubao
26 August 2021

Schools across Canada are scheduled to reopen to full in-person learning over the next two weeks, even as the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic spikes, driven by the highly transmissible and deadlier Delta variant.

Even before school doors open, COVID-19 infections have risen sharply in recent weeks. On Wednesday, Canada recorded over 3,300 new infections for the first time since the end of the third wave last May. Alberta alone recorded more than 1,000 new cases.

Craig Jenne, Canada Research Chair in infectious diseases at the University of Calgary, painted a bleak picture of the weeks and months ahead in an interview with CTV. “If you look back to last year’s cases,” said Jenne, “they really didn’t start rising sharply until we got into September with people back indoors at school. This year, the cases really have started to go up in a number of places—Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia in early August. Basically the wave has a month head start.”

Canada was ravaged by second and third pandemic waves that claimed the lives of more than 16,000 people and sickened more than 1 million others. Schools were major vectors of transmission in both the second wave, which peaked in late December 2020 and early January 2021, and the third, which peaked in late April and early May. “We can’t let this wave get out of control,” added Jenne, “because the more cases there are, the more hospitalizations, the more ICU [admissions] and tragically, the more deaths we will see this fall.”

Neither the federal Liberal nor the provincial governments have any intention of heeding this advice, or the mountain of evidence from other countries that shows the Delta variant is more dangerous for children. They are determined to fully reopen schools for in-class instruction, even while eliminating many of the inadequate “mitigation measures” they instituted last year, like cohort bubbles.

The school reopening drive is not being done for the sake of children, whose education governments have systematically undermined through decades of budget cuts. Rather, the capitalist politicians want to herd children into schools so that their parents can go to work generating profits for Canada’s banks and corporations.

With few exceptions, students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 will be expected to sit in classes numbering upwards of 30 children, many in rooms without proper ventilation and in some cases even windows. Virtually all provinces had announced they were scrapping mandatory masking in the classroom. But facing a public outcry, as cases have steadily mounted and public health officials have conceded Canada is in its fourth pandemic wave, several provinces, including Quebec, have had to reverse themselves at the last minute.

The growing opposition to these criminal policies among serious scientists was underscored by epidemiologist David Fisman’s decision earlier this week to resign from the Ontario Science Table, which advises the provincial government on pandemic policy. “I find myself increasingly uncomfortable with the degree to which political considerations appear to be driving outputs from the tables,” wrote Fisman. “Or at least the degree to which these outputs are shared in a transparent manner with the public.”

Many provinces have eliminated any remote learning option, and even when such an option exists it is difficult to access and is truly viable only for a small minority of children, generally from more privileged families. In Ontario, for example, parents were required to notify their school district that they wanted their kids enrolled in online classes before the end of June, well before the dangers of the Delta variant became widely known.

Provincial governments have been shameless with their lies in justifying the reopening of schools. Alberta’s Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, who reports to United Conservative Party (UCP) Premier Jason Kenney, derided remote learning and COVID-19 health measures as harming “the mental health of children and youth.” In reality, remote learning programs were carried out haphazardly across Canada and deliberately starved of resources, forcing teachers to cobble together virtual classes for students.

The escalation of the pandemic, along with the closure of schools, was principally due to the inaction of the Trudeau Liberal government at the outset. Only on March 10, 2020, as the pandemic was exploding across Canada, did it even write the provinces to inquire about potential shortages of personal

© World Socialist Web Site

protective equipment (PPE), ventilators, and other vital medical equipment and supplies. Subsequently, it and the provinces dismissed out of hand any attempts to eliminate the virus, insisting that the "economy" had to be reopened and that the population had to effectively learn to live with COVID-19.

The claim that Canada's relatively high vaccination levels now constitutes a "ticket" out of the pandemic is a fantasy, not supported by science. Fully 5 million children in Canada remain unvaccinated, including all those under 12 years of age. At an online meeting this past Sunday hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, "For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives," Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz, a developmental biologist and researcher at the University of Calgary, demonstrated that abandoning lockdown measures and relying solely on vaccines to contain the pandemic will permit the Delta variant to spread exponentially.

By far the most notorious lie, however, as articulated by the Manitoba Progressive Conservative Government's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Brent Roussin, is that "children are less likely to transmit COVID-19 while at home, in school or in community settings, and they are at lower risk of severe illness from COVID-19." The preposterous character of this lie has been tragically confirmed by the recent explosion of the pandemic in the United States, which has been characterized by unprecedented child infections and hospitalizations as classes have begun to resume. In the week ending August 19, the US reported 180,000 cases in children, a 50 percent increase over the previous week. During the same period, 24 children succumbed to the disease.

According to Dr. Gasperowicz, research has shown that between 3 to 12 percent of children infected with the virus develop Long COVID. A chronic illness in which COVID-19 symptoms persist long after the initial infection, Long COVID can include respiratory problems as well as debilitating cognitive and developmental defects.

Provincial governments headed by establishment parties of all political stripes, from the ostensibly "left-wing" New Democratic Party in British Columbia to the hard-right Progressive Conservatives in Ontario, United Conservatives in Alberta, and Coalition Avenir Québec, are willfully ignoring the mountain of evidence that illustrates the madness of subjecting children, the most vulnerable section of society who deserve the most protection, to the best possible conditions for the spread of the virus.

Parents are increasingly worried about sending their children into classrooms that will function as breeding grounds for the virus. A July 2021 Statistics Canada report concluded that nearly 75 percent of parents were "extremely concerned" about juggling work, child care and their kids' schooling during the pandemic.

An Ontario parent wrote a letter to the WSWS last week opposing the school reopening policy, in which he echoed the sentiments of countless parents and teachers who are looking for a means of opposing the ruling class policy of death and profits: "We need to find other parents, teachers and concerned workers and act. We need to demand that schools stay closed until all our children are vaccinated."

The teachers' unions continue to insist, against the wishes of rank-and-file educators, that schools be reopened with virtually no protections in place. From the start of the pandemic, the union bureaucrats have vehemently opposed rank-and-file demands for strikes over unsafe school conditions. They have mouthed token criticisms of government policy, and told teachers with COVID-19 concerns to file individual work-refusals with the various Labour Boards, whose function is to regulate and suppress the class struggle.

Sam Hammond, the president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation and former head of the Ontario elementary teachers' union (the ETFO), spoke for the union top brass across the country when he criticized the Ontario Tory government, not for pursuing its herd immunity policy, but for shuttering schools at the peak of the pandemic's second and third waves. "Because of this government's poor decision-making," he railed, "students in Ontario lost more opportunities to learn in person than any other students in Canada. Educators want schools to stay open all year even as we combat the variants we know will threaten reopening and recovery for some time."

Such a policy means accepting hundreds of thousands of infected children, tens of thousands of whom will contract Long COVID, and hundreds of child deaths.

As the speakers at Sunday's WSWS online meeting made clear, a strategy of eliminating and eradicating the virus, backed by science and pursued at an international level, is the only viable means of halting the pandemic's spread, thwarting the emergence of new, deadlier variants, and preventing further massive loss of life in Canada and globally.

However, if this strategy is to prevail it must be fought for. Teachers, parents, students—in short, the working class both in Canada and around the world—must be mobilized against the capitalist drive to sacrifice millions of lives on the altar of profit.

The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to mobilize educators, students and parents to close schools to in-person learning, suspend all nonessential production, and secure workers full financial compensation so they can shelter at home and look after their families until the pandemic is brought under control. **To attend the CERSC's next meeting on Saturday, August 28, at 1:30 pm EST, please email: cersc.csppb@gmail.com.**

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site