

Quebec educator exposes government's provision of masks that failed quality standards to school staff

Our reporter
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A tweet by Laurent Lafrance, an educator from Montreal, revealing that the Quebec government supplied masks to his school that failed to meet quality standards went viral this week. Over 40,000 people viewed the message, which noted that the surgical masks designated with the MC9501 code were deemed unsuitable for use in December 2020.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Laurent noted that the masks typically used in his school have the marker “ASTM Level 1” on the packaging. This refers to the American Society of Testing and Materials, which grades face masks. Level 1 masks are described as offering a “low-barrier protection,” and are explicitly not recommended for use against airborne contaminants like COVID-19. Only masks with a Level 2 or Level 3 designation protect the wearer against infection by COVID-19, which is primarily transmitted by aerosols, tiny particles expelled in an infected individual’s breath that can float in the air for hours.

“It was a regular day under pandemic conditions, and I was sitting at my desk doing some work,” he said. “I’ve always been concerned about my own and my co-workers’ safety. One particular concern for me is that we are provided with surgical masks marked with the ASTM Level 1 designation, which experts say are not adequate to protect against airborne transmission.”

Examining the box of masks on a nearby table, Laurent observed that the ASTM Level 1 marking was absent.

“I was intrigued, so I performed a search for the mask’s code online,” he continued. “The first thing I saw was an article from December 2020 noting that this type of mask had not met safety standards. The piece

noted that these masks were withdrawn from day cares and replaced with adequate masks.

“I was quite shocked, because these were precisely the masks we had been using for several weeks. So I wrote a tweet about it and stated at the end that we need an explanation for this. I also warned my principal that these masks were prohibited. She wrote to the designated institution about it.”

Laurent noted that the widespread anger generated by his tweet reflected the fact that many teachers and other education staff recognized that the hard-right Coalition Avenir Quebec government has no interest in safeguarding their health and safety. “Many teachers said that these were the same masks they were using at their school,” Laurent added. “A day care worker wrote that they took a picture of the mask in December 2020 to ensure they would never come back into use.

“Last year, we were provided with masks with toxic components in them. They contained graphene, which can cause lung damage. We wore them for weeks. All of this shows that our safety is not taken very seriously by the authorities.”

In line with the homicidal policy of mass infection adopted by the Canadian ruling elite, the CAQ government has throughout the pandemic positively welcomed the spread of COVID-19. In April 2020, Premier Francois Legault mused during a press conference that only “herd immunity,” i.e., mass infection, would provide a way out of the crisis. Government officials explicitly rejected the need for educators and other essential workers to have access to N95 masks, which are necessary to protect the wearer against aerosols.

“How can we have confidence in a government that is

prepared to accept mass infection?” Laurent stated. “Legault asked at a recent press conference, ‘What does living with the virus mean?’ He then said that we have to accept more death and hospitalization in Quebec.

“The way they have changed the rules in schools shows they are letting the virus rip. The threshold for closing class is 60 percent of kids being infected. Last year, if there were two cases that were linked in a single class, they were supposed to stop in-person learning. Even then they would try to get around this by denying that transmission occurred in class.”

Laurent’s tweet was picked up by the nationalist Parti Quebecois (PQ), which called for answers from the government. Education Minister Jean-Francois Roberge avoided replying to Laurent directly, merely responding to the PQ’s tweet with a vague assurance that the masks’ manufacturer had confirmed to the government that although the box said they were only good for one year, they could be used for up to two years if they were properly stored.

Roberge made no reference to the December 2020 report noting that masks bearing the MC9501 code were withdrawn from use because they were deemed unsafe. Nor did he explain why the government, two years into a deadly pandemic, is not providing masks to education workers that protect them from infection by a deadly virus.

Laurent rejected the bogus claims made by government officials that they want to keep schools open to ensure that kids receive a good education and to protect their mental health. “We learn every day that a teacher has COVID in school and needs to be replaced,” he commented. “The government sent a memo to schools telling them to prepare lists of parents and volunteers who are not qualified but can babysit. They are conscious that teachers and students will fall ill but they’re letting it go.”

This ruthless class policy is supported by all governments, which see schools as warehouses for children so that their parents are free to go to work and generate profits for big business.

Laurent insisted that a drastic change is necessary so that students, staff, and the community at large are protected from infection. “Teachers should have access to the highest level of PPE,” he said. “The virus is airborne, and experts say that N95s or elastomeric

respirators are the safest options. However, we have to fight under current conditions to close schools. They are not safe in this pandemic. Schools should only be opened when the situation is under control as part of a Zero COVID strategy.

“When schools are reopened, teachers should have the safest PPE, including N95s at a minimum, along with a whole series of measures to prevent transmission. These include reduced class sizes, use of outdoor settings where possible, and smaller cohorts.

“Teachers and other education staff need to establish rank-and-file committees to fight for a Zero COVID strategy. Teachers and support staff should work together with parents and scientists to determine the necessary measures to be taken in schools when it’s safe to reopen. Teachers also require education about the science of the virus. On this basis, they can support the adoption of measures that will ensure everyone remains safe, including the kids.”

We encourage all educators across Canada who wish to share their experiences of conditions in their school during the pandemic to contact the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at cersc.csppb@gmail.com. You can also follow the committee on Twitter.



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