

New Brunswick educator speaks to the Global Workers' Inquest on the abandonment of pandemic protections: "All decisions were made above our heads. We had no say"

Dylan Lubao
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Mina is a resource teacher and a mother in New Brunswick, Canada. She has worked throughout the pandemic, including during a period when the province's Progressive Conservative government implemented public health measures that came close to COVID-19 elimination, as well as the period following the dismantling of all measures by the same government.

The government's decision to abandon public health measures has led directly to a disastrous surge in sickness and death. A recent CBC report noted that New Brunswick had the highest excess death rate among all provinces for the latter half of 2021. Excess deaths measure the number of fatalities above the average based on previous years' data.

Mina recently spoke to the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic about her experiences as an educator during the pandemic, her view of her union's and the government's pandemic policy, and what she thinks is in store for the province when classes resume in fall 2022. Since this interview was conducted, Mina has seen several health care providers, including visiting the emergency room numerous times and has been diagnosed with Post COVID condition (also known as Long COVID).

Dylan Lubao: What duties does your job entail, compared to a regular classroom teacher?

Mina: Resource teachers work outside the classroom to support students who have extra needs. Often running one-on-one or small group interventions and also taking the lead role in developing PLPs, or personal learning plans.

DL: What were working conditions like before the pandemic hit? Did you enjoy your job?

M: I was actually in a different position before the pandemic, similar in that I was not in the classroom though. It was good. I loved my job. I felt grateful to be able to make connections with my students. I could focus on my work when I was at work. There was generally a sense of community among the school, and at a different level, among the staff, although to be honest, I am a huge introvert and typically would be home outside of work. The biggest thing was just being able to focus on the students.

I really enjoyed working one-on-one and with small groups of students. I liked the fact that I was able to make bigger gains with them that way and reaching that "aha" moment with them is the best! It is also easier to connect with students and learn their stories and just learn more about them. It helps to build interventions and plans when you know the students well, who would work well with who, what strategies will help that particular student, etc.

DL: Atlantic Canada managed to avoid the worst effects of the pandemic during the first year and a half. What were working conditions like at your school during that period?

M: Pretty good, considering. Students quickly adjusted to the new rules, and everyone seemed to be pretty supportive of each other. There were minimal disruptions in learning, which was nice.

Students were in bubbles, including assigned seating in the cafeteria. We had universal and enforced masking, contact tracing and the rapid test program, isolation requirements, and vaccine requirements for staff.

DL: When did the government and school board begin to dismantle these measures? What was the state of the pandemic at that time?

M: Everything basically happened the same across the province. All districts are, apparently, supposed to follow the Department of Education, so measures basically changed everywhere at the same time. Schools did not fully go back after Christmas 2021. Only up to 20 percent of students came in person. The students were prioritized as those who needed to be in person for whatever reason, so basically the most vulnerable. Others did online or at home learning until the end of January.

PCR tests became limited in early January 2022, so only those aged 50 plus, health care workers, and immune compromised. Around the same time, contact tracing stopped. When students came back to schools at the end of January, parents were to test students who had symptoms and report positive cases to the school and to the province. At this time teachers were no longer allowed to screen students.

Towards the end of February, the government of New Brunswick announced that they would end the emergency order and every protection the first day school came back from March Break. Schools would no longer need to have positive cases reported.

After March Break things got really bad. COVID burned through the school. We were often short-staffed and had a lot of student absences, but also a lot of students and staff came to school with COVID. Many students told staff that their parents did not bother testing anymore.

I have done a lot of reading to make sure I have correct evidence-based info and I have had to correct a lot of myths, like, COVID is airborne, not droplet; you can catch COVID more than once, it is not one and done; many people do not fully recover or take a long time to recover, it is not like a cold where you are sick for a few days and that is it, etcetera.

DL: As the pandemic waves this past winter and spring picked up, how did your colleagues react? What were the discussions like, when it came to safety conditions at school for education staff and students?

M: All decisions were made above our heads. We had no say. Some contacted the union. The New Brunswick Teachers Federation did advocate for protections of teachers in January, but quickly switched gears in March when the government did.

Instead of advocating for protections, they were solely advocating for more teaching staff to fill the unprecedented absences. My colleagues

seem to be very out of the loop, so to speak. We are told to follow the folks at the provincial government, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Public Health, and our union, all of whom somehow seem to agree with each other, or pass the blame for the decision making.

When questioned on Twitter, Education Minister Dominic Cardy refers to Public Health, saying that they made the recommendation to drop all protections based on evidence that, we have come to find out through an investigation by *Telegraph Journal* reporter Andrew Waugh, does not exist.

Child and Youth Advocate Kelly Lamrock did a thorough investigation and was not able to find any evidence to support taking precautions out of schools, but no one from the government cared to listen. He actually urged the government to re-implement masking right away until further investigation could be made into the decision to remove them.

Long story short, there were no discussions. My colleagues were concerned at first but trust Public Health.

D: Why did you continue to study the science and use proper protocols even when your colleagues followed the advice of the Public Health office?

M: Because Public Health was not providing any evidence to support their decisions and experts and those in the front lines were saying otherwise. Even my own family doctor told me not to stop masking; that people would act like things were normal, but they are not.

Other places that had chosen to “let ‘er rip” were not doing well. Places in Europe like the United Kingdom and Denmark. Science is ever changing. With all the research being done, I knew that we were learning new things about COVID all the time. When it came down to it, Public Health would not provide evidence to support their decision. And then it came out that there was, indeed, no evidence.

I do not want to get and do not want my family to get COVID. This virus is still considered novel, and we just do not know what the long-term consequences from infection could be, let alone multiple infections. Looking at other viruses, especially other coronaviruses like SARS-CoV-1 and MERS, it is not a risk that should be taken lightly.

DL: Can you describe your union’s policy as the Progressive Conservative provincial government removed the remaining public health measures?

M: They fought for protections in January 2022 but did not in March. A January article from the New Brunswick Teachers Federation informs members about their right to work refusal, whereas March’s is basically, “This is how it is, be kind!”

Everyone I know of who has expressed concerns was brushed off. I think most have given up, at least for right now. June is wildly busy, as you can imagine. I believe most, if not all, have continued to use precautions, though I speak about colleagues who work at other schools, so I cannot say for sure.

Those same colleagues, as well as myself, are already concerned for next school year. A lot of district staff and those involved in the union, work on teachers’ contracts, so essentially nothing will be done during the summer. I say “everyone,” but it sadly refers to a low number.

Teachers have never been given all the information about COVID and only follow those in a position of power or authority—the provincial government, Public Health, the education department, and the union—all of whom are deflecting.

Every avenue comes back to Public Health, but it does not have any evidence for their supposed “recommendation” to remove all health and safety measures. Public Health also does not have the authority to actually make decisions, save Chief Medical Officer of Health Jennifer Russell, who has been missing in action from the office for several months. New Brunswick also has a sketchy history of dismissing chief medical health officers who disagree with the government. I am referring to former Chief

Medical Health Officer Dr. Eilish Cleary.

It is all just a huge mess of passing the buck while people get sick and cannot access proper health care.

DL: Do you have children? What is their school situation like?

M: One under five, in daycare. It has been a very stressful year. It is difficult to get a toddler to mask when nobody else is. It has been very frustrating hearing the government say that everyone needs to take “personal responsibility” and get vaccinated when “everyone” includes toddlers who cannot get vaccinated and who do not understand the importance of health measures.

Schools are not that much better, to be honest. Many students who were masking coming back from March Break have since stopped due to peer pressure. I know of cases where teachers have told students to take their masks off.

DL: Did many students and staff at your school get COVID? Did work become harder due to absences and other disruptions?

M: I cannot really speak to student absences, except that there were a lot, and a lot of sick students coming to school. Staff were not allowed to ask why a student was absent, so we have no idea what COVID numbers were or are like within the student body.

Some students did tell staff that they were COVID positive, but their parents told them to come anyway. A lot of staff were out. We had a lot of shortages, so much so that some staff came in COVID-positive because they felt bad leaving everyone so short-handed.

It was stressful. It was hard to teach because so many staff and students were out. Even now, there are always a bunch of sick students around and I regularly get coughed or sneezed on at work. It was gross before the pandemic, now it is extra awful.

We also have our premier Blaine Higgs telling the media that he speculates that everyone is getting sick because of all the masking, which is not true. Many experts have spoken out and said that immunity debt is not a thing. The media is spreading misinformation. When a complaint was filed, they came back basically saying the premier is allowed to “share his opinion” even though he has no knowledge or authority to speak on such things.

DL: Did you get COVID these past two and a half years? Did you ever consider leaving the profession because of the stresses produced by the government’s herd immunity policy?

M: It did finally get me in March. It was not mild for me, though I was fully vaccinated and boosted. No regrets on the vaccines though and I do plan to get my next booster when eligible. I can imagine how much worse it would’ve been had I not had them.

I am still not fully recovered and would be considered having Long COVID or Post COVID Condition as per the Health Canada definition. So, it is especially frustrating seeing so many people around me who just don’t care. I have coworkers telling me how COVID is “just like a cold or flu.” Meanwhile, I have had to go for several tests and see specialists because of the lingering issues I am experiencing.

For the first time ever, I have considered leaving the profession because of the stress and frustration caused by the New Brunswick government and their policies, or rather lack of policies. I honestly cannot see doing something else though. I love my career. I love my students. This is so much more than a job for me. These past few months have been both infuriating and heartbreaking.

DL: What sections of society do you think have suffered the most from the ongoing pandemic?

M: We know that marginalized groups, as usual, are struggling the most. With no health and safety protections in place, the medically and economically vulnerable, and disabled communities are especially suffering and taking on an extra burden. It is well known now that COVID is especially harmful to people with certain medical conditions, including disabilities.

Not to mention seniors and young children who are unable to get vaccinated. I just read today that a child in Newfoundland died from COVID. It is absolutely tragic, and I cannot imagine going through that. Women, especially mothers, have taken on a much heavier burden. They are most often the primary caregiver and I know several women who left the workforce to stay home with their children because of COVID.

As for those who benefited: the privileged and rich. The working classes cannot afford groceries, yet large companies continue to make record profits. They also have better access to things like paid time off and medical resources.

The rich and privileged do not have the barriers that regular people do. They can afford all the testing and top of the line medications and care. I could go on. I have worked with marginalized folks before and come from a poor family, so I have seen firsthand how disgustingly this pandemic is being handled.

DL: What do you think is in store for your region and community over the next few months going into winter and fall?

M: Honestly? A lot of illness. I hardly see anyone else wearing a mask when I go out, not that I am out and about very much, because I try to limit my exposure.

Lots of events like festivals and concerts are planned over the next few months, so lots of crowds gathering together. Unless Public Health finally does their job to protect the public, we are in for a rough ride.



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