

Quebec schools to reopen without any anti-COVID measures

Laurent Lafrance
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Are you an education worker in Quebec or elsewhere in Canada? We want to hear what you think about the reopening of schools with no protections in place for staff or students. Email us at cersc.csppb@gmail.com.

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Quebec's elementary and secondary schools will reopen this week for full in-class instruction without any anti-COVID-19 measures whatsoever, although the 7th wave of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage across the province and the country.

Tens of thousands of teachers and school personnel already reported for work last week. Meanwhile, more than 200,000 CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students have been attending classes since mid-August, and the province's universities will reopen after Labor Day.

This is the first school year since the start of the pandemic in which all public health measures, including mask mandates and social distancing, have been abolished under the "living with the virus" mantra of the capitalist elite. On August 22, the Department of Education announced that even the most vulnerable children, those with chronic illnesses or weakened immune systems, will no longer have access to remote education and have to attend school in person.

Due to the more virulent Omicron sub-variants, Quebec and Canada have not experienced a decline in infections anywhere comparable to that in the previous two summers. While Quebec recorded approximately 20,000 cases and 95 deaths from June to August of 2021, during the last three months more than 900 people have died from COVID-19 and the government reports close to 110,000 new infections. The infection figures for this year, it need be added, are likely gross underestimates, since they do not take rapid tests into account and the government has drastically restricted PCR testing, limiting it to a handful of especially "at risk" groups. Hospitalizations have also increased, exceeding the 2,000 mark again last week.

A recently released Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ) forecast of the evolution of the pandemic

showed that the arrival of a new variant this fall could well cause an 8th wave with even more infections and hospitalizations than in the three omicron-driven waves. Given the frequency with which the virus has mutated since the beginning of the pandemic, and the fact that sub-variants such as BA.5 are already increasingly able to evade the immunity provided by vaccines or past infections, such a scenario is highly likely.

In addition to the danger of COVID-19, another threat is now posed by monkeypox, which is likely to spread in schools due to the inaction of the government and public health authorities. Quebec is the second most affected province after Ontario, with 446 cases as of August 16, the majority in the Montreal area.

The situation could be even more catastrophic this fall and winter as people will be crammed into closed spaces, including crowded, dilapidated and poorly ventilated schools.

In a rare press briefing on the state of the pandemic, Quebec Premier and Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) leader François Legault had to admit earlier this month, that "COVID is still here." Despite his usual efforts to downplay the scope and dangers of the pandemic, he reluctantly acknowledged that the reopening of schools will result in an increase in infections.

Legault's press briefing was called to announce a new vaccination campaign that is part of his government's "living with the virus" policy, based on the anti-scientific "vaccine only" approach. Legault reiterated that there was no question of bringing back public health measures in schools such as mandatory masks or "class bubbles."

The "vaccine only" approach has been severely criticized by leading scientists and epidemiologists not in the pay of the government and its public health agency.

Mass vaccination has proved important in reducing the risk of complications following infection. It should be, as scientists have explained, a major component part in an arsenal of public health measures—including mass testing, isolation, contact tracing and the temporary closure of

schools and non-essential workplaces—aimed at COVID elimination and eradication.

But the effectiveness of mass vaccination has been drastically undermined by the ruling elite's "let it rip" policy, which has allowed the virus to continue to propagate en masse in Canada as around the world, resulting in the emergence of more contagious, virulent, and increasingly immune-evasive variants.

Due to the spread of Omicron and its sub-variants, Quebec had already recorded by the end of June more deaths from COVID-19 in 2022 than in all of 2021. Despite the claims of the authorities that the pandemic is largely, if not completely over, Canada as a whole is well on track to register its highest number of deaths from COVID-19 in a single year since the pandemic began.

The "vaccine only" strategy has one overriding purpose: to make the population believe that it is protected and to prevent it from fighting for effective anti-COVID measures, which are denounced by big business, the corporate media and the political establishment as harmful to the "economy." It is this "profits before lives" principle that has guided the disastrous response to the pandemic of the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau, Legault's CAQ government and the entire ruling class.

As a result, COVID-19 has caused the premature death of over 16,300 Quebecers and 44,000 Canadians.

The ruling elite and their political hirelings have insisted throughout the pandemic that schools and businesses must remain open to get parents back to work and churning out profits for the banks and big business.

Canada's epidemiological curve shows a direct correlation throughout the now two-and-a-half years of the pandemic between the reopening of schools for in-class instruction and surges in coronavirus infections and deaths. However, Legault and his Minister of Education, Jean-François Roberge have systematically lied about the risks to children, school staff and society. From the outset, Roberge said that schools were safe, that children rarely catch the virus, and that they do not develop serious symptoms—all in direct contradiction to international studies, including those that show that Long COVID affects 10 to 15 per cent of infected children.

Roberge and the CAQ now claim to be concerned about ventilation in classrooms when they have always denied its importance, remained silent about the transmission of the virus by aerosols and refused to equip classrooms with HEPA air filters—a limited, but necessary, measure to improve air quality. Earlier this month Roberge bragged about providing CO2 monitors in classrooms. In his attempt to mollify the concerns of school personnel, pupils and parents, Quebec's Education Minister implicitly admitted

that hitherto conditions have been far from safe, declaring, "This time the work has been done." But as one commenter on Twitter noted, "It's like installing fire alarms... but no sprinklers to control the fire."

Experts have also criticized the threshold of 1,500 parts per million (ppm) of CO2 tolerated by the government and the provincial public health agency in indoor settings. Stéphane Bilodeau, a lecturer in the Department of Bioengineering at McGill University, noted that "when we accept 1500 ppm, it means that we are very tolerant of the risk of infection: we should aim for 700-800 ppm." Higher levels of CO2 in the air indicate better conditions for aerosol transmission of viruses like COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the unions continue to maintain radio silence about the pandemic. The Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) and the Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement (FSE-CSQ), which represent most teachers in Quebec, have essentially scrubbed this crucial issue from their respective websites. On the FAE site, there is only a hyperlink (which does not work) to a May Ministry of Education directive announcing the end of mask mandates.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the education unions have played a key role in suppressing worker opposition to the reopening of schools and forcing workers to return to work without adequate protection against the potentially deadly and debilitating virus.

For its part, the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC), which is supported by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, has fought to mobilize school workers to fight for a Zero COVID policy in Canada's schools as part of a comprehensive pandemic elimination strategy on a global scale. Those interested in participating or learning more can contact us at cersc.csppb@gmail.com.



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