

Opposition grows to British Columbia NDP government's reckless school reopening

By Alexandra Greene
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Opposition is mounting across British Columbia to the New Democratic Party provincial government's dangerous plan to reopen schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic, putting the lives of teachers, students, and parents at risk. A petition criticizing the government's back-to-school policy signed by tens of thousands and protests organized by a group of concerned parents in Vancouver have forced the government to make a few cosmetic changes in the hopes of dissipating popular anger.

Some 40,000 people have signed a change.org petition demanding that the return to school be conducted on a voluntary basis, while two fathers have filed cases with the B.C. Supreme Court to block schools from opening.

Opposition is being fuelled by the recent uptick of COVID-19 cases in the province. More people are actively fighting infections in B.C. than at any time since May 9th, with 978 active cases as of August 28, including a single-day record number of new cases, 124, that day. Nearly 3,000 further people are under surveillance by the provincial Public Health Association due to exposure to known cases.

Earlier this month, Safe September B.C., a group established by concerned parents, organized a rally to protest the back-to-school drive at Vancouver's Joyce-Collingwood Sky Train station. The location was chosen due to its proximity to the constituency office of B.C. Health Minister Adrian Dix.

"We were pleased with the rally and the opportunity to share some parents' concerns with B.C.'s school restart plan," organizer Stacey Wakelin told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "There was media present and that allowed us to speak to other parents and encourage them to communicate with the Ministry of Education and their school districts."

Safe September BC is demanding: a delayed start to the school year to allow for on-site planning; mandatory

masks and physical distancing in all schools and classrooms; the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) to all schools; and fair options for anyone who needs to stay out of school until the pandemic ends.

The NDP government's original plan, released in mid-July, provoked widespread anger due to its lack of detail and dismissal of health and safety concerns. It proposed the creation of large cohorts or "social bubbles" of 60 elementary and middle school students and 120 high school students, within which social distancing would not be necessary. Even these cohorts or bubbles would not be maintained in most common areas, including cafeterias, the reception desk, or on school buses.

The plan also proposed that all K-12 students return to the classroom on a full-time basis from September.

The disastrous restart plan's flimsy guidelines are not supported by government action to address safety and hygiene concerns, placing the onus largely on individual staff and students. Teachers are asking how they are supposed to follow a guide that simply says, "use visual cues to maintain physical distance," "wash hands frequently" and "don't share supplies."

Even these basic measures will prove impossible to implement in many schools due to the severe defunding of public education in B.C. for two generations, regardless of which party—NDP, Liberals, or Social Credit—has been in power.

A major component of the government's narrative to justify the reopening of schools is that it is necessary to protect the mental health of students.

The B.C. Ministry of Education has shown how disingenuous such feigned concern is by providing schools with just 1 counsellor per 960 elementary students, 1 counsellor per 380 secondary students, and 1 psychologist per 3,400 students. Moreover, only \$45.6

million has been added to the B.C. COVID-19 action plan to support school districts and independent schools. Even if the entirety of that funding was to be utilized solely for sanitation and hygiene equipment for limiting the spread of the virus, it works out to just \$2 per student per week of the academic year.

Facing strong public backlash, Minister of Education Rob Fleming announced on August 10 a measly postponement of just two days to the beginning of the school year, which the government preposterously claimed would give teachers adequate time to prepare school buildings for the restart.

The indifference of the provincial government has provoked the emergence of numerous groups on social media, where discussions on the dangerous back-to-school drive are taking place. “The cake is half-baked and they just put it back in the oven for two minutes...” lamented one Surrey teacher online, in response to the paltry two-day delay.

Within a few days of the Safe September BC rally, the Ministry of Education announced further minor changes to the school reopening plan. These include modifying it to include a mask mandate for middle and high school students in halls, on buses and when interacting with people outside of their learning groups.

“There have been many advocates pushing hard on this issue and I certainly believe it is the work of many that will see any changes,” Wakelin told the WSWS. “In all honesty, this change is a small one and we hope to see more meaningful movement in the near future.”

The reality is that the trade union-backed, Green Party-supported NDP government has no intention of taking serious measures to protect the lives of students, teachers, and their loved ones. Instead, the government is doing all it can to drum up support for its reckless back-to-school policy, which is dictated by big business’ drive to “reopen the economy” and thereby intensify the extraction of profit from the working class.

One example of this was the production last week of a lying propaganda ad featuring Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry. The Ministry of Education claimed that the 30-second ad was designed to “build families’ confidence” about the so-called “strict health and safety measures that are in place to protect students and staff.”

To accomplish this, the government had to fabricate an imaginary classroom situation that will never exist in reality. The ad shows 6 students in the classroom in total, their desks spaced apart at a distance that will be impossible to actually achieve and situated comfortably

nearby a sink.

“I’ve had a lot of respect for Dr. Henry, but this is out of touch,” said one Twitter user in response to the ad. “No classroom looks like this. Try it again with 30 kids and that’s why students, parents, teachers and support staff are concerned.”

The Ministry of Education responded to the critique with a statement that is unintentionally heavily-laden with irony: “In order to videotape the ad,” it read, “the number of students in the room was limited for health and safety reasons and the children were placed at safe distances from each other.” This, less than two weeks before students are sent back to school with no such safety measures.

Patti Bacchus, a former chair of the Vancouver School Board with ties to the NDP establishment and the current education columnist of the *Georgia Straight* has been critical of the restart plan since its release. In an interview with the WSWS, she criticized the government’s failure to support families and for failing to listen to what educators are saying about the school reopening plan. “There’s a lack of confidence in the Ministry of Education’s plan. The government needs to listen to educators,” Bacchus said. “Families need to be given options. Parents need options for remote or partial remote learning but to still be connected to their local schools.”

The government is receiving critical support in its reckless back-to-school drive from the B.C. Teachers Federation (BCTF), which, while mouthing oppositional sounding phrases, is helping organize the return to class. BCTF President Teri Mooring revealingly remarked that the union is playing an active role in government committees to plan the reopening of schools. This little noted fact thoroughly exposes the union’s empty criticisms of the government’s plan, which have included calls for the hiring of more teachers and reduced class sizes. The union has deliberately avoided even issuing a threat to strike, underscoring that its criticisms of the government are nothing more than window dressing to help the NDP force through its homicidal plan in the face of widespread public opposition.

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