By email: provhlthoffice@gov.bc.ca

September 23, 2020

Dr. Bonnie Henry  
Provincial Health Officer  
Ministry of Health  
PO Box 9648, STN PROV GOVT  
1515 Blanshard Street  
Victoria, BC V8W 9P4

Dear Dr. Henry:

On behalf of the members of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, I’m writing to you today to express our deep concerns about the lack of transparency and consistency across health authorities in reporting on the cases of COVID-19 in schools.

With more than half a million students, 45,000 teachers, and thousands more support and administrative staff, our public education system brings together a significant cross-section of the BC population. Teachers, support staff, and administrative staff are all doing our utmost to keep children and their families safe but, without timely information, our efforts are significantly hampered.

While some health authorities do provide up-to-date and full information, others do not. As you know, Fraser Health is confronting the majority of coronavirus exposures in schools, and they have been communicating well with parents and the public, posting information online quickly. By contrast, Vancouver Coastal Health has only posted one exposure, that at Sentinel Secondary in West Vancouver, while news reports are full of additional examples in Vancouver, Richmond, and on the North Shore.

We understand the negative impacts of rumours and speculation especially in the context of a pandemic, this is the reason we take the position that information regarding schools needs to be shared in an open, transparent, and timely manner by the local health authorities. In the absence of this openness the public sharing of information will continue, and we are concerned this could lead to an undermining of public confidence in both the education system and in the health authorities.

We are also concerned about the different approaches to contact tracing amongst the various health authorities. We feel strongly that teachers need to be a part of the contact tracing process when a student is diagnosed with COVID-19. In classroom settings teachers and other education workers come into close contact with students when they circulate to support student learning, and teachers are a source of additional information in identifying close contacts of individual students.
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It is in this context that we are particularly troubled by the situation at Sentinel Secondary School in West Vancouver. Our particular concerns include the contact tracing process, and the lack of timeliness in the public reporting. As of today, the public reporting still characterizes this as a “potential exposure” from September 14–18.

While this particular example is concerning, we also note the different approaches taken by the various local health authorities, especially in regard to communication with school districts and school communities. This lack of consistency leads to confusion and heightened concern amongst school communities.

It is in the spirit of co-operation and with deep concern for the safety of students, school staffs, and public confidence in the public education system in BC, that we request a meeting with a representative from your office to discuss our concerns. If another avenue is more appropriate however, we would appreciate that advice.

Dr. Henry, your frequent media briefings have provided excellent information to British Columbians and have helped citizens feel united around a common cause. If you were to report on, and contextualize the school-based exposures, it would go a long way to assuaging the deep concerns and anxieties of teachers and parents. Armed with the necessary information, people will—as you have so often reminded us—be able to stay calm, kind, and safe.

Thank you for your ongoing efforts, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to educate British Columbians, young and old, on how we can tackle this crisis together.

Sincerely,

Teri Mooring  
President

pc: Carole James, Deputy Premier  
Don Wright, Deputy Minister to the Premier  
Scott MacDonald, Deputy Minister of Education  
Dr. Martin Lavoie, Chief, Fraser Health Authority  
Dr. Sue Pollock, Interim Chief, Interior Health Authority  
Dr. Raina Fumerton, Chief, Northern Health Authority  
Dr. Patty Daly, Chief, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority  
Dr. Richard Stanwick, Chief, Vancouver Island Health Authority

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