



Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers
L'Association provinciale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec

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Montreal, August 26, 2020

Dear Sirs,

I am writing to you in my capacity as President of the Québec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT), which represents the 8,000 teachers who work in the province's English public schools, more than half of whom teach in the Montreal metropolitan area. My purpose with this letter is to present their concerns regarding the return-to-school plan proposed by the Québec Government in mid-August. A recent survey carried out by CBC/Radio-Canada, published this morning, echoes many of the concerns expressed by our members in the last two weeks.

Like the vast majority of Québec's citizens and education community stakeholders, the teachers are in favour of students returning to the classroom for educational and psycho-social reasons. Although anxious, they are committed to dealing with the many challenges awaiting them.

However, recent epidemiological data, combined with the condition of many of our schools, media reports of other countries' experiences after reopening their schools, and

some notable differences with measures adopted by other Canadian provinces in their own back-to-school plans, have led our teachers to question the ability of Québec's plan, in these unprecedented times, to provide them with the safest possible conditions for their own health and that of their students, especially in the Greater Montreal region.

In particular:

- The experience of countries like Denmark and Norway appears to suggest that reduced ratios (12-15), physical distancing (two metres) and strict sanitary measures helped avoid outbreaks when their schools reopened last spring (*COVID-19: comment s'est déroulée la réouverture des écoles chez nos voisins européens*, Libération, May 9, 2020). The same can be said of schools that reopened in the rest of Québec last May and June.
- In contrast, according to a recent report in the *Journal de Montréal* on August 13 last, Israel's school reopening plan (no reduction of ratios, no capacity for physical distancing, masks not required) and the conditions in which the reopening took place (heatwaves, poorly ventilated classrooms, etc.), quickly triggered a substantial increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, causing thousands of students and citizens to be quarantined (placed in self-isolation) in that country. Interestingly, the number of new daily cases was very low before schools reopened. This particular case, which we hope is anecdotal only, certainly does not reassure our members, who are preparing to start the new school year in conditions very similar to those that existed in Israel (*Journal de Montréal*, August 13, 2020).
- An extensive South Korean study recently published in an American journal (*Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, volume 6, No. 3, October 2020) confirms that young people aged 10 to 19 do in fact spread COVID-19 as effectively as adults.
- Recent data suggest that, in Québec, the percentage of individuals under 30 infected with COVID-19 is increasing steadily, and is now closer to 25% (compared to 16% at the beginning of the summer break).
- In a document entitled *COVID-19: Herd Immunity and the Return of Children to School and Daycare*, the INSPQ advises against allowing children to infect one another, since it is likely to trigger a significant increase in adult infections too. The document states that: "In the current context, to avoid a spike in adult infections when schools are reopened, strong social distancing measures will have to be maintained in schools."
- The INSPQ website states that, based on current knowledge, although the predominant transmission method is contact with respiratory droplets from someone who is symptomatic, the virus can also be propagated through the air via aerosol secretions.
- An open letter signed by more than 150 scientists and health professionals last Monday strongly recommended that your Government should make some adjustments to its school reopening plan, to help prevent outbreaks of COVID-19.

It considered the current measures to be insufficient and suggested, among other things, that students should be required to stay at least one metre away from other students, and wear masks in the classroom (*Rentrée scolaire: les mesures sanitaires sont insuffisantes, disent des médecins*, La Presse, August 25, 2020.)

- Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Greater Montreal region has been the virus epicentre of both Québec and Canada.
- A number of school buildings are at maximum capacity, and are outdated and poorly ventilated. Like many CHSLDs, very few of Québec's schools have mechanical ventilation systems. The INSPQ has reiterated the importance of optimizing ventilation.¹
- As has been the case in recent years, it is more than likely that there will be more heatwaves in the coming weeks. (*L'été n'est pas terminé: une nouvelle vague estivale est en préparation*, MétéoMédia.com, August 20, 2020).
- Ontario's plan provides for ratios to be reduced in grades 9 to 12, whereas Québec's plan does not provide for any reduction of ratios in secondary schools.
- Once in the classroom, students will be allowed to remove their face-coverings and physical distancing will not be required, or even possible.
- Although a two-metre distance must be maintained between students and the teacher, many teachers believe it will be difficult in practice to apply this requirement in their daily teaching.
- The MEQ has made no commitment regarding the installation of physical barriers in classrooms, in particular near teachers' desks, even though it is delusional to believe that the two-metre distancing requirement will be upheld.
- In secondary schools, teachers will be moving from one group to another, meaning that many will be in contact with several different groups of students on any given day and in any given week (for some subjects, they will be in contact with more than 150 different students).
- Many believe it will be very difficult to enforce classroom bubbles inside and outside school, since it is impossible to control contacts between students when they are at home or in society.

Given all the above elements, and to ensure that the return to school will be safe for everyone and does not trigger outbreaks of the disease in schools that could lead to full or partial re-confinement for teachers, students and citizens, the QPAT submits the following questions:

- Would it not have been more prudent to impose physical distancing in the classroom for Elementary Cycle Three and all secondary school classes?
- Accordingly, and for the sake of prudence, should student-teacher ratios be revised downwards and, as is already the case for Secondary IV and V, should schools be given the flexibility to operate at 50% capacity if necessary for all secondary levels, to allow for physical distancing?

¹ <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/publications/2992-environnement-interieur-qr-covid19>

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- Should students and staff members be required to wear face-coverings in the classroom if physical distancing is not possible and the premises are poorly ventilated?
- If not, what measures would be possible and desirable to mitigate the lack of appropriate ventilation in classrooms?
- Will physical barriers be installed in front of all teachers' desks, similar to those that are now in place in most stores?

Teachers, many of whom are preparing to receive their students as early as tomorrow, not only need to be reassured, but also hope that the necessary adjustments will be made to ensure that the return to school is successful, safe and sustainable over time.

I hope the foregoing is received with the greatest consideration for the well-being of the entire school community.

Yours sincerely,



Heidi Yetman,
President,
QPAT-APEQ