

Montreal, October 21, 2020

BY E-MAIL

**Mr. Christian Dubé**  
Minister of Health and  
Social Services  
Ministère de la Santé et  
des Services sociaux  
[ministre@msss.gouv.qc.ca](mailto:ministre@msss.gouv.qc.ca)

**D<sup>r</sup> Horacio Arruda**  
National Public Health Director and  
Associate Deputy Minister  
Ministère de la Santé et  
des Services sociaux  
[horacio.arruda@msss.gouv.qc.ca](mailto:horacio.arruda@msss.gouv.qc.ca)

Dear Sirs,

We are writing to you at this time, almost two months after the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, to inform you, once again, of the concerns and worries of the teachers we represent. As union organizations representing teachers throughout Québec, the *Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement* (FSE-CSQ) and the Québec Provincial Association of teachers (QPAT) have been actively involved in numerous consultations since the beginning of the pandemic, and have submitted several opinions and recommendations based on the legitimate concerns and priorities expressed by their members.

Things have evolved rapidly since the beginning of the new school year, and it is now clear that, in Québec, we have reached a new stage in the COVID-19 pandemic. The daily number of new positive cases continues to be very high in most regions of Québec, and the number of cases is also increasing in schools and centres throughout the public education network, resulting in numerous classroom closures. This is an everyday reality in many schools, and as you know, it has led to frequent absences among individual students, groups of students and school staff members, and has become an additional factor for stress and instability among teachers, students and parents alike. The overly long wait times for testing and obtaining results in many regions of Québec have exacerbated the problems for everyone.

Despite this, teachers are still working on the front lines and are providing the best possible educational service in the circumstances. Many are telling us that they are exhausted and do not know whether they can continue for much longer in these conditions. They therefore need to know that, when measures are implemented in schools and centres, the Government and public health authorities are making coherent decisions based on science, and are applying the precautionary principle in the best interests of students and school staff members.

Many of the recommendations made by acknowledged public health agencies, as well as epidemiological data from research into the SARS-CoV-2 and the recently-issued expert opinions on barrier and prevention measures for COVID-19, have raised questions for our members and have led us to conclude that there may still be some blind spots with regard to the measures implemented in our schools and centres.

**Among other things:**

- The daily number of new cases is now above 1,000 and is increasing in most regions of Québec.<sup>1</sup>
- There has been a significant increase in the number of schools with at least one case of COVID-19. On October 9, Premier François Legault said that more than 1,000 classrooms were closed in Québec due to COVID-19, in more than 780 schools and centres, affecting more than 3% of the province's students in the elementary, secondary, vocational training and adult general education sectors.<sup>2</sup>
- An important study by the Princeton Environmental Institute confirmed that children, adolescents and young adults can also be significant vectors of transmission for COVID-19.<sup>3</sup>
- In one of its publications,<sup>4</sup> the *Centre de recherche en santé publique* (CReSP) reviews the effectiveness of different measures implemented in schools to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infections among students and teachers in several different countries (China, Israel, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand and some American states). The measures found to be most effective were:
  - reducing student density in elementary school classrooms and implementing physical distancing between students in secondary schools;
  - using rapid tests;
  - wearing masks;
  - applying a cohort system.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Les cas « augmentent dans tous les milieux » en Montérégie*, La Presse, October 12, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *COVID-19 en milieu scolaire – Plus de 1 000 classes ont été fermées au Québec*, La Presse, October 9, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> *Largest COVID-19 contact tracing study to date finds children key to spread, evidence of super spreaders*, Princeton Environmental Institute, September 30, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Le CReSP répond à vos questions*, Volume 2, No. 2, October 7, 2020.

- A document produced by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control<sup>5</sup> reaches similar conclusions and confirms that children and young people can also transmit the virus that causes COVID-19. While it does not recommend the closure of schools and daycare centres, it strongly recommends the use of protective measures similar to those imposed in society as a whole, to avoid spreading the virus as far as possible. These measures include:
  - physical distancing;
  - better ventilation, cleaning and disinfection;
  - other hygiene measures such as frequent washing of hands;
  - provision and use of personal protective equipment (masks, goggles, etc.).
- Numerous specialists, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), have confirmed that the SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes COVID-19 is also transmissible by air beyond two metres, through aerosols. They recommend greater emphasis on ventilation and on the types of activities that take place in closed environments.<sup>6</sup>
- In an open letter published in *La Presse*, several Québec specialists recommended that the Department should impose rapid and systematic aeration and ventilation measures in all Québec's schools, and pay the associated costs, with a view to achieving five air changes per hour, in order to dilute coronavirus effectively.<sup>7</sup>
- A number of specialists, including Dr. Marc Dionne of the Québec City CHU, recently spoke to *Le Devoir* about the limitations of contact tracing and the impossibility of doing it quickly enough, meaning that it is often necessary to resort to partial closures of classrooms and stores.<sup>8</sup>
- A document produced by the Government of Northwest Territories confirmed that rapid testing speeds up the process of tracing people with whom the infected person has been in contact, and hence the treatment of positive cases.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> *COVID-19 in children and the role of school settings in COVID-19 transmission*, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, August 6, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> *COVID-19 – Des experts appellent à se méfier davantage de la transmission aérienne*, *La Presse*, October 13, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> *Plus d'aération, moins de contamination*, *La Presse*, September 30, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> *La réponse à la deuxième vague jugée tardive et timide*, *Le Devoir*, October 10, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> *Dépistage de la COVID-19 – La réponse du GTNO à la COVID-19*, GTNO, last updated on September 17, 2020.

- Health Canada recently approved the use of a rapid test for COVID-19 and suggested that the new procedure be used in schools and centres.<sup>10</sup>

**The FSE-CSQ and QPAT therefore make the following recommendations with a view to keeping schools open and protecting the physical and mental health of teachers:**

- Reduce wait times for COVID-19 testing to a minimum, for school staff members and students, by making the recently-approved rapid test units available in schools.
- Quickly adopt aeration and ventilation measures in schools. As recommended by numerous specialists, if a mechanical ventilation system is not available and the windows cannot be opened to allow air to circulate, mobile air purification systems should be installed in classrooms to make up for the lack of aeration.
- Explore school organization models that allow for the greatest possible physical distancing in schools, including in classrooms.

The above recommendations are made with the welfare of teachers, students and the community in general in mind, and we hope they will receive due consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Josée Scalabrini  
President, FSE-CSQ



Heidi Yetman  
President, QPAT

---

<sup>10</sup> COVID-19: Santé Canada approuve un test de dépistage rapide, La Presse, September 30, 2020.