

## MTS Positions and Concerns

Each of the issues listed below takes a unique and heavy toll on teachers, clinicians, school leaders, and substitute teachers. The Manitoba Teachers' Society continues to advocate strongly for a safe and sustainable school re-opening, to raise issues about the intensification of workload, and to call for measures that ensure the well-being of educators.

The Society maintains that ongoing input and consultation with all stakeholders will be crucial to a safe and sustainable school re-opening.

---

## Public Health Orders

The health and safety of everyone in Manitoba public schools is paramount as we return to an in-class learning environment. All divisions must follow Public Health Orders consistently to ensure a sustainable return to school.

The Society was successful in its call for mandatory wearing of masks in public schools and believes that personal protective equipment, as recommended by public health, should be provided to all staff and students.

## Outbreak Management

The majority of respondents to the Teacher Engagement Survey said that procedures and policies for dealing with student and staff illness are important. The government has provided guidelines for dealing with sick students and staff, however, there are a number of gaps that must be addressed.

For example, the MTS is in agreement with the Public Health Officer's direction to stay home when sick, however, without a province-wide mandate to this effect it will be left up to individual school divisions to interpret and implement.

The Society calls on the government to provide local public health teams to support the school to manage well-being, panic, worry, anxiety, family flight, and stigmatization associated with positive COVID cases.

## Protection of Teachers

Many teachers, student support workers, clinicians, and substitute teachers travel among several buildings or even divisions to do their work. The health and safety risks of doing so must be addressed through consistent divisional protocols.

To ensure the health and well-being of those in our classrooms and homes, it is imperative that divisions are consistent, fair, and reasonable in complying with their legal duties to employees who require workplace accommodations based on medical, age-related, or family status.

When teachers are required to self-isolate and they are not sick, they should be working from home. The Society is opposed to any mandated use of sick time provisions for reasons other than illness, including the requirement to self-isolate when not symptomatic. Each situation is different and grievance action will be considered in response to direction given to any of our members to inappropriately utilize sick time.

Workplace safety and health standards are more important than ever. In Manitoba, workers may refuse to work or do particular work at a workplace if they believe on reasonable grounds that the work constitutes a danger to his or her safety or health or to the safety or health of another worker or another person.

## Gradual Re-Entry

The Society recommends a gradual re-entry to schools over multiple weeks to help mitigate, identify and correct issues that arise from repopulating schools too quickly. This will also give students and staff time to adapt to new behaviours and routines and reduce stress and anxiety. A slower approach will help create the best possible conditions for sustainable safety.

## **Class Size and Room Density**

While the province has shown a commitment to safety by providing masks for students and staff, we have other concerns that remain unaddressed. Limiting close and sustained contact is a fundamental practice to reduce the spread of COVID-19, making it imperative that classrooms allow for proper physical distancing. Since the number of students in a classroom is directly related to the ability to physically distance, class sizes and spaces are of great concern. Large class sizes in small classroom settings render adherence to the recommended two-metres of distance impossible in an active learning setting. Immobile students in rows of desks does not create an effective learning environment.

Masks are not a substitute to distancing, and distancing should be the first priority.

Federal and provincial funds must be used to help achieve the two-metres of physical distance by facilitating a reduction in class size. In fact, an estimated 1,400 full-time teachers would fill the demand for staffing smaller class sizes. The creation of more classroom space through portables and creative use of community spaces would also support a safe return to school.

## **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

The instruction of mandated curricula, which includes music (K-6), physical education (K-12), art (K-6), basic French (K-8), etc. must be maintained. Manitoba Education should consult with specialist teachers to ensure sustainable program variety. The MTS is opposed to unilateral program cuts and encourages the creative use of spaces to ensure that subject areas, which support the health and well-being of students, are consistently taught across the province. Consultation with Special Area Groups of Teachers is paramount for fostering successful and creative solutions.

The Society calls for the suspension of provincial standards testing for 2020-2021 in order to prioritize instructional time and formative assessment to inform recovery learning. Standardized assessment, at a time of continued uncertainty and flux, will only serve to highlight the inequities of COVID. It is critical that we avoid the temptation to resume previous expectations of curriculum coverage, assessment and reporting. Time and human resources must be used in efficient ways to meet the needs of students, and teachers are best positioned to make these professional judgments.

## **Workload Intensification**

The Society is opposed to increased teacher workload due to the mandated delivery of instruction outside of the instructional day. Instead, MTS advocated for staff/divisional support teams to be assigned to provide alternate program delivery for students who are unable to attend school due to medically-confirmed risk factors.

Parents who choose to keep their children at home, for reasons that are non-medical, are accepting the responsibility to teach their children. Home schooling is not the responsibility of the members of The Manitoba Teachers' Society.

## **Recovery Learning**

According to the Teacher Engagement Survey, teachers need collaborative planning time to support recovery learning and students' transition back to school. In addition to providing teacher time to collaborate, the Society recommends the addition of teachers to support ongoing credit recovery. The government must commit to additional funding for increased staffing needs, recovery learning, infrastructure upgrades, and ongoing safety precautions.

## **Professional Learning**

The Manitoba Teachers' Society vehemently opposes the changing of non-instructional days to instructional days and the denial of teacher participation in MTS PD Day events to be held on October 23, 2020.

Professional learning and development provide the necessary tools to succeed in a COVID teaching and learning environment. The need for teacher autonomy in choosing some PD opportunities is reinforced as teachers are at the frontlines of education and in the best position to assess the needs of their students as they transition to an in-class learning environment. Teachers must have access to PD more than ever before.

## **Substitute Teachers**

There is a shortage of substitute teachers under normal circumstances, which will now be far more pronounced as teachers heed Public Health advice to stay home when sick. However, because substitute teachers do not have access to sick time it may influence their decision to teach in the upcoming school year. Additionally, many substitute teachers, due to their age, are in

the high-risk category for contracting coronavirus and may choose not to work as a precaution. Manitoba Education and school divisions must create a plan for recruiting and retaining substitute teachers as well as consider hiring full-time, on-site supply teachers.

To help alleviate these concerns, a portion of the \$85.4 million of federal funding should be used to help establish a bank of sick days for COVID-19 related purposes, accessible by substitute teachers. Additionally, a plan for recruiting and retaining substitute teachers could include the hiring of supply substitute teachers on term contracts, as well as reassurances about financial safeguards should they become ill.

The Society believes that substitutes must be certified teachers. However, recognizing that this is not always viable, the Society will consider the use of teacher candidates when substitute teachers are unavailable, as well as modified restrictions and timelines for the granting of Limited Teaching Permits on a temporary basis.

## Communication

Respondents to the Teacher Engagement Survey said that above all, a clear plan, well communicated, and consistently implemented is key to ensuring family and student buy-in for the return to an in-school learning environment. Notwithstanding the need to be flexible, teachers need the time and space to prepare for changes within this evolving context.

## Questions?

Please contact an MTS Staff Officer for any questions or concerns related to the issues here, or any that may arise over the coming months.

**MTS Staff Officers can be reached at the numbers listed below:**

**Phone: (204) 888-7961**

**Toll Free: 1-800-262-8803**