

OPEN LETTER

February 1, 2021

The Honourable Heather Stefanson, M.L.A.
Minister of Health
Room 302 Legislative Building
450 Broadway
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8

Dear Minister Stefanson,

Manitoba educators are extremely disappointed with the announcement that they are not included on the vaccination priority list, despite ongoing reliance on the essential service they provide.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, almost a year ago, the premier and former education minister have sung the praises of teachers, and rightly so. We know that teachers play a vital role in keeping schools open, which in turn allows parents to go to work, driving economic recovery – a primary focus for all governments during this pandemic.

Our members have done their part to ensure that schools stay open and students keep learning, despite struggling to cope with crushing workloads and unreasonable and continually shifting expectations. Daily, educators put their personal health at risk, because their commitment to the students of this province is of the utmost importance.

The failure of this government to recognize the important contribution of educators by prioritizing them for the vaccine is a significant setback to teacher morale. More importantly, this oversight has the potential to bring the education system to a halt - the very thing that the government is trying to avoid.

Minister, education staff are in the unique position of being essential workers, who work directly with the one group that cannot be vaccinated. As you know, children under the age of 16 are not eligible to be vaccinated, however they can still contract and spread the coronavirus.

Due to the nature of a teacher's job and factors like class size and physical space, it is a challenge to achieve the two-metres of physical distance, as recommended by public health experts. In fact, we know from our recent membership poll that two-thirds of members find it very challenging to ensure students practice physical distancing during the school day.

Meanwhile, only three in 10 teachers, themselves, can achieve the recommended two-metres of physical distance in classrooms. The fact that students in K-3 are not required to wear masks in the classroom compounds the vulnerability of teachers and increases their risk of contracting the Coronavirus.

The Society has called on the government since August 2020 to mandate masks for all students and staff in our public schools. The government has not acted on this recommendation, which would have provided an additional layer of protection to teachers.

All this to say, teachers are in the impossible situation of being required to provide an essential service, taking on significant health and safety risks, and not being granted any of the protections afforded to other essential frontline workers.

I want to be clear; teachers are not asking to jump the queue. Rather, we would like the province to follow the lead of Ontario by recognizing teachers as essential frontline workers and including them on the vaccine priority list.

Vaccinating all education staff will help keep schools open and students learning.

The Manitoba Teachers' Society would appreciate the opportunity to participate in consultations regarding the criteria for essential workers to make the case for inclusion of educators on the list of essential frontline workers prioritized for vaccination against COVID-19.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Bedford', written over a large, faint circular watermark or stamp.

James Bedford
President
The Manitoba Teachers' Society