

Safeguarding teachers' mental health through the second wave of COVID-19 and beyond

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BC Teachers' Federation

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Introduction

Among the social issues exposed by COVID-19, the mental health concerns of Canada's teachers have intensified. A recent national survey conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation in October 2020¹ found almost 70% of respondents were concerned about their mental health and well-being seven months into this national public health emergency. However, as seen in research from BC, mental health concerns among teachers are not new. Research conducted by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) in 2017–18, well before the COVID pandemic, indicated widespread stress, weariness, and burnout related to workload, inadequate student and classroom supports, and a strong perception of disrespect for teacher work within governmental and public contexts. COVID-19 has not only precipitated new demands on teachers, but also magnified pre-existing fissures in underfunded, under-resourced and undermaintained schools.

This brief outlines current conditions and policy recommendations to generate stronger mental health supports for Canadian public education teachers through the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on both pre- and post-COVID outbreak research, it illustrates how the mental health of public school teachers during COVID-19's second wave will be affected by a complex matrix of institutional, organizational, cultural, and inter-personal factors. These factors have left a significant portion of BC's public school teachers feeling emotionally, physically, ethically, and professionally compromised.

Teachers' Mental Health: An epidemic of its own?

Prior to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of teachers' mental health was an increasing focus for educational policy makers and researchers. Teaching is a demanding job at the best of times. Research shows that, globally, teachers experience more stress, burnout, and depression compared to other professions and that teachers experience higher levels of stress than the average population, and comparable to other care-giving and client-oriented professions such as physicians and nurses.² School systems around the world are confronting

¹ The Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey (<https://www.ctf-fce.ca/canadian-teachers-experiencing-a-mental-health-crisis>) conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, received nearly 14,000 responses. The Canadian Teachers' Federation is the national voice for the teaching profession. As the national alliance of provincial and territorial teacher organizations, the CTF/FCE represents over 300,000 elementary and secondary school teachers across Canada.

² Martin, Dolmage & Sharpe (2012). *Seeking wellness: Descriptive findings from the survey of the work life and health of teachers in Regina and Saskatoon*; Marko, K.A. (2015). *Hearing the unheard voices: An in-depth look at teacher mental health and wellness*; Kinman, G., Wray, S. & Strange, C. (2011) Emotional labour, burnout and job satisfaction in UK teachers: the role of workplace social support. *Educational Psychology*, 31(7), 843-856; Weldon, P. & Ingvarson, L. (2016). *School Staff Workload Study: Final Report to the Australian Education Union Victorian Branch*. Camberwell, Australia: The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd.;

a shortage of qualified teachers, while losing experienced mid-career teachers. Mental distress is one of the primary reasons for lost work days, long term disability claims, and professional attrition—with teachers either moving schools or leaving teaching practice altogether.

In 2017, the BCTF conducted a survey on teacher mental health and well-being that aimed to develop a broad, province-wide understanding of the prevalence, nature, contributing factors, and impacts of BCTF members' mental health concerns, and to assess experiences with and barriers to mental health support services.³ Approximately two-thirds of teachers reported feeling stressed, emotionally exhausted, and/or weary due to their job responsibilities all or most of the time. Major contributing factors included 1) a perceived climate of disrespect; 2) challenging working conditions, including intensification of workload; and 3) inadequate student support services. One in five teachers reported high levels of burnout while two of five had seriously considered leaving teaching within the previous 12 months.

Subsequent focus groups with teachers from across the province deepened our understanding of sources of teachers' mental distress. These can be seen broadly in seven themes:

- **A teaching culture of “pushing through”⁴**—Many teachers spoke to a culture of teaching that compels them to place professional imperatives before their own well-being. The phrase “pushing through” recurred in various ways, as participants described their own or their colleagues' reluctance to address stress, mental fatigue, and even diagnosed mental health concerns as it might be perceived as irresponsible or inconsiderate of their colleagues, or interfering with their professional obligations to their students. This includes, for example, the “need to be working hard and seen to be working hard” within their schools and feeling that—because “you're like a public person at all times”—a sense of obligation and public scrutiny follows them into their personal lives and activities.
- **Untenable workload**—Teachers reported that under staffing and downshifting of administrative tasks have intensified teacher workload, with various mental health consequences including increased stress levels and sense of inefficacy. Attending to managerial duties within an audit culture left teachers feeling torn between meeting both administrative and classroom commitments. Counsellors and special education teachers, in particular, were described as being “majorly overworked” in this regard.

Santavirta et al. (2007). The association between job strain and emotional exhaustion in a cohort of 1,028 Finnish teachers. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 77, 213–228; Nubling, M. et al. (2011). *European-wide survey on teachers work related stress: Assessment, Comparison and Evaluation of the impact of psychosocial hazards on teachers at their workplace*. Brussels, Belgium: European Trade Union Committee for Education.

³ A baseline survey was conducted in May/June 2017. The BCTF received 679 respondents from a random sample of 4,000 BCTF members resulting in a 95% confidence level and 3.75% sampling error.

⁴ Throughout this report, teachers' words drawn directly from BCTF research data will be indicated by double quotation marks unless otherwise cited.

- **Chronic systemic underfunding of schooling for a “forgotten generation”**—Teachers are keenly aware of the erosion and neglect of BC’s public school system and identified this as a source of stress and demoralization. Teachers cited a chronic lack of funding leading to time consuming and frustrating bureaucratic processes to obtain support and resources for their students. When support is delayed or inadequate, teachers are left “holding the bag” and “floundering” without sufficient resources, time, and training to feel effective in their work. Staffing issues and Teachers Teaching On Call (TTOC) shortages resulted in participants’ reluctance to take sick days for mental health-related concerns. If TTOCs were not available to replace them, teachers felt guilt and concern that their absence would negatively impact their colleagues who were left to cover classes.
- **Complexity of the work of teaching**—When teachers described their teaching assignments, the complicated pedagogical and personal demands of teaching was highlighted. Teachers spoke about the persistent weight and pressure of their roles that requires both pedagogical expertise to meet students’ learning needs, as well as emotional capacity to support students and their families. Teachers described the mental health impacts of these complex responsibilities as “compassion fatigue,” “burning out,” and “running out of energy.”
- **Administrative surveillance and practices of “We’re watching you”**—Teachers cited instances of administrative surveillance and perceived mistrust as counter-productive to wellness promotion. Teachers described encountering managerial pressure to avoid taking sick days for physical illnesses or being questioned about the legitimacy of a sick day/leave request. When such legitimate instances of visible physical illness were questioned, teachers felt even more reluctant to access sick days/leave for wellness or mental health-related absences which appeared less justifiable.
- **Change and instability**—Teachers mentioned employment instability and precarity as a source of stress. High staff turnover, repeated (and “last minute”) changes to subject/grade assignments and schools, and uncertain employment prospects left teachers feeling trapped in a cycle of economic vulnerability, professional unpreparedness, and personal disappointment.
- **Professional disrespect**—Media misrepresentation of teacher work, and a general lack of understanding of the teaching profession, was a source of stress, anxiety, and demoralization for many in the profession. Examples included the “chilling effects” of media coverage of teachers’ disciplinary cases, misconceptions about the demands of teaching (“we work six hours a day, eight months of the year, you know?”) and integration of professional learning in the school calendar (“here’s another day when you do nothing”).

Teachers have adopted multiple strategies to mitigate the causes and impacts of mental distress. For example, teachers may choose to reduce their assignment/FTE to create a more manageable workload. Other teachers may choose to leave a particular assignment or school in the hope the next position might be less stressful. When teachers do not have the flexibility or ability to move assignments or schools, they end up feeling trapped and unable to improve

their work situation. The BCTF research highlighted how teachers who were unable to access mental health and well-being supports experienced diminished work performance and increased sense of inefficacy. Their situation also caused lateral impact on their collegial relationships, exacerbating their stress and anxiety.

There were also barriers to accessing supports and services, including:

- **lack of awareness** and general knowledge of service options and program information.
- **lack of accessibility** in the form of long wait times before and between service visits, limited or inflexible access hours, and limited service in smaller communities.
- **limited choice** of service delivery method (e.g., preferring in-person but limited to online counselling).
- **inadequate time** to make or attend appointments due to workload and family commitments.
- **institutional red tape** such as limited mental health/counselling benefits, complicated service rules and regulations, and onerous paperwork requirements.
- **social stigma** amplified by lack of confidentiality when accessing services, employer knowledge of service access (e.g., perceived surveillance through attendance management systems), fear of colleagues' knowledge of service access, and concerns about others' perceptions.

The BCTF research also foregrounded “protective factors” that serve to mitigate against mental health stressors. These include:

- **acknowledging systemic causes:** moving away from self blame for systemic issues such as understaffing, education change, lack of professional development and training, and inadequate student services.
- **accessing and normalizing** the use of mental health support and services.
- **feeling effective and successful** in their work as teachers.
- **personal boundary setting** regarding workload and commitments.
- **institutional recognition and support** for both their teaching work and their efforts to safeguard their mental health.
- **informal peer support and encouragement.**

Teachers' mental health and COVID-19

As in jurisdictions around the world, British Columbia's public education system was transformed in the spring of 2020. In the span of days, teachers were expected to fundamentally change how they taught. With little warning and often little support, they scrambled to transition to online education while worrying about their students, their communities, and their own health. The pandemic also made it much more difficult to access the “moral rewards”⁵ which lie at the heart of teaching. The pandemic also undermined some

⁵ Santoro, D. (2011). Good teaching in difficult time: demoralization in the pursuit of good work. *American Journal of Education*(118), p. 1.

of the very sources of mental health resilience that teachers have identified, as discussed in the previous section. For instance, collegial connections and engagement in daily classroom work have been limited by remote work and physical distancing protocols.

Two surveys conducted by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation among BC public school teachers in June 2020⁶ and September 2020⁷ highlight teachers' perspectives on, among other issues, the impact of the pandemic outbreak on their mental health and well-being. In June, for instance, a majority of teachers felt more fatigued (77%), isolated (56%), and worried about their students (81%) than before March 2020.⁸ Fewer than half of teachers felt able to balance teaching with their personal life during the pandemic (45%), while well over half reported that they did not have the same emotional connection with their students as before the pandemic (69%). Decreased well-being has also been fueled by the increased workloads that teachers are experiencing during the pandemic. Two in three teachers reported a somewhat or significantly increased workload, with over one in three reporting a significant increase.⁹

The return to in-person instruction added substantial health and safety concerns onto these stressors. While some teachers reported satisfaction with the health and safety measures implemented in their schools at the start the new school year, many reported inadequate health and safety measures at their work sites.¹⁰ For instance, teachers expressed frustration that protocols regarding mask-wearing and physical distancing required in other public sectors and venues were not applied in classrooms and school spaces. Many reported scrambling to provide their own cleaning equipment and supplies, while others experienced delays or rejections when applying for work accommodations based on personal or familial vulnerabilities such as chronic health conditions. The anxiety associated with fulfilling their professional responsibilities in difficult circumstances left many questioning their ability to remain in their teaching assignments—and the teaching profession.

As many BC teachers have shared, what keeps them going each day, and what keeps them in the profession for the long run, are their relationships with students and supporting their students as learners, citizens, and human beings. Phelan and Jantzen, in their study on the emotional toll of obligation in teaching, point to the dual function of “obligation” as both a source of purpose and of anxiety.¹¹ The very sense of commitment that gives teachers their

⁶ BCTF (August 2020). Teaching during the pandemic: What BC teachers experienced and what BC schools need now. Retrieved from:

<https://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/NewsAndEvents/NewsReleases/2020/BCTF%20-%20Teaching%20During%20the%20Pandemic%20-%20Aug%202020.pdf>

⁷ BCTF Provincial Snapshot: September K-12 Restart.

https://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/Research/K-12_Restart_Provincial.pdf

⁸ BCTF (August 2020). Teaching during the pandemic, p. 2.

⁹ Ibid. p. 6.

¹⁰ BCTF Provincial Snapshot, p. 1.

¹¹ Janzen, M., & Phelan, A. (2018). “Tugging at our sleeves”: understanding the experiences of obligation in teaching. *Teaching Education*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1080/10476210.2017.142>

affirming sense of purpose and reward is also the force that commits them to protecting students from COVID-19 pandemic, and from endemic conditions of underfunded and understaffed schools. When their students' needs are underserved, teachers' anxiety and stress increase. In short, teachers thrive when they find their work fulfilling, engaging and rewarding. They find strength and support in their collegial connections and their daily relationships with their students and feel connected to the families and communities within which they teach and with whom they have direct contact. Teachers thrive when they are connected to their teaching purpose and respected by those they interact with most. COVID-19 has severely undermined these critical sources of emotional resilience for a significant number of BC teachers.

Now and Beyond COVID-19: Recommendations

The multi-faceted impacts on teacher well-being have arisen both from the pandemic itself, but also from teachers doing their best to respond to it at a time when what was expected of them has been shifting rapidly and the necessary supports are often not in place. Teachers thrive when they feel empowered, rewarded, and effective in carrying out work they deeply value: building strong pedagogical relationships and communication with their students.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues its global surge, Canadian teachers face a new season with further exposure to both epidemiological and mental health risks. The experiences and concerns teachers have expressed about the teaching under pandemic conditions require urgent action as this Standing Committee considers the broad-ranging effects of COVID on the mental health of Canadians. Canada's teachers have played a significant and undervalued role as essential professional workers during this time, providing stability, safety, care, and learning opportunities to children and youth in precarious conditions.

Supporting teachers' mental health is a complex problem requiring a complex set of responses. Short-term emergency responses are important, and help over-burdened teachers get through a day or a week but ensuring public school teachers remain well throughout a long, rewarding career requires cultural and political will and systemic commitment. Long-term austerity measures have left a legacy of systemic fatigue, not just in overcrowded and understaffed schools, but chronic burnout and psychological weariness among a significant number of teachers.

This brief has outlined key issues and research regarding both the mental health effects of COVID-19 on BC teachers, as well as long-standing effects of inadequate funding, weakened student learning conditions, and a political and funding climate that has accelerated their de-professionalization. Research indicates that when a society values public education and its children, teachers—and their wellness—may flourish, too. In this context, the British

Columbia Teachers' Federation respectfully submits the following six recommendations for this Standing Committee's consideration:¹²

Recommendation 1

That the Standing Committee on Health reinforce in its report the importance of stable, predictable and adequate funding to deliver quality public education to all students in Canada.

Recommendation 2

That the Government of Canada develop accountability mechanisms for the Safe Return to Class Fund. This could be accomplished by creating a temporary Ad-Hoc Intergovernmental Taskforce that would help ensure the effective use of education related funding.

Recommendation 3

That the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health reinforce in its report that the provincial and territorial Ministries of Education be financially enabled to provide sufficient and targeted funding to local school districts to expand teaching and support staff to accommodate the smaller class sizes necessary for physical distancing.

Recommendation 4

That the Government of Canada increase the weekly amount of the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB) to \$1,000 to ensure that teachers do not experience such a significant reduction in income when they run out of contractual sick leave provisions.

Recommendation 5

That the government-funded virtual mental health care portal, Wellness Together Canada, incorporate a trauma-informed approach and that services be offered for the unique needs of frontline workers and teachers.

Recommendation 6

That the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health encourage informed, constructive, and transparent collaboration and communication between teachers, public health and education officials, administrators, and district officials in COVID-19 health and

¹² For a complete report on the BCTF's 2021 funding recommendations, see <https://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/Briefs/EducationFundingBrief2021.pdf>

safety planning—creating a culture of inclusion and involvement, respect for teachers, collaborative planning, problem-solving, and decision-making.

Organizational Description

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation represents all 45,000 teachers in the K–12 public education system in BC. A proud union of professionals, the BCTF is outspoken in its advocacy for a strong, stable public education system as the foundation of democratic society. The three pillars of the BCTF are collective bargaining, professional development, and social justice. As well, the Federation is deeply committed to education for decolonization by working toward the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.