



Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association

Dear Members,

We hope this communication finds you and your family well. We know that there continue to be many and significant concerns with the Ministry and District Restart Plan. Please be assured that VESTA continues to advocate with the Board on the implementation of the district plan. Neither VESTA nor the BCTF have approved or endorsed either level of the Restart Plan and we continue to advocate on your behalf at each of those tables.

This communication will be short on certainty, as many of the details are still actively being discussed. Your Staff Rep and Health and Safety Reps will play an important role in supporting the roll out of information prior to the return of students to regular classes on September 14. VESTA will be holding an Information Session for members on September 8 at 4pm. An email invitation will be sent by email.

In the meantime, we hoped to remind you of the structures and protections in place.

10 things to remember for back to school:

10. COVID-19 is a marathon, not a sprint

From the beginning, it was unclear how long COVID would be with us. It's clear that COVID will have long term implications on our work and personal lives, and that uncertainty and constant change will be a feature of our lives for months or years to come.

Please ensure that health and safety and wellness – for you and for your students – is part of your daily plan. No part of our job takes priority. If you can, slow things down, reduce expectations for yourself and your students, and take your time adjusting to the changes before us. Conserve your energy and use your personal time for yourself and your sick leave when you're sick.

9. Your colleagues can support you and need your support

A survey over the summer identified that teacher colleagues were the most trusted and supportive aspect of teachers' lives in the spring of 2020. We urge you to consider the impact of isolation on your work and wellbeing and to find safe ways to talk, share resources and ideas, collaborate to reduce workload where possible.

We can never know what realities our colleagues are facing outside of school and urge generosity and caring with one another, in a time where stress and fear can serve to increase our feelings of disconnect. Not everyone will be participating or engaging in the same ways, and that's OK. Don't forget to check in on one another, and to ask for help when you need it.

8. Your Collective Agreement rights are in force

Despite many changes to the way that our work looks and feels right now, and despite the State of Emergency declared by the province of BC, the ministry has committed to upholding collective agreement rights. Your right to provide advice to your principal through Staff Committee, limits to class size and composition, the provision of relevant and timely information, and access to your sick leave are in full effect.

In addition, you have rights under Worksafe legislation, the Human Rights Code and the Employment Standards Act. Talk to your Health and Safety Rep or your Staff Rep if you have questions.

7. If you have a Health and Safety concern, notify your principal first

The school-based Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee is the most powerful tool you have to address health and safety concerns at school. However, if you see or experience a health and safety issue or concern, the first step is to notify the Principal or Vice Principal for an immediate solution. If there is no resolution to your issue, the JOHS will meet to determine solutions.

Any Health and Safety concern should be documented and reported immediately.

6. You have a right to wear Personal Protective Equipment

You will be provided with face masks and face shields will be available upon request. The advice from the Provincial Health Officer is to wear masks if physical distancing is not possible, but it is the right of all members to wear PPE at any time.

You may bring your own PPE if you prefer, but the installation of physical barriers must be done through the district or the JOHS Committee. You can recommend that your students wear PPE even if physical distancing, but it is not mandatory at this time.

5. Use your professional judgement and professional autonomy

You will be the best person to make decisions about how to proceed with your class this year. Your provincial reps continue to lobby for clear direction and requirements for assessment and reporting, but you have professional autonomy in your classroom and your judgement about the needs of your students and the class community will take priority, and must be honoured.

4. If you are sick, stay home

If you have COVID symptoms, you need to see your family doctor and remain at home until advised to return. If you have symptoms of another illness, such as a common cold, or a cough, please also stay home until you are symptom-free. If you are confident that your symptoms are seasonal allergies, the advice from the PHO is that it's safe for you to attend work, but please err on the side of caution for your own and your colleagues' health and safety.

Sick leave will be accessed in the usual way if you do not report to work due to illness of any kind.

3. Follow processes wherever possible

If you have a concern about...

- ... the school organization or assignments -> staff committee
- ... the implementation of a health and safety protection -> health and safety reps
- ... your rights as a VESTA member -> VESTA reps
- ... an immediate health and safety hazard or risk -> school principal (take a rep!)

If you are experiencing a concern, it's likely you're not the only one. It's often more efficient and successful when we raise and share our concerns. We shouldn't be re-inventing the wheel to address concerns. Let's work together.

2. Ask for help when you need it

One impact of isolation can be the feeling that we need to be independent and self-sufficient. As a union, as staff of a school, we are only as strong as our most vulnerable member. Please do not hesitate to ask for help if you need it, whether it's information, support, material resources or advice, you have many resources around you. Similarly, if you're a teacher who can provide leadership at this time, consider reaching out and offering support to those around you if you can.

Please remember, each one of us is facing different struggles and challenges. The whole picture may not always be self-evident, and each role within our school is complex and nuanced. Practice empathy for your colleagues and for yourself.

1. Your union is here for you

It may not always be visible, but your VESTA representatives are working hard in daily and weekly meetings with the VSB advocating for the safest possible return to school. Your BCTF representatives are doing the same advocacy with the Ministry of Education. While there are aspects of the Restart Plan that we will not be able to anticipate or control, every effort is being made to ensure consistency and the highest standards of protections and support for teachers.

Through your school Staff Rep, VESTA is here to provide you with advice and support and to ensure your rights are upheld in the first days and weeks of September, but also through the fall and the years ahead. Please continue to check your email and update contact information, and consider joining us for virtual Staff Rep Assembly meetings, the first of which will be held on September 22, 2020.

There will also be a Virtual Information Session held on Tuesday, September 8 at 4pm, please watch your email for an invite.

In solidarity,

Joanne, Allison, Darren, Jody, Donna

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