

I don't have the answers

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Dear Teachers,

You have my utmost respect and you have my sympathies. You are about to join the legions of frontline workers already supporting our economy and helping, through your perseverance, patience and commitment, to promote a sense of 'return to normalcy'. Unfortunately, there is no 'normal' anymore and like nurses, doctors, grocery store clerks and truck drivers before you, you are joining the front lines without a realistic plan, but at least with some protection (but none for kids Grade 3 and under) and with no idea what the new reality will look like in a 'socially distanced' classroom of 25-30 children. We're talking about no masks for JK kids as young as three for whom social boundaries simply don't exist, to children as old as nine who do know boundaries but also know how to push them! At least those teaching grade four or higher will be facing a room full of face masks, always assuming of course that you achieve 100% compliance. Considering the number of adults who can't or won't wear one - good luck.

I don't have all the answers but I do know this plan isn't it. A return to full class sizes, in schools where ventilation might be an issue, where distancing is certainly an issue and without temperature checks (at a minimum) at the door, is a recipe for disaster. We have only to look at examples from around the world to see how a return to school, in many areas, coincided in a resurgence of the disease. I don't envy our government either, having to make difficult choices under difficult circumstances is no easy task and no matter what is decided, one thing we know for certain, not everyone will be happy. The government says, 'This plan reflects the best medical and scientific advice with a single aim: to keep your child safe,' according to Minister Lecce. 'While this plan will continue to evolve to respond to the changing threat of COVID-19, we will remain constant and consistent in investing in the resources, staffing, and cleaning supports, and strict health and safety protocols to keep our communities and our classrooms safe.' I think the key words in this statement are actually 'continue to evolve' since what's being done now is really just a best guess scenario driven in large part by the need for parents to get back to work and to get the economy moving. Hardly a reason to create massive petri dishes in which to test the theory of herd immunity but soaring unemployment and continued government bailouts can't go on forever either.

The recent report released by the Hospital for Sick Children was comprehensive and focussed in particular on the critically important element of supporting the mental health of children when it concluded kids be allowed to return to school. It appears to be a document upon which the government has relied heavily. Sick Kids top doctors have said, and I think we'd all agree, that children's mental health has taken a beating over these last few months. I'm sure many of us parents would agree our own mental health has taken a beating too. To this layperson however, the thing about mental health is this: You can't have mental health without physical health and you can't have physical health without good mental health. In other words, you can't have one without the other. So throwing 25-30 kids in a classroom, creating the potential for a resurgence of Covid-19, won't help anyone - and certainly won't help the economy. At what cost are we placing children potentially in harm's way? What happens when schools have to suddenly close again, kids have to quarantine, at least one parent has to stay home from work and what about that older sibling in high school?..they've now exposed their whole class too. The impact on everyone's physical and mental health in this scenario is no less severe than being told school is online for three more months and could be potentially much more severe if a diagnosis of Covid-19 arises as a direct result of school attendance.

Speaking of online, what also frustrates me is that there's no real sense of consistency across the province or indeed, across all levels of education. Kids in K-8 can go to school all day, every day. High School - you'll be doing some kind of 'Quadmestering' system and as for you College and University kids - your 'freedom' has been delayed by at least three months and you'll be living and learning at home, online. I know there are suggestions that younger children are less likely to get Covid-19 or to suffer as severely as their parents or grandparents might but shouldn't this be an 'all for one and one for all' scenario. Either all the kids go to school or none of them do. Kids can still transmit the virus - can't they?

Like I've said, I certainly don't have all the answers but I don't really think the government has them either. I'm glad they're spending

money on cleaning school busses, adding custodial staff to help keep schools clean and providing money for masks ? for our teachers and particularly for those families who can't afford one - but is this enough? They plan to spend \$50 million on school nurses but what will these nurses actually do? Covid testing? Of all the money being spent, guess how much is actually being directed toward mental health, allegedly one of the primary reasons for allowing our children to return to school? If you said \$10 million you'd be right. Bussing gets \$40 million, custodial staff, \$75 million, even \$23 million has been allocated for ?testing capacity to keep schools safe? but mental health gets next to nothing. No matter, no need for mental health funding if physical health is at risk. Right?

PS ? The government also kindly points out: ?Parents will continue to have the option to enrol their children in remote delivery, which respects their fundamental role in making the final determination of whether they feel safe with their children returning to school.? What the government has neglected to point out however is that only people of privilege ? those who can afford to make this choice, whether literally or through great sacrifice ? are able to keep their children at home. Covid, even in this, continues to divide the ?have's from the have not's.? I'm glad I don't have to make this decision. Good Luck to all!