

Media Statement  
August 17, 2020

## **Introduction**

I would like to thank you all for being here today. I will be available over the coming week if any of you would like to have more detailed conversations regarding the public education system and plans for a safe reopening in September.

It is important for Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans to understand that the NLTA has two legislated responsibilities in this province. The first is as the bargaining agent for teaching and learning assistants, program specialists, school counselors and psychologists, speech-language pathologists, teachers and school administrators. This representation of a diverse and professional membership provides the Association with a unique and detailed understanding of the public K-12 education system. Since March 15, 2020, the Association has received and responded to more than 40,000 direct emails and other contacts from our members in the field and parents.

The NLTA's second role is as the professional association for educators. In this role, we have the legislated right and duty to advise government and the public on practical issues in education. It is as the President of the professional association that I wish to speak with you today.

The NLTA, like everyone else, is hoping that all students and teachers will be able to safely return to school in September, and that the public school system will be positioned and prepared to adapt to changing circumstances in a resilient and sustainable manner. We hope for a public education system that teachers, parents and students will have confidence in, and one that will not invite COVID-19

outbreaks or clusters, or place communities at risk. To date the NLTA has collected nearly 10,000 signatures on our petition seeking government action on a safe return-to-school for our children.

On July 6, the Premier and Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development announced government's K-12 Education Re-entry Plan. That same day, the NLTA publicly questioned the inconsistencies in the Public Health guidance in that plan as compared to the direction provided for other sectors, pointing out in particular that government's Plan stated physical distancing was not important enough to have any impact on class sizes or school routines. The government Plan specifically stated:

**"The daily school routine should not be disrupted to accommodate smaller class sizes for physical distancing." Page 3**

**"Strict physical distancing should not be over-emphasized to children in the school setting as it is not practical and could cause psychological harm." Page 3**

The Chief Medical Officer of Health and the Minister of Health have repeated and recently stated that people are to avoid large groups meeting in confined spaces with poor ventilation for long periods of time; yet, this is the very definition of many Newfoundland and Labrador classrooms. It was clear from the July 6 announcement that this government is prepared to accept a greater risk of exposure and potential of COVID-19 outbreaks for children and the adults who work with them in return for getting everyone back to school at no additional cost. Government assessed the cost of safe school re-entry and decided it was not worth the investment.

Since July 6, the school districts have been challenged to develop return-to-school plans with both hands tied behind their backs. Without added resources to ensure physical distancing and daily sanitation, it is no wonder the districts have been delayed in their planning. I would like to acknowledge that the NLES defence did provide the Association and NLTA special interest councils the opportunity to provide information, raise concerns and give feedback. Unfortunately, the issues that truly need to be dealt with are not within the districts' scope of authority to address in light of government's refusal to invest in Scenario One, that being a return to in-school classes for all students, which is ironically the preferred option in government's own plan.

The NLTA has presented some very direct questions to the Chief Medical Officer of Health, pointing out and seeking clarification on the many contradictions that both parents and teachers have identified between the Public Health guidance for schools and the direction given for all other aspects of life in our province. The NLTA has released those questions, along with a summary of the verbal responses provided by Dr. Fitzgerald. It is indeed frustrating to see the strict occupancy limits and other restrictions in place for almost every facet of life, including controlled environments, such as churches, daycares, restaurants, yoga classes, government services and public transportation, in the absence of similar Public Health safety guidance for schools. **At the same time, Public Health officials continue to warn people to limit their exposure to small, poorly ventilated, crowded rooms to 15 minutes or less. Again, this is the definition of many classrooms in this province.**

The NLTA has reviewed the newly released NLES defence Plan today, and as we continue to study the plan, we may have further comment.

## **New Information Today**

According to the Public Health Guidance for K-12 Schools: “**It is recommended that schools implement as many public health infection prevention and exposure control measures as possible.**” It is distressing that public health safety measures, in the school setting for children, are subject to what is possible as opposed to the mandatory requirements established for all other public activities.

Public Health guidance for schools is built upon an assumption that children are not efficient transmitters of the disease. It would appear that this assumption is based upon our provincial experience of a low percentage of youth contracting COVID-19. The NLTA is concerned that this experience is more a reflection on the extra precautions parents placed on their children’s safety. Hopefully we are wrong and the public health authorities are right.

Public Health officials consider schools controlled environments, and use this to defend less stringent public health measures for children and those who work with them. As all educators know, schools are dynamic workplaces and children are less than predictable in their behaviour. To state that schools are more controlled environments than other spaces providing government services to adults, in which appointments are required and strict limits are placed on occupancy, is nonsensical. It is telling that the government announcement today needed to be done virtually to be safe.

Public health also seems to be depending upon stand-alone cohorts within schools as the rationale for requiring fewer public health restrictions. The NLTA contends that the concept of cohorts within schools is invalid when one considers that children, regardless of age and grade, travel together to and from school on the same bus. This will be the first failure of the direction that, **protocols must be in place to**

**ensure that the cohorts remain separated at all times.** While the concept of dedicated classrooms may work in primary schools, and in many elementary schools, it does not work in high school, in which students take different courses from different teachers and are required to attend different classrooms.

### **Non-Medical Masks**

At the same time as it is being publicly reported that public health officials will require, effective August 24, all persons aged 5 or older to wear a NMM while in public indoor settings, including office buildings, shops, public transit, places of worship, etc, public health guidance for schools is once again different. Mask will not be required in classrooms.

According to Public Health guidance, **NMM are recommended in situations where a child cannot maintain physical distancing for an extended period of time and in close proximity to a person outside of their regular class cohort.** The NLTA is concerned with looser public health protection for children and teachers compared to the strict public health expectations that all people use masks when in public spaces. This is especially alarming when one considers the Public Health statement that in schools, **while a two metre physical distance is encouraged, it does not have to be consistently maintained.**

### **Bussing**

According to the NLES plan, it will be acceptable for up-to 46 students to ride on a school bus. This compares to 19 passengers allowed on a metro bus. Without a government investment in student transportation, this will now mean many parents will lose access to student transportation services.

## **Class Sizes**

According to this plan, **if your child was in a class of 35 students last year, it is very likely that they will be in a class of 35 students this September.** As educators, we know that smaller class sizes allow teachers to spend more dedicated time working with individual students. Understanding the educational merits of reduced class sizes, the NLTA has been publicly calling upon government to conduct an independent review of the teacher allocation model. If government had chosen to invest in smaller class sizes prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, our schools would be far more resilient now. In light of the pandemic situation and the common sense understanding that physical distancing measures protect everyone, government needs to take steps immediately to reduce class sizes.

## **Student Mental Health**

Teachers are concerned about the well-being of our students and understand that many of them may return to school with heightened anxiety. Students with existing mental health concerns may have relapsed. It is disappointing that government did not provide the school districts additional guidance and psychological supports for children, even while expressing concern for the social-emotional health of students. The expectation that classroom teachers will be required to obtain trauma informed practice training at the same time students will immediately need specialized help is unlikely to provide the services these children will need. Government investment in additional counselors and psychologists would have spoken volumes of governments concern for student mental health.

## **Workload**

There can be no doubt that the increased supervision and planning responsibilities that this plan will place on teachers and school administrators will impact on their ability to do what teachers do best, plan and deliver instruction. If government had understood this fact, they would have invested in providing supervisory and planning supports to school districts, so that teachers and school administrators could look after our children and focus on their educational advancement.

## **Balancing the Risks**

While not being comfortable to relax Public Health directives for the community at large, it is clear that government is banking on maintaining a low rate of COVID-19 cases in the province as the best strategy for safeguarding children and the adults who work with them. Should this fail, teachers and parents know that school buildings, many with large student groupings, congested classrooms and common spaces, poor ventilation and challenges in maintaining cleaning standards, are very efficient environments for the transmission of viruses. We see in the global media that other parts of the world are learning this the hard way. Hopefully we will not.