

Media Statement

INTRODUCTION

I would like to thank you for all coming today. I will be available over the next 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 under the *Teachers' Association Act*. The first is as the bargaining agent for teaching and learning assistants, program specialists, school counsellors and psychologists, speech-language pathologists, teachers and school administrators. This representation provides us with a unique and detailed understanding of the public education system. Since March 15, the Association has received and responded to 31,188 direct emails from our members in the field.

The NLTA's second role is as the professional association for educators. In this role, we have the legislated right and responsibility 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.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the declaration of a Public Health emergency, resulting in a suspension of in-school instruction, the NLTA has actively engaged with government and the school districts on issues and concerns that need to be addressed in order to ensure a safe and sustainable re-opening of schools in September. It is important to keep in mind that in March, nobody, including government, school districts, teachers, students and parents, had the opportunity to prepare for the unexpected and unprecedented shutdown of schools.

Teachers worked to maintain connections with their students and to provide learning opportunities as much as possible, doing so without access to proper equipment, resources or training in online teaching techniques. Like other working parents, many struggled as they dealt with their own childcare issues and the unavoidable isolation of the pandemic reality.

However, we have learned a great deal over the past few months, and we know that the system can do better if it is properly supported. 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 better 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. The NLTA believes that, with proper supports, this goal is attainable.

The NLTA had hoped that government's K-12 Education Re-entry Plan would articulate a vision for and provide the necessary resources to ensure compliance with all public health advisories and guidance. We did not want parents, teachers and administrators faced with having to choose to ignore the sound public health advice we have all been encouraged to follow in order to meet the societal need to have children in school. These two concepts should not be mutually exclusive. If K-12 schools are essential in our society, then we should all expect them to be properly resourced and supported.

The NLTA has been calling for an independent review of the teacher allocation model, a review that was directed by cabinet to occur in 2011 but was never conducted. Over time, and without the mandated review, government has increased class sizes in this province to the point that parents now understand that class size matters and does impact their children's opportunities for success in school. This is well documented in the National Education Policy Centre research report titled, "Does Class Size Matter?" We know that during the last round of pre-budget consultations, government, through responses to its own surveys, heard this concern loud and clear. We know that the Federation of School Councils is on record as sharing this concern, and we expect that the NLESD is hearing the same message through its strategic planning process consultations. In 2017, the report of the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes recommended some new

resources, including reading specialists, teaching and learning assistants and more teacher-librarians. While these resources were welcome and overdue, they did not address the single biggest challenge facing the public education system in 2017, that being class size and class composition. These are things we knew before COVID-19. If class size mattered three years ago and was a concern for parents prior to the impact of a global pandemic, it should matter now more than ever.

The NLTA has questions regarding government's K-12 Education Re-entry Plan. I am pleased to report that the Premier reached out to me this morning and I have shared some of these concerns. Likewise, I have been in contact with senior Department of Education officials prior to this meeting. I have been assured that the NLTA will be fully consulted and engaged in further discussions on the implementation of this Plan. I have also been assured that the NLTA will be provided an opportunity to meet with the Chief Medical Officer for Health and her office to discuss our public health concerns.

DIGITAL EDUCATION PLAN

I was pleased to learn this morning that the provincial government is making a sizable investment in digital education. The NLTA has consistently raised the need for government to ensure that teachers and students have equitable access to the tools they will need in case a suspension of in-school instruction should be required in any region of the province. Even in the absence of a shutdown, access to such resources will improve our education system. I was also pleased to learn that the digital education plan will also include the needed additional computer technicians to support these additional devices. The NLTA supports the government's investment in technology.

That being said, the Association does have questions arising from the K-12 Education Re-entry Plan and I would like to acknowledge that the urgency of each of these questions and concerns will be very much dependent on the public health situation when schools are re-opened.

1. Consistent public health messaging

The Government Plan speaks to the societal and emotional need for children to be in school. The NLTA does not dispute this. Children need to be in school and parents need to know their school-aged children are safe in the educational system.

What is questionable is the degree to which this plan appears to contradict the good advice that all of us, including children, have been expected to follow over the past four months.

The Plan states:

“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

This appears to be in complete contradiction to the advice we have all been given and applauded for following. More questionable are statements such as:

“For the purposes of contact tracing, consider limiting capacity of rooms to a number that allows physical distancing (i.e. fewer students in a smaller room, more students in a larger room).” Page 19

“Schools must develop procedures and plans for in-person learning that support physical distancing (2 metres) where possible, and to separate cohorts to the greatest extent possible.” Page 20

This apparent discord between emphasizing and de-emphasizing the need for physical distancing is going to create confusion for administrators, teachers, parents and students.

We have all seen the impact of public health directives on the most controlled environments, frequented primarily by adults. We expect that parents will ask, if it is not safe for adults to attend or work in a restaurant without patrons and staff practicing good physical distancing and without reduced capacity, why is it okay for parents to send their children to schools where all of these safety measures are optional at best?

If schools meet a societal need, then government needs to ensure that physical distancing is a priority. I found it interesting that **when it comes to protecting any particular group in the K-12 system, it seems, on page 23 of the Plan, that only school bus drivers are singled out as requiring specific protections. I certainly don't disagree that bus drivers need to be protected. However, what about the caretakers, secretaries, teachers, student assistants, administrators, students, and everyone that they come in contact with outside the school setting?**

The NLTA had hoped that addressing another serious issue facing the education system, the substitute teacher shortage, a problem that may be greatly aggravated by the economic hardship experienced by this group of educational workers, would lead to more teaching personnel being available to ensure proper physical distancing could be achieved in our schools. At the very least, this would have minimized what we expect to see as a result of the shortage. Under this Plan, schools' options, such as doubling up classes, will be limited when regular teachers are absent due to sickness, family emergencies or other reasons. Parents need to be aware of this fact and the potential result of students being required to stay home for no other reason than the unavailability of substitute teachers.

It is due to these apparent contradictions between public health directives over the past four months and what government has envisioned for schools that I look forward to a meeting with public health officials. Again, I am pleased to report that I have been assured that such a meeting will occur. It would seem, in reviewing this Plan, that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is relying on guidance provided by the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) in Toronto. **This guidance has been questioned by doctors from Australia and back to Canada as referenced in a recent CBC report. It is interesting that, even in Ontario, they have not relied upon the SickKids guidance. In fact, the Ontario plan for school re-entry actually references a desired class size of 15.**

2. Resources

The NLTA looks forward to discussions with government and the school districts regarding how to address the absence of any provision of additional resources to support the identified measures or concerns. For Example:

School Cleaning: The Plan speaks at great length of the need for enhanced cleaning and disinfecting protocols. This includes more regular cleaning of all parts of school buildings and the multiple disinfecting of surfaces and equipment throughout the day. This is good to see and reflects one of the recommendations made by the NLTA during discussions. However, we know from our practical experience that schools do struggle at times to maintain past standards for cleaning. This is not due to lack of effort by the cleaning staff or lack of concern by the school districts, but is due to the insufficient funding they have to work with in terms of maintaining adequate levels of custodial staffing. Schools are among the busiest and most dynamic work environments in the province and as such, the most in need of regular and thorough cleaning.

Administration: The extra administrative expectations outlined in this Plan, including documenting illness and pre-existing conditions, home contacts, screening school visitors, file management, and increased staff and student supervision requirements, are not sustainable without additional administrative time and

secretarial support. Over the past number of years, the government has cut the allocations for school administrators while increasing expectations. Two years ago, the NLTA presented a detailed report outlining the negative impact the increase and intensification of administrative workload was having on the school environment. That was before COVID-19 and all of the related extra expectations. Government cannot simply continue to say, “do more with less” without there being consequences. Without additional administrative and secretarial time, schools will not be able to manage the Plan that government has created. **When government policy is not in line with the resources available to action it, the policy will fail.** We saw this with the inclusive education policy and we fear we will see it more broadly and systemically if this issue is not addressed.

Social-Emotional Health of Students: This report quite correctly flags one of the NLTA’s main concerns regarding the impact of COVID-19 on our students. We fully expect to see an increase in mental health issues in our schools. We have students who were receiving in-person supports from school counsellors and psychologists who may have regressed. We expect to see mental health issues present themselves from students affected by the isolation and family stress of the economic shutdown. We know there are families who are struggling due to these stresses. Schools can be safe places for these students. The Plan recognizes this problem but fails to identify a single additional resource being made available to students. **In 2007, the Teacher Allocation Commission recommended a school counsellor ratio of 1:333; the current government ratio is 1:500.** Since 2007, we have seen a steady increase in mental health issues in our schools, while class sizes have increased. The Child and Youth Advocate identified this as a real issue in her report on student absenteeism. If we needed more school counsellors and psychologists more than ten years ago, then we certainly need more now.

Special Needs:

Unlike private schools, the public education system takes in all students, regardless of ability, exceptionalities, and special needs. Some students have severe behavioural disorders which result in aggression and violent outbursts that can endanger others. It is not uncommon for Newfoundland and Labrador schools to engage “lockdown” protocols when such incidents occur. This can mean students being moved from one room to another when a classmate throws books or desks, bites or kicks. It can also mean students having to remain in their classroom because a student is having a violent episode in the hallway. Often teachers and/or student assistants are called upon to de-escalate such incidents, which may involve restraining a student to protect themselves and others. Now I ask you to imagine this scenario in the COVID-19 context, in an environment where handwashing is the public health expectation being relied upon to keep students and staff safe. If the government is serious about ensuring access to education is maintained for students with special needs, they should be identifying extra resources to achieve this.

3. Compliance Issues

The Plan is written in a way that will create unavoidable compliance issues. Parents, and society in general, are being told that physical distancing matters, but schools are told not to emphasise it. Parents are told that cleaning and sanitizing will be improved, but no additional resources will be provided. School administrators will be expected to perform a host of additional duties, leaving them with no choice but to triage and disregard other tasks. **At the end of the day, the NLTA is fearful that government has provided a plan which, when it doesn’t work, will allow it to unfairly place the blame for non-compliance on under-resourced school districts, teachers and administrators.**

As you can see, much of our concerns are about operational and resource issues, resource issues not specific to our membership. I look forward to continuing to work with the government and the school districts with the aim of addressing these issues.

Thank you.