

TEACHERS SPEAK OUT



With a third of this unprecedented school year gone, The Manitoba Teachers' Society has endeavoured to find out how our 16,000 members are viewing their current situations from health to safety to recovery learning.

Over the past eight months we have heard from more than a thousand members with questions, comments and stories about their particular experiences.

While helpful, we wanted to see if the anecdotes reflected the overall fears, anxiety, concerns or, indeed, lack of concerns, of our overall membership, all public school teachers.

We commissioned a poll of our membership, participated in a survey by the Canadian Teachers' Federation on mental health and canvassed school leaders about their current challenges. All were done within the last few weeks.

While recent, there is no doubt feelings have changed in those weeks and continue to change for the worse by the day. The tone and content of emails, voice mails and comments we receive from members has grown darker.

We have heard, and confirmed, teachers are teaching multiple classes at the same time, in-class and remote. Some teachers are teaching regular classes and substituting for colleagues and many have lost prep time and breaks, contrary to their collective agreements.

Many colony teachers have expressed their own unique, anxiety-inducing experiences.

We could cite every case, division-by-division, but the point is that divisions are not interpreting provincial guidelines in the same manner, meaning teachers and their students are not being treated the same across the province.

Given the caveat that conditions are worsening, we would like to share with you that snapshot of teachers in classrooms. Our research found many commonalities and we have included some comments from teachers, adding individual voices.

Safety

Student and staff safety is our members' greatest concern, not just in terms of contracting COVID-19, but also the toll on their mental health.

Teachers and MTS continue to press for initiatives to increase safety for students and teachers. Eighty six per cent said they were concerned or somewhat concerned about maintaining their own health through the year.

They report constant concerns that they are not getting the information they need to evaluate their own risk.

Teachers are looking for continued efforts to ensure schools are safe. They report they are rarely able to meet the optimum for physical distancing. A full 90 per cent said this was very, or somewhat, challenging. Only 30 per cent said they could achieve distancing of two metres. More than half said one metre was the best they, or their division, could do.

It was recommended that children age 2 and up wear masks to trick or treat outdoors. Children in K-3 are not mandated to wear masks to school. Is this something we are trying to be made mandatory. I am uncomfortable teaching second graders not wearing masks.

“90 per cent of Manitoba public school teachers are stressed”

It continues to be a serious concern of both members and MTS leadership.

A number of teachers, and MTS, have also asked that masks be mandatory in all grades to increase safety. At the moment, 70 per cent of respondents said current mandatory mask rules are being followed all of the time. Another 27 per cent said they are just being followed some of the time. Some of the time is hardly reassuring.

In the context of COVID, teachers said that stress this year is overwhelming. More than 90 per cent are feeling very stressed or somewhat stressed. This should be a red flag for the government and all divisions.

My colleagues and I work in classes of 20+ students with maybe 1 meter between each. Some of us don't feel safe coming into work. We are told there's nothing else the division will do to try to increase distancing.

Stress, workload

Our research has shown that stress and mental health are greatly impacted by a wide range of factors, many of which are compounded by the pandemic. For example, more than 75 per cent of teachers find recovery learning a greater challenge than last year. As well, almost 70 per cent find greater challenges in dealing with students' emotional and social concerns related to the pandemic.

I am working 7:00 am to 10:00 at night and weekends just to make changes and get things done for my job. And it keeps changing and new things coming up all the time. Are you guys able to help us?

These are real additions to a regular workload. Indeed, increases in workload take many forms.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation found in its survey of more than 3,300 Manitoba teachers that their No. 1 frustration was the continual shifts in their jobs, new expectations and new protocols. Changes seemingly come every week.

The survey found only 13 per cent of Manitoba public school teachers say they are coping well during this time. One-third said they were barely coping and 3.5 per cent were not coping at all. In other words, 14,000 teachers are not coping well.

Three teachers in our school will have to cover two groups with an EA supervising as they float back and forth. Why should these teachers have to shoulder more responsibility and more work? It is not an equitable situation within our own school. And why should these children receive a trained, licenced teacher half the time when other students have a teacher all the time?

“14,000 teachers are not coping well”

Overall, Manitoba teachers said stress, anxiety and depression were their top concerns when it came to mental health.

The MTS Disability Benefits Plan has seen the highest number of members taking medical leave at this time of the school year than they have in the past 10 years.

Our Educator Assistance Program had the busiest September in recent years and is seeing a steady influx of requests for their virtual counselling services.

While worries about health overall are adding to stress, workload has been mentioned in the surveys and almost all emails we have received.

I'm burning out. I want to know what exactly the division can, and cannot ask of me and make sure I'm doing only my mandated job requirements. I've put in extra hours countless times in my 12 years for my students, but working this much is where I need to draw the line.

One of main difficulties in quantifying both the exact workload issues and their impact on the wellbeing of teachers is that divisions have not implemented provincial recommendations consistently. There is now a wide range of expectations on teachers across the province as to how to do their jobs and what they are expected to do. There can be 38 ways of doing what the government has asked.

Starting on Monday, I have to be responsible for providing both live and independent work for remote learners, as well as plan to have half of my class in one room, while the other half is in another room, being supervised by a revolving door of interns and EAs. The govt/division claims that teachers' workloads will not be increased, but I feel like I am juggling three full-time jobs. We are expected to change everything in an instant, with zero resources. I no longer know how to be successful at my job.

For example, some members point out they are expected to teach more than one class at the same time, moving between two, sometimes three, classrooms during the same period. While splitting classes to ensure physical distancing may be commendable, it does nothing but increase the stress on that one teacher. It is also of questionable value in the education of those students.

Other teachers have had similar concerns over teaching both in-class and remote students at the same time. Some have been asked to prepare and provide same-day home-learning packages for students isolating. Support teachers and specialists are facing constant reassignments.

As well, it adds to teachers' stress when they are constrained from teaching students to the best of their abilities both in-class and remotely.

For example, asked about their experience last spring, only 19 per cent of teachers said all their students had access to the technology needed to participate. Almost six per cent of teachers didn't have the necessary technology.

It is no doubt a main reason why our members prefer to teach in a classroom and not remotely during this time: 50 per cent in-class to 16 per cent remotely. As an aside, without COVID, that would be 92 per cent to one per cent.

I cannot imagine doing what K-8 teachers are being asked to do right now. All of the high school teachers I know right now are being asked to teach online and in class simultaneously as well. This is so crazy. Our duty time has quadrupled, our school days have lengthened (we have to be here at 8:20 instead of 8:35 ... so not much time, but still a change) every day to account for COVID procedures... we're responsible for cleaning manipulatives, we are classroom managing students online and in class simultaneously with no other adult in the room to supervise. Somehow, in there, I also need to teach the entire curriculum of Grade 11 and 12 math.

Principals

Principals and vice-principals face unique problems in leading staff, students, community, supervision, operations, and in-person and remote programming in this pandemic crisis. Particularly when there is a positive case in their school, principals spend many hours managing the communication and, in some cases, principals have heard about positive cases from parents or staff before Public Health. Recently, principals have been tasked with beginning the preliminary contact investigation, and this carries with it a number of risks including making public health judgments or being disciplined for their actions or inactions. It also intensifies the workload for principals at a time when continual pivoting creates a myriad of additional daily responsibilities. Further, the physical, psychological, and emotional impacts of a positive case in a school cannot be understated: Supporting the whole school community through this distress also rests on the shoulders of the principal.

The principal did all of the contact tracing: calling the positive case for more information, checking attendance records, and reporting back to the public health nurse. They were also given responsibility to email all close contacts and didn't feel comfortable just sending the email so they make the effort to phone as well. All told, it was seven hours of extra work.

French Education

The challenges that French educators typically face have been amplified by the pandemic. This includes access to professional learning and resources in French, particularly in the area of remote teaching and learning. As well, recruitment of qualified additional teaching and non-teaching staff is needed. There has been an intensification of workload due to blended and remote learning models. This has led to large multi-age classes online due to a lack of French teaching staff. There is also little time to prepare and collaborate with other French educators to plan for in-person and online learning.

« Les enseignants sont au bout du rouleau et nous devrions être inquiets. Pour moi, mon temps de présence auprès d'élèves a augmenté de près de 30 minutes par jour mais mon temps de préparation a, quant à lui, été réduit. Je n'ai plus de leçons toutes prêtes ; il faut tout réinventer, en double : avec des élèves en classe et avec des élèves à la maison. Il faut améliorer maintenant les conditions de travailler. C'est pas durable. »

Overall

This should give a realistic view of how teachers are coping or, more to the point, barely coping. All the issues are intertwined.

Frustration over work assignments adds to stress, increased stress impacts mental health, impacts sick time, impacts the need for substitutes, leads to regular teachers given substitute duties, increasing their stress. The circle continues, unbroken.

It should be kept in mind that teachers have shown they are willing to step into the frontline to continue educating kids. But, they expect decision-makers to clear obstacles from the path to ensure the highest safety standards. They don't want to feel they are out on a ledge every day, alone.

Teachers need to be informed. While personal student information may not be necessary, we feel that it is important for us to know when any possible exposure has been in our class, low-risk or otherwise. We, as teachers, are not concerned about the perception of cases in schools, we are concerned about the risk of exposure to our students and ourselves. Transparent, up-to-date information will help teachers rebuild our confidence in Public Health and allow us to make informed decisions.

Despite the hardships of the pandemic, our poll found public school teachers are still committed to their calling. More than 77 per cent of members were still satisfied with their role as public school teachers.

Our members want the best conditions to teach, no matter the circumstances, because those are the best conditions for their students to learn.

Now more than ever.

Yesterday evening I was taken to the hospital by ambulance after a series of intense panic attacks. But I felt guilty for taking today off because I know that all staff are already stretched so thin and shouldn't have to add to their responsibilities just to cover for me. All this to say: I don't know what to do.