

# Manitoba teachers deserve better

WFP Opinion Editorial By: John R. Wiens

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A BIG thanks to reporter Maggie Macintosh's "Teachers in constant state of anxiety" (Oct. 17) for drawing attention to the current situation in schools for teachers. It has become evident that schools play a much larger and different role in the economy than commonly recognized. Similarly, it has become abundantly clear that teachers carry a much greater societal responsibility than is generally acknowledged. **They indeed are essential workers and deserve our support and appreciation.**

Whenever I hear what it's like to be a teacher in the current pandemic, I think of Dr. Rieux, the main character and narrator in Albert Camus', *The Plague* (1947). Speaking from a sense of overwhelming powerlessness to do anything to slow the plague, even his open frustration with the authorities' unwillingness to recognize its seriousness and human cost seems futile. Still, he prevails personally, doing what needs to be done to reduce suffering, simply because he is a doctor and that's his job, even to the point of putting his urgent family matters aside.

I can't help feeling that is what it means to be a teacher today.

As is the case for everyone in a pandemic, being a teacher means being caught in a series of circumstances and situations over which one seemingly has no control. That helplessness, and hopelessness, are heightened when government unilaterally makes decisions that impact teachers and their families, without ever involving the people working with young people who are also experiencing extreme displacement and stress.

The latest edicts are a perfect example, with impossible demands for physical distancing "to the greatest extent possible." Everywhere except in schools, people are required to physically distance and where they can't, as is the case in health care, they receive personal protective equipment.

Teachers often have to supply their own masks, teach in classrooms of 30 children where students are less than a metre apart, and sanitize their own (and their students') equipment. Contact tracing is virtually impossible and community spread inevitable. Provincial officials seem to have no clue about what goes on in schools and they seem to care even less.

To repeat Michael Zwaagstra's comments near the beginning of this outbreak, "Schools are not grocery stores." They are already physically distancing to the greatest extent possible, and the government guidelines don't help.

If teachers are not feeling well, they not only have to wait days for test results but also must pay for the wait with their own sick leave. In other words, they not only regularly put themselves in harm's way and worry about being spreaders, but also they have to foot the bill themselves. And they worry that if anything goes wrong, they will be blamed.

Most teachers report to their schools every day because it's their job and they love teaching children, and they know that for most young people today school among their friends offers a pleasant distraction, a present relief and better education. Remote learning cannot replace the support and encouragement that children experience in schools. It is a lot harder on children, is less effective and further disadvantages children who are already disadvantaged.

Like Dr. Rieux's reduction of suffering, teachers offer comfort, stability and assurance to children and their parents. Teachers I know have spent countless hours crafting new activities — games, videos, special in-classroom events, interactive lessons, remote concerts and exhibitions, to name a few — providing a different outlet for students' imaginations and creativity, and a welcome distraction from their current anxieties.

As well, they have spent hours reassuring parents about their children's schooling and well-being. Parents seem to get it; they have been understanding and supportive.

Teachers deserve better than what the provincial government has offered and expects. They deserve to be listened to. They deserve reasonable expectations, like not having

to teach in class full-time while offering remote learning at the same time, as is now seemingly being suggested. It would be reasonable to hire more teachers so that we can do both, and so teachers can physically distance like everyone else.

It would also be reasonable to provide them with personal protective equipment appropriate to their situations and have them not lose their sick leave entitlements as they wait for test results. Such measures would go a long way to affirming and supporting them for the work they do, a small price to pay in the interest of our children's well-being and education.

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