

# Teachers deserve backup in pandemic schoolyard fight

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RUTH BONNEVILLE

Parent-teacher meetings are now online meetings. (Ruth Bonneville / Winnipeg Free Press files)

## OPINION

It is the first parent-teacher night for my daughter's first year of high school, where course credits, grades, and attendance really matter.

And it is like nothing I've experienced before.

There's no waiting, seated on small, hard plastic chairs that hurt your knees. There's no forced chit-chat with some random parent. There's no feigning being nice when an appointment goes too long or another parent shows up late.

It is five weblinks to online meetings. That's it.

We click on each link. Teachers we don't know — but have heard about — appear on the screen.

One seems to be sitting in a closet. Another speaks too close to the screen and reveals an intimate amount of her nostrils. One doesn't have a working speaker, so calls but leaves his screen on, so it's like watching someone talk on the phone.

It's comical, but also a reminder: we are all at the mercy of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The teachers tell us our daughter is positive, kind, and smart. They give advice on how to develop her skills and what to work on.

They know her career goals, what her laugh sounds like, and what makes her sad. They know how nervous she was when she was tested for COVID-19 last month. They know she got a cat, too, and ask us about it.

It was surprising as, due to COVID-19 regulations, my daughter goes to school once every three days. This means some weeks, she doesn't see her teachers in person for nine days. During one span, it was 16 days.

Yet, they know her. They care about her. They want her to succeed.

It's tough teaching one-third of a class at one-third the speed they've taught in the past, but schools are not centred around curriculum — they're built on relationships.

Students don't learn much from people they don't know, trust, and believe in. This is why children don't often remember what teachers teach but the tone they are taught in.

That's what makes this year so incredible.

Despite the problems with an education system built for in-person learning, poorly ventilated schools, and a backwards contact tracing system that makes teachers wait too long for COVID-19 test results (placing demands on substitutes and putting the whole system in jeopardy) — schools have largely kept the virus at bay.

While there have been a few outbreaks, it's almost shocking — especially considering the Manitoba government's haphazard choice of economy over health — that public schools haven't become coronavirus incubators.

Instead, schools are among the few places winning the battle against COVID-19, and it's in large part to teachers, alongside the administrative, custodial, and support staff.

They've done this in spite of a provincial government content that let casinos and bars stay open and community spread run amok.

On Nov. 9, hundreds of teachers and educational staff wrote a letter to the province asking for long-promised financial support, and warned of an "imminent collapse" due to the overwhelming workload.

The Manitoba Teachers' Society added nearly \$85.4 million in federal funding earmarked for education has not been delivered to schools. MTS president James Bedford said: "(Provincial officials') vague and non-committal responses are, quite frankly, unacceptable, and their silence is negligent."

In response, Manitoba Education minister Kelvin Goertzen announced a \$10-million "remote learning" facility, to hire 100 teachers and 20 educational assistants. (Where are these trained teachers going to come from?)

This is not only a drop in the proverbial bucket, but does little to support front-line teachers and their current workload stress.

The provincial bungling of education continues.

This week, Manitoba openly mulled ideas to extend the winter break to address staffing issues, after providing an "exemption" for teachers from isolation requirements even if they have a household symptomatic member. (As if the two don't relate.)

This is not to mention schools were previously sent expired face masks by the province.

How about this province protect teachers, who are succeeding in providing the most important and essential service of all: protecting our children?

Schools are fighting hard, but getting little help with haphazard provincial policies, politicians playing with ideas, and being told to "just keep working, no matter what."

Teachers are doing their job. It's time leaders do theirs.

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