

83% of teachers surveyed express concerns about returning to school in September ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Thérèse Forsythe usually spends some of her summers planning course work for September, despite being on break. The preparations give the Wolfville, N.S., high-school math teacher time to focus on building relationships with her new students during the first three months of class, she says.

But planning for the 2020-21 school year has proven challenging, as Nova Scotia's Department of Education has yet to reveal its plans for school reopening in the fall.

"Teachers are planners. That's what we do. We plan for all contingencies," Ms. Forsythe says, "and we can't [plan] with this because we don't know. We need to plan and we can't."

Ms. Forsythe, who has been teaching for 25 years, said teaching is her vocation and that she will find a way to make things work, namely by planning for the fall "as if nothing is happening." She is among thousands of teachers across Canada who are trying to prepare for fall classes with little direction from education officials, who are trying to organize a school year in the midst of a global pandemic and looming fears of a second wave of COVID-19.

Nearly 18,000 teachers voiced their concerns by responding to a Canadian Teachers' Federation survey, whose findings were made public on July 10. Eighty-three per cent of respondents said they had questions or concerns about returning to school buildings.

In provinces such as Ontario and Alberta, school boards are preparing three scenarios for September: a full return to classes with public-health measures in place; a hybrid model in which small cohorts of students will receive part-time in-person instruction; and complete remote online instruction.

Beyhan Farhadi, a high-school English teacher living in Toronto, is concerned the hybrid model suggested in Ontario is "asking [teachers] to do two full-time jobs," as they would have to cater to students following in-class instruction, as well as those choosing to learn online. As a working mother, she calls the scenario a "logistical impossibility."

The Ontario Ministry of Education has asked school boards in the province to submit their plans for fall by Aug. 4, but "we don't know what the criteria for approving those plans are, because the ministry is saying they have to play it by ear," she added.

Ms. Farhadi is taking a year off to research COVID-19 education policy in Ontario at Toronto's York University as a postdoctoral visitor.

Ms. Farhadi and Ms. Forsythe are both also concerned for the mental health of students who have spent months away from peers, rapidly adapted to a global pandemic and faced unhealthy and unsafe living conditions at home.

Ms. Farhadi has heard from some students experiencing "low moods" or "depression." In Nova Scotia, Ms. Forsythe says students have burst into tears during one-on-one video-call sessions.

"I haven't heard of a plan in any province or territory where they're looking at bringing in more human resources," said Shelley Morse, president of the CTF. Seventy-four per cent of its survey respondents are worried about the toll distance education is taking on students' mental health.

She said students have lived through trauma over the past few months and thinks "we will be foolhardy to think that we are not going to need those services in place."

"We just need a guarantee that children [and] teachers won't be used as an experiment," Ms. Morse said. "Safety has to be in the front line of any initiative to return to the classroom, and that return to school buildings should not be left up to chance."

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