



WEST VANCOUVER Teachers' Association

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Notes from your President – *Spencer Capier*

Dear Colleagues,

➤ **Happy August Everyone!**

If you're like me, Sunday afternoons before a school week are always a little anxious. My mind is cast on the week ahead - the lessons, the looming marking, the challenging students I work with. The last weeks of August are a bit like a very long Sunday afternoon. Though by August the weight of the previous year has eased, the challenges of the new school year begin to swirl around my thoughts, and my calm is not as it was say, in late July.

Of course last summer was nothing like a normal summer. It felt like a blip in the midst of the longest school year ever. I do hope you all were able to take July and August this year as a time to recharge, rejuvenate, and reclaim your sense of balance.

➤ **This should be a better year than the last.**

- Teachers have developed the skills to manage a classroom during a pandemic.
- According to Teri Mooring, teachers have a 90 percent vaccination rate, and so I hope we can all see a bit more of each other.
- We know that 2 meters distancing is not as important as mask wearing.
- We know that the primary vector for transmission is airborne, not through surfaces. This should lend a focus to our health and safety protocols that the previous year did not have.

As we learned on Tuesday this week there will be a mask mandate for all students in grades 4-12. We also learned there won't be one for K-3 at this time. The BCTF is pressuring the Minister of Education to expand that mandate to all grades.

In this newsletter there is a sample of a letter to parents you might use explaining classroom rules around mask wearing.

Regarding a vaccine mandate, the BCTF does not oppose them as they can be an important tool to make our schools safer. Any mandatory vaccine mandate would need to include a transparent process to protect privacy, accommodate workers with exemptions, and with an adequate timeline for implementation.

The WVTA will continue to work for your health and safety and work load balance.

Teachers are not alone in calling for stricter measures to prevent the spread of the virus. University unions, both staff and faculty have called for mask mandates. Many are calling for vaccine mandates as well.

The WVTA expects be on school sites this year, following the normal health and safety guidelines for visitors to schools.

In other news it's a bargaining year! The timelines from the BCTF are very tight this round so we will be asking you to fill out a very straightforward survey of your priorities for provincial bargaining. It will come to your inboxes shortly. Please find and complete the survey [here](#).

➤ **WVTA General Meeting Sept. 23:**

We are in the process of determining whether we can safely hold this important meeting in person at Kay Meek. Meanwhile, below you will find an interview Stephen conducted with a noted immunologist around classrooms and mask wearing. Enjoy the rest of your summer, and here's to a better year and better times ahead!

Seeing COVID School Measures Through the Eyes of a Scientist

By Stephen Price, VP, West Vancouver Teachers Association & Teacher, Gr 4/5

With the school year is upon us, we are each navigating the question of how to manage our classrooms in the face of the Delta variant-driven 4th wave of COVID. One of the big challenges in doing this work is navigating the competing views of experts. There seem to be a multitude of views, generally falling on a spectrum that on the one side values a quick return to normalcy and personal choice about taking precautions to one that values a mandate of collective responsibility to take precautions such as masking and ventilation all the way to a COVID-zero approach that advocates for a complete shut down so that we can end the chain of transmission.

In each of our circles, we tend to lean on those in our networks who are informed. In my own network is **Dr. Hermann Ziltener, a professor emeritus of Pathology at UBC**. He led a glycobiology lab that studied the role of sugars within the immune system and particularly the kinds of inflammation responses similar to the ones we see caused by COVID.

Dr. Ziltener was kind enough to give us his take as a scientist and educator on how teachers might navigate COVID in the context of their classrooms.

Like any good scientist, Dr. Ziltener highlights his limitations. He is not a public health specialist and has not been active in COVID research. His opinions are not those of a COVID expert, but of an informed observer with the ability to evaluate claims and data being presented in the media in a way that most lay people cannot. Here's the interview with Dr. Ziltener. It was collected over two days and edited collaboratively with Dr. Ziltener to ensure it accurately reflects his views.

Stephen Price: If you were in my shoes as a grade 4/5 teacher, and could design your own COVID response with no limitations, what would you do?

Dr. Hermann Ziltener: *It's still the same as before: vaccinate everyone who can be vaccinated. This should be mandatory for teachers - the balance is between two freedoms: the freedom for a teacher to not be vaccinated balanced against a students' freedom not to be put at risk by their teacher. It's obvious to me what the right choice*

is. In addition, social distancing, fresh air, and masks are all helpful. I'd have my class outside as much as possible. I'd also suggest shortening the school day by one third, but that obviously isn't likely.

SP: Are there measures that you saw taken that you don't see support for in your reading of the science around COVID?

HZ: *Hand washing and surface cleaning has benefits for general hygiene and should be encouraged, but we probably focused on it too much as a measure to prevent COVID transmission. The research as I read it shows that COVID is not a disease spread from hand to mouth, but through the air. If you are spending a lot of class time on handwashing, it's probably not worth the lost class time.*

SP: There are a lot of possible sources of information out there, some are more anxiety-inducing than others for me. In my work helping communicate science at SFU, I often found scientists who were exasperated by how their research was presented by some journalists, usually by overstating the claims. What are you seeing as you read the media and who have you seen that's doing a good job of translating the science to a general audience in a way that doesn't lose the nuance?

HZ: *The New York Times has been doing a pretty good job. One example is around the idea that vaccinated people spread the Delta variant as much as non-vaccinated people. While it's true that very early in the disease, infected people, vaccinated or not, will spread the same amount of virus into the air. But the part of the study that gets lost in the headlines is that the vaccinated person will stop spreading the virus within a few days while the unvaccinated person keeps on spreading it for a much longer period - increasing the chances they infect someone else. So the vaccination is helpful in suppressing the spread of the virus, but obviously it's not perfect. The reporting on the issue lost this really important nuance.*

SP: I've seen folks arguing that masks harm kids. For example, there was a formal petition presented by the BC Liberal Health Critic in the BC Legislature from 4500 parents claiming that masks caused more harm than good. I've not seen any solid evidence for this. Have you seen anything that gives credence to parents who might come to us as teachers and make

this claim? What would you tell a parent about the science around masks and the tradeoffs involved?

HZ: *It's still important for people to wear masks. The masks mostly reduce transmission from an infected person to others. Unless you have a reliable N95 masks - and some that are sold are not reliable - your mask does not protect you. The masks are pretty good at catching the droplets that come out of your mouth. Without a mask, as the droplets travel further, the water surrounding the virus molecule starts to evaporate and that makes the droplet smaller. When that virus droplet hits your mask as you breathe in, it's much harder for a mask to filter the smaller particle. The N95 mask uses an electrostatic charge to do that filtration better than a regular mask. It's important for the mask to stay relatively dry, so it's good for kids to have more than one available to them. The exhaust valves on some masks to make it easier to breathe were not a good idea - it creates a bypass for some of the virus.*

SP: We are hopeful that a vaccine for school aged children is coming. Do you have a sense of when this will be coming? What are some of the things that teachers should keep in mind about the development of vaccines for kids?

HZ: *One of the reasons the children's vaccines take much longer is that there are so many more approvals for a pediatric vaccine to be approved. It's become very clear, though, that we need children vaccinated to achieve herd immunity. Early in the pandemic, we perceived the virus as mainly an older persons virus. What we are seeing with the Delta variant is that there is now a much greater risk to children. This makes it more important than before.*

SP: What would you say to someone who is concerned that the vaccines are too new and untested?

HZ: *The truth is that the RNA vaccines have been in development for many, many years. It just happens that this is the first time we have needed to use this technology. The symptoms - fever-like symptoms, soreness, etc. are the indication that your immune system has been induced to respond to the virus.*

SP: We saw with the Astra-Zeneca vaccine that the question of whether it was worth the risks involved depended on how likely you were to catch the virus; in other words if you were a front-line worker who had a high risk of getting exposed to the virus, AZ was a sensible risk to take. If you were working from home and able to

take other precautions, waiting for supplies of another vaccine often made more sense. This caused a lot of confusing messages from experts to the public over the arc of the spring. How will we know the vaccine is safe for the kids when it does come out?

HZ: *What I'm seeing is that the health risk associated with vaccination is very low, so if it's my own grandchildren, it's a no brainer, I'd vaccinate them the moment they were eligible. The Astra Zeneca vaccine was always a good vaccine to take given the risks. If you look at the UK, where most of the population was vaccinated with the AZ vaccine, we see it's very effective. We just happen to be lucky that there are also the new RNA vaccines that are even better in terms of the risks vs. the benefits. If there weren't RNA vaccines, the entire world would be scrambling to get Astra Zeneca delivered.*

SP: Given that high schools students can be vaccinated, does that change what measures you would want to see in place if it was your classroom?

HZ: *I think you still need mask mandates and other measures until you have everyone vaccinated or a conclusion to the pandemic. You have enough people who are at risk who can't be vaccinated that the benefit of these measures is worth the effort. It goes back to the same principle as I mentioned with teacher vaccine mandates: do you prioritize the freedom to choose not to be vaccinated or do you prioritize the freedom of a student who is not able to be vaccinated to have his or her classmates decrease their risk of being infected? Again, to me, the answer is clear. You don't get to drive your car at 100km/h in downtown Vancouver because it's not okay to risk others' lives.*

Notice:

WVTA GENERAL MEETING
Thursday, September 23rd
3:45 – 5:00 pm, (Virtual, or location tba)

AGENDA ITEMS

- President's Report; Important updates
- 2021-2022 Budget Report
 - (a) Adoption of 2020-2021 Budget

If a virtual meeting is required, your meeting and voting links will be emailed to you before the meeting.

Info for Teachers re: K-3 COVID Rules

While we were happy to see a clear mask mandate for Gr 4-12 classes, we continue to advocate for K-3 teachers who are now in the unfortunate position of “creating a culture of mask wearing” in their classroom communities. To support you, we’ve written some thoughtful messaging that you could send to parents in your welcome letters. Our initial wording suggested teachers might make a rule for their classrooms, however we now would suggest only strongly encouraging mask wearing. We will continue to advocate strongly for a mask mandate for K-12.

Note: We hope this will be helpful in support of this work. This is only a suggestion: feel free to adapt it, add to it or not use it at all.

I know we all hoped that we would be returning mostly to normal this school year with respect to COVID rules. Unfortunately, we have to wait a little longer. As you probably know, the BC Public Health Office has mandated masks for students from grade 4-12. In the same announcement, they recommended that students from K-3 wear masks. This recommendation is supported by new studies about masks in schools. One of the [most comprehensive studies](#) looked at 1,280,000 kids in North Carolina and found that masks are an important and effective measure.

You know as parents that kids need consistency, clarity, and a sense of fairness. This is why I hope you will support me in building a culture of mask wearing in our class. Just as our students will learn skills like keeping hands to self, listening to others and taking turns to share ideas, I will be taking a caring and compassionate approach to supporting every child in the class to understand and adopt the public health recommendations around mask wearing. It’s so important for kids to be in school learning with their peers. Right now, that means taking all the steps we can to make sure we are keeping each other as safe and healthy as possible.

I’d ask that you do the following as a parent to help our class community:

- 1. Check in with your child to make sure that you’ve found a mask that works for them. Some kids do better with over-ear masks, others do better with masks that go around the head and neck - if your child is complaining that they don’t like wearing a mask, I found last year that this could often be solved by finding a different brand, size or type.*
- 2. Build a positive story in your home around masks. Not only do they keep kids safe, masks are a visible reminder of your child’s work to create a positive community and care for others. These are essential values that we’ve always taught in primary grades.*
- 3. Make sure that they are coming to school with 2 clean masks each day. Clean masks are gentler and more comfortable for our learners.*

Thank you for all your efforts to keep our class safe and healthy this year.



In Memoriam

Blair Mercer (January 1959 - August 2021)

Remembered and cherished as a wonderful colleague and friend, and for his 24 years of positive impact in the district as an exceptional teacher and compassionate mentor.