

August 28, 2020

Additional Funding and Resources for a #SafeSeptember are Non-Negotiable

We all have known for six months that this day would come. Many CUPW members and their families have already made the difficult decision to send their children back to school in the coming weeks. For months, we have also known what would be required to keep everyone safe within the public education ecosystem. We applaud the heroic efforts of teachers and education workers, custodians, staff, bus drivers, progressive trustees and boards of education, boards of health and health care workers who are all doing their best – under extremely difficult circumstances – to get things ready for our children. Despite these efforts, many governments have simply not done enough to help ensure the best possible #SafeSeptember.

Important safety measures have been introduced in many school jurisdictions. In some cases, class sizes have been reduced, modified schedules have been created and classroom flow will be restricted. Many children, educators and staff will also have to wear a mask or other personal protective equipment while in school and observe strict cleaning regimens.

Even with these measures, a severe lack of public funding is hampering efforts toward a safe return to school for all. Many classrooms will be too full to be able to provide two meters of physical space between children. Physical activity and extra-curriculars may be cut to a minimum, which will be a challenge for active children. It may be difficult to help children with special needs get the support they need given physical distancing measures. Families with children who require extended day care may face a shortage of quality child care spaces. There are also concerns about insufficient physical distancing on buses, increasing the risks for drivers and children.

Governments must provide more funding for additional teachers and education workers, custodians, buses and drivers, health care workers and must commit to smaller class sizes with dedicated caps (not averages) at board of health approved numbers. How can we put a hard cap on the number of people who can go into a store, but at the same time allow classrooms to be too crowded to allow for safe distancing? Governments must fully fund heating and ventilation system retrofits for all schools and ensure safe bussing for children and their drivers. Some municipalities have even offered to provide extra public space for schools that have no room to expand – so let's use it!

A safe and equitable return to school must include quality child care. The pandemic has shone a light on the child care crisis in this country, illuminating the direct relationship between access to child care and women's equality. Governments must provide substantial and sustained funding to help families return to work and to support the child care sector to provide safe environments for our youngest learners.

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We welcome the recently announced federal funding of \$2 billion to help with the safe reopening of schools and an additional \$112 million for Indigenous school communities. This money must be considered *in addition to*, not as a substitute for, any other funding. We call on governments to put it to good use immediately. Instead of blaming unions when government inaction is the culprit, governments, in particular the provinces, must commit substantially more of their own funding for public schools to make a #SafeSeptember happen.

We are also concerned that the underfunding of public education is creating a two-tier education system for those who can afford it. For many, there is no option but to send their kids back to school. This will disproportionately affect women, gig and precarious workers and marginalized communities. Everyone wants what is best for their children, so it is hard to fault families who are looking for alternatives because they want to keep their kids safe and don't see governments providing a solution. We must not pit families against one another. This two-tiering is a direct result of governments failing to provide equitable public solutions to meet the needs of children, families, and workers.

If health authorities expect children to get tested for COVID-19 and isolate when they feel unwell, we must also consider the impact this will have on their family members. The cascading effects on society could be enormous. What happens to the student's classmates? Their educators? Their sibling's classmates and teachers? Family members, their co-workers and workplaces? How many others will have to isolate and get tested as well? Even though a large number of CUPW members have rights under our collective agreements with Canada Post, they are not without problems. Many working people do not have any leave provisions and only limited job protections. Will families be able to isolate or take their kids to get tested if they have no supports, risk losing their job or would not receive enough income under government recovery benefits? What if they do not even not qualify for those benefits?

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers stands with children and their families, with teachers and education workers, custodians, support staff, bus drivers and their unions, with progressive trustees and boards of education, with the health care community and others calling for and working toward a safe return to school.

We know with COVID-19 there are no guarantees, and while many are doing all that they can, a severe lack of funding is constraining their efforts at this critical time. Ultimately, the decision to adequately and equitably fund a safe return to school is in the hands of government. If societies are to be judged by how they treat their most vulnerable members, then governments are the ones we must hold to account for letting down our children, families, and those in the education system. We cannot allow that to happen. It may not be a normal return to school, but we should at least ensure that it is a #SafeSeptember.

What you can do:

- Call your provincial government representative and let them know you want them to fully fund a #SafeSeptember
- Look for local or online actions to support your teachers, custodians, school staff, bus drivers, health care workers and their unions
- Use the social media hashtag #SafeSeptember