

Dangerous Gaps in Saskatchewan's Back-to-School Plans

Swift Current – This week the Saskatchewan government announced its plan for the return of K-12 students in September. After reviewing the plan and consulting with its members, SEIU-West has identified further gaps and issues that may put at risk the health and safety of workers and families in areas with some of the province's highest rates of COVID-19.

"The return-to-school plans—and much of the coverage of them--have missed the concerns of front-line support staff," said Barbara Cape, President of SEIU-West.

SEIU-West represents school bus drivers, educational assistants, janitorial and maintenance staff, among a dozen other classifications, in the South East Cornerstone and Chinook public school divisions and the Holy Family Catholic division.

"We have taken the time to review the province's "plan", such as it is, as well as the plans of each of our divisions," said Cape. "We also asked our members in various job classifications for their questions and concerns. It's clear that the Minister of Education wants to micromanage pandemic planning in line with his government's political agenda, while leaving critical details to the school boards and even the individual schools. Our members' voices have been lost in the shuffle."

"The staff of our schools want nothing more than to be back in school with students," said Patti Langedahl, an Education Assistant and SEIU-West member. "We know the importance of education, but we are concerned for the safety of everyone."

Particularly concerning is the vague and inconsistent guidelines for bus drivers: the plans state that drivers will be expected to enforce a strict seating plan, but are unclear about whether they must also assess children's health on pickup. The plans give drivers increased responsibility for sanitizing their buses, but only one division's plan acknowledges that this will require extra time, training, and resources.

"Our members are also wondering about additional staff to manage the increased cleaning and enhanced protocols," said Cape. "The Ministry of Education must know that experts are recommending reduced class sizes, keeping desks six feet apart, mandatory masking and ensuring adequate ventilation systems, at least until a vaccine is available. So why aren't these strategies the foundation of Saskatchewan's back-to-school plans?"

Service Employees International Union West (SEIU-West) represents over 13,000 people across Saskatchewan. They include people who work in health care, education, municipalities, community-based organizations, retirement homes and other sectors. They are joined by one colour – purple – and one union – SEIU-West. Visit PurpleWorks.ca to find out more about SEIU-West members.

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