

For Immediate Release
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NLTA SAYS SOME CONCERNS REMAIN FOLLOWING NEW ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR K-12 SCHOOLS

St. John's...The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association views today's announcement of some increased Public Health precautions in schools for students and staff as a step in the right direction. But, concerns remain regarding plans moving forward to manage the confirmed presence of COVID-19 variant B117 in the province and to prevent further outbreaks and transmission in and connected to schools.

"Our Association has been on record since July 2020 that the Public Health protocols for schools need to be consistent with the precautions required for most community spaces and other public and private sector workplaces," said Dean Ingram, President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association. "I think the continuation of scenario three protocols for schools in the Avalon region was the right decision, and we welcome the announcement today that some Public Health measures for schools will be strengthened across the province as regions outside the Avalon move to Alert Level 4. However, we still have concerns about the ability of many schools to maintain effective student cohorting and the continued challenges they will face with respect to proper physical distancing and poor ventilation. We would certainly like to know more about what role interactions at school and school sponsored activities played in the recent outbreak and how this, and the science around the B117 virus variant, have been factored into the decisions made. An abundance of caution should always be the rule."

Since the release of government's K-12 Education Re-entry Plan, the NLTA has persistently called for implementation of the same level of protections for students and teachers that exist for other community interactions. Where physical distancing cannot be assured, the NLTA maintains that mandatory face masks for all students and physical barriers should be required to ensure students and school staff are as safe as possible. The reality for many schools is 25-30 students, and sometimes more, in crowded, poorly ventilated classrooms for extended periods of time without consistent and enforceable masking rules – that should not be acceptable.

"Schools are where all of our homes, workplaces and community contacts come together," said President Ingram. "Strengthening protections for students and staff, and by extension their families, to make school re-entry safe and sustainable for all should be the focus moving forward."

The NLTA maintains that schools should not be the weak link in our COVID-19 precautions and those protections should include prioritizing teachers in the phased approach for administering COVID-19 vaccines in the province, after at-risk populations and health care workers.

"We are concerned about the lack of clarity on whether teachers are included in Phase II," added President Ingram. "This is alarming given the obvious impact of suspensions of in-school classes on all aspects of our society, which we are now living again. Teachers have been referred to as essential workers, their work requires direct and close contact with members of the public who are not in their personal, family bubbles and, under scenario three of government and school district school re-entry plans, not all teachers are able to work from home during Alert Level 5. We will never know if we did too much, but time will tell the tale of whether or not we did enough."