

For Immediate Release

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NLTA SUPPORTS SUSPENSION OF IN-SCHOOL INSTRUCTION, ATTENTION NEEDED TO NEXT STEPS

St. John's...The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association supports the suspension of all in-person instruction at schools across the province, and teachers being encouraged to work from home, in response to the confirmed widespread presence and community transmission of SARS-CoV-2 variant B117. This variant "of concern", first identified in the United Kingdom, is reported to be significantly, as much as 70%, more contagious than the original COVID-19 virus.

"The safety of everyone in our school communities and doing all we can to stop the alarming spread of this more easily transmitted strain should be the primary focus right now," said Dean Ingram, President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association. "However, our current circumstances are a lesson learned. Since July of 2020, the NLTA has repeatedly expressed concern regarding the lower level of public health precautions in place for the protection of students and school staff as compared to those required for other public sector workers and the community in general. Recent trends demonstrate that the majority of new cases have been among school-aged individuals."

With the presence of a more virulent strain in our province and the sources of exposure and spread that have been identified by Public Health, there should be no question or debate that, in order to have safe communities, we have to do what is necessary to ensure that our schools are safe places. Everyone should understand by now that schools are where all of the homes, workplaces and contacts in our communities come together.

"The fact is that, for the past five months, government has allowed schools to operate with little or no physical distancing and relaxed mask rules that are difficult to enforce," said President Ingram. "At many schools, large groups of students have been spending extended periods of time together in close quarters with poor ventilation. With the B117 variant now here and on the move, when schools re-open it is imperative that protections be enhanced in order to prevent a recurrence of what we are now experiencing."

In addition to increasing precautions to protect students and staff, the NLTA is also advocating for the prioritization of teachers in Phase Two of the provincial COVID-19 vaccination plan. A safe return to in-school instruction should be everyone's priority, and vaccinating teachers would add an additional layer of protection for students and staff, increasing the likelihood of schools staying open safely once in-school classes resume.

"NLTA members are on the front lines in our schools every day, teaching and supporting students during these unprecedented times, and frontline workers should receive frontline protection," said President Ingram. "Government considers K-12 education to be an essential service. If teachers are not prioritized for vaccination, after vulnerable populations and health care workers, our kids will face the consequences and our economy will continue to suffer."

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