

Wilkinson Column September 16, 2020

Working towards a safe back-to-school

Amid the dizzying uncertainty forced upon our daily lives by COVID 19, there is one certainty that is clear and absolute – our collective responsibility to do everything possible to keep our children safe and well.

This imperative lives deep within our DNA.

As a parent myself, it has been a source of reassurance for me to witness how that instinct has driven local preparations for back-to-school.

Here in North Vancouver, the School District 44 Restart Plan (www.sd44.ca) provides testimony to the level of effort, planning and commitment focused on getting this reopening right – amid extremely uncertain and difficult conditions.

I've heard multiple times during recent weeks that the most significant underlying concern of many parents and grandparents regarding school reopening has been whether sufficient resources will be available to support the planning that our teachers and school administrators have been doing.

The resources of provincial governments and school boards have been stretched in their efforts to ensure students have a safe opening to the school year.

We are all very much aware that we have just one chance to get this reopening right and the stakes could not be higher.

If we were to fail in our efforts, we would be risking not only the health of the children and educators in our schools, but also every other person with whom they come into contact. Our efforts and sacrifice over the past many months would risk being partially undone.

\$2 billion federal funding

Given the importance of this matter, while fully respecting the fact that education falls under provincial jurisdiction, Prime Minister Trudeau recently announced a \$2 billion Safe Return to Class Fund to ensure that provincial governments and school districts have the resources they need.

This funding has been allocated to provinces and territories based on the number of children between the ages of 4 and 18. Here in BC, that translates into \$242 million from the federal government to supplement the \$45.6 million earmarked by the provincial government for back-to-school safety.

The Safe Return to Class Fund will help our schools by supporting adapted learning spaces, improved air ventilation, increased hand sanitation and hygiene, hiring more teachers and custodians and purchases of personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies – to name a few examples.

The money is being allocated to school districts based on enrolment, and school boards can use it for what they need most. School District 44 is now working to determine how the money will be spent here in North Vancouver's schools.

Additional funding

The \$2B funding for the Safe Return to Class Fund is in addition to the more than \$19 billion in federal funding that was recently announced for the Safe Restart Agreement - to help provinces and territories safely restart their economies.

The Safe Restart Agreement includes funding to increase testing and contact tracing of the virus, support vulnerable Canadians, ensure the availability of safe childcare, and provide income support for people who do not have paid sick leave so all Canadians can stay healthy.

Canadians are rightfully still very worried about COVID-19. The federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to focus on keeping Canadians safe and supporting Canadian families and our economy so that we come out the other side of this pandemic stronger than ever.

Canadians have proven time and again that we know how to support each other in times of need. This year in classrooms across School District 44 and across the province and country I have no doubt that this sense of community will be at the forefront of everything we do.