

Interview: Teri Mooring (TM)

Interviewer: Al Cornes (AC)

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Transcription: Melissa Lonneberg and Pam Moodie

AC: [00:00:04] This is one of a series of interviews the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre is doing as part of the COVID Chronicles project to document and get firsthand accounts of how unions and working people are working and living through the COVID 19 pandemic. Today is February the 2nd, 2021 and as of last week, we've entered the second year of this pandemic. I'm Al Cornes, volunteer and board member with the BC Labour Heritage Centre. With us also is Sharon Prescott, the project coordinator for the COVID Chronicles project. Today, we're pleased to have our guest for a return visit, Teri Mooring, the President of the B.C. Teachers Federation. I have a number of questions, but the main objective is to get your stories on how this pandemic has unfolded for working people in this pandemic has impacted workers still working: issues of health and safety, changes in work, losses of jobs, and the impact on unions and the BCTF itself. These interviews are meant to be public now or in the future, and don't hesitate to decline if there are questions you don't wish to answer or are sensitive and you prefer to limit your comments. Does that work for you?

TM: [00:01:12] It does.

AC: [00:01:12] Okay. So Teri, just to confirm, what is your current role in BCTF?

TM: [00:01:20] BCTF president.

AC: [00:01:22] And you've been BCTF president how long?

TM: [00:01:24] For two years. We're just coming up to elections. It'll be my third election that I'll be running for.

AC: [00:01:32] Okay, You're running for your third year, and it really seems like your tenth as a result of this current year. Okay. So let's just talk very briefly then. The last time we talked in August, the teachers had participated in a joint meeting with all of the partners and players within the system hosted by the Ministry of Education. The government of the day, the government at that stage had decided not to proceed with some of the recommendations about how to organise schools for the opening in September. And the BCTF felt that government was going a bit too fast and things needed to slow down to ensure that things were all in the right place and the resources were adequate. So just tell us a little bit about what was the thinking then just going into the opening of the school year.

TM: [00:02:26] Sure. Well, we had had a high level of cooperation between BCTF and government in the spring, and so entering into the summer we were optimistic that we would do—we had time to do some really good planning to ensure schools are safe. Unfortunately, government made other decisions at that point. And so, while we did participate in steering committees in the summer time and working groups were established, I would say that we definitely had some concerns about decisions being made without the input of both support staff and teachers on the ground. And so we went to

September, we did start school with not enough safety measures in place as far as we were concerned. And so we've been calling on a number of safety improvements to be put in place, and we're still calling for those safety procedures.

TM: [00:03:26] The health and safety guidelines were last updated September 3rd when they were first established. And we will be coming, we are currently working with government at the Ministry Steering Committee, along with the other education partners, on updating that guidance. It will come out either this week or next week, and it will only be, you know, the first time since those guidelines have been established that they will have been updated. We are expecting that when they are made available, there will contain quite a number of improvements in health and safety. There will be improvements to the mask policy, for example. It will fall short of a mask mandate, and that's what we think needs to be put in place. Any time there's ambiguity, it's problematic. And so we have been really pushing the safety procedures and protocols that are in place to be implemented by districts, and that's been a lot of work both for locals and for the BCTF.

TM: [00:04:34] And so, you know, there did come a time, early on in the fall, when we were not satisfied with the oversight that government was showing in terms of the school-based safety plans. Nor was there any ability to enforce Ministry's own guidelines. And we were having situations where districts were not enforcing the mask policy that is in place. Where teachers are requesting barriers, they weren't getting them. Where teachers were requesting face shields and weren't receiving them, even though government had supplied districts with free face shields. So there are a number of issues that we were dealing with that were not being adequately dealt with in our view. And so we did make an application under Section 88 to go to the Labour Board. That application was accepted. Government, the employer's association, BCPSEA [BC Public School Employers' Association], and BCTF were at the hearings of the Labour Relations Board and the Chair of Labour Relations Board led those hearings. And we were really looking for oversight, enforcement and more clear communication. We were really frustrated by the lack of communication amongst the school districts from government.

TM: [00:06:07] Then of course the election was called and everything went into caretaker mode. And that was a really difficult time because we knew no improvements were going to happen over that time. And yet we were still experiencing an increase in the number of cases of COVID-19. And so, as soon as the election was over and the NDP was successful, shortly after that, Premier Horgan publicly announced that the Labour Relations Board would be issuing recommendations. And so that was the first we heard that recommendations actually would be issued. There had been a lot of really good conversations at the Labour Relations Board, but nothing had been agreed to. So government did accept the fact that there would need to be a troubleshooting process in place. Our problem was that the grievance and arbitration process that's in collective agreements isn't quick enough and was never designed to deal with imminent health and safety issues. We also were dealing with issues that didn't fit the test of WorkSafe in terms of refusal for unsafe work. And so we were really caught in the middle with no appropriate mechanism to address issues when districts weren't implementing the health and safety guidelines that were in place. And so a troubleshooting process with the Labour Relations Board was established. The other recommendations were around communication. And so the Chair of the Labour Relations Board issued some recommendations around the steering committee and the function of the steering committee in order to enhance communication.

TM: [00:08:01] The Labour Relations Board also put in a coordinator position. And that coordinator position was to liaise with school districts, the steering committee and the troubleshooting process. And so that has been all established now for a number of months and we have been making very good use of the troubleshooting process.

TM: [00:08:26] The other thing that has happened is that a new Minister was put in place shortly after the election as well, Minister Jennifer Whiteside. And so she has really taken the lead on those changes that needed to occur at the steering committee level and some of the changes in terms of lines of communication. And what she's really done is really helped to establish the steering committee as being an important committee. And so she's included some other people within the steering committee. Besides the education partners she's also included WorkSafe as someone—a representative, is there every time, as well as a representative from the Provincial Health Office. So that has definitely helped to support the work of the steering committee. And so that work is ongoing. And to date we, the BCTF and our locals have taken many, many issues to the troubleshooting process.

AC: [00:09:26] So basically, as I look at just working from the base of the recommendations that came plus what you've added in, we had the enhancement of the [unclear] minister's COVID steering committee to include WorkSafe, education partners, and the provincial health office, and then improvements in communications between the various stakeholders with the requirement that the Ministry of Education explain the rationale for changes to guidelines and standards and seek input before implementing these changes. The provision of neutral parties from the Labour Relations Board to troubleshoot issues on an expedited basis about problems with the implementation of health and safety measures. Tracking the nature of the disputes and the LRB making recommendations, addressing recurrent disputes with the addition of a needed coordinator position provided by the Labour Relations Board in terms of pulling it all together. Is that more or less what's happening?

TM: [00:10:25] It is. And the other changes have been to the transparency of the steering committee itself: that issues get brought forward in a transparent way, there is a listing of the issues and how they've been dealt with, so there's been quite a few improvements there.

AC: [00:10:42] So if I take an individual local and certainly a big traffic local would be a large local like Surrey, which is the largest school district in the province. They have a number of issues presumably before the troubleshooter then, do they? Is that what they refer to as issues and then?

TM: [00:11:02] That's right. Yeah. So any local. So a good example was, we decided to go around government and the provincial health office and go directly to families and ask them to help support us in our call for students to wear masks in classrooms. And so we, we did that. We created posters to encourage mask wearing. And there was a number of districts that refused to allow teachers to post those posters in their classrooms. And so those locals took the districts to the troubleshooting process. The really good thing about the troubleshooting process is only one party needs to refer something there. And so we were able to resolve all of those issues. And in fact, it's been well established in arbitrations that we do have a right of expression. We do have a right to post things on bulletin boards, for example. And nothing about the poster contravened or contradicted the health guidance that was given, the guidelines. And so, using the troubleshooting process, we were able to resolve that issue across the province. And there's been quite a number of things coming forward from locals.

AC: [00:12:24] I'm sure it has added a lot of steam to the efforts to make sure that there was social distancing, to make sure there were masks. And I know those are still issues at play, but they're public issues. I mean, for example, we had the issue just this week of Garibaldi Secondary having 18 alternate variants of outbreaks. And, you know, the sign at the school--right at the front of the school, the biggest sign on the property--was Wear Your Mask. Okay. So that process then involving the troubleshooter has been pretty effective, as best we can tell, has it?

TM: [00:13:06] It has been effective. It hasn't resolved everything. It is a mediation process with recommendations that can be issued if the issue isn't resolved. But what we're finding in most cases is the issues get resolved. But the other side-effect, which has been positive, is that some districts don't want to go to the troubleshooting process. And so in those cases, they've been much more willing to sit down with locals and come to agreements on some of the issues that have been brought forward. So just having that troubleshooting process in place has helped improve communication and problem-solving between locals and districts, which has been a good by-product of it.

AC: [00:13:49] Yeah that sounds, it sounds really healthy in a way and, however, what kind of support are you getting from locals and from teachers? Has that been positive as well? And teachers are not afraid to bring issues forward?

TM: [00:14:03] Well, we we've been doing a lot of work with our members around, you know, increasing their knowledge of how to bring issues forward. And so we have the school based Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees that have taken a much more prominent role in the course of the pandemic. And so we've been putting out quite a few communications. We've also conducted a number of livestreams with members to let them know the process by which they can bring issues forward. And we've also done a lot of work with school union reps and health and safety reps. We have brought health and safety reps in for additional training, twice so far this year. And when the health and safety guidelines change again, we'll be bringing in health and safety reps from across the province. And also teachers-teaching-on-call representatives, because teachers-teaching-on-call and itinerant teachers are two of the more vulnerable groups within our system right now when it comes to the pandemic. You know, there are other, you know, counsellors and different itinerant teachers that will see hundreds of students each week. And so we have been bringing them in for additional training.

TM: [00:15:23] It's also obviously been the focus of our zone meetings as well. So what we've been able to do, because we're not meeting face-to-face, we have been able to direct our resources; rather than pay for hotel rooms, we're paying for release time for people to get additional training. We've also constructed a very significant COVID related grant, which is in actually four parts. And so one part is for locals to support locals and [unclear] the safety, health and, you know, improving health and safety within their offices. You know, what they need to do, whatever they need to do to improve that. Also to release teachers to help support in the office. We've also got a grant where health and safety school union reps can be released within schools to do their work. And we also have a grant to support communication between the local and members because we know it's extraordinarily challenging, extraordinarily challenging. We've also purchased Zoom licenses for all locals and we've also helped them with their voting systems. So we've helped them with simply voting. So there's a number of processes we put in place to support locals function remotely during the pandemic. And we were able to do that

because we aren't aren't expending our resources in other ways that we typically would be right now.

AC: [00:16:52] So just to kind of put it together, you know, in a way the crisis has allowed the BCTF to build off its existing structures, which is to have school union reps in every school or most schools, and to also have health and safety officers and/or committees in schools depending on school size. So those get melded together because, of course, this isn't strictly just health and safety by the regulations of the Worker's Compensation Act, it also deals with the Provincial Health Office and health regulations and directives and various other things. So we're taking together things from two schemes and you've got a variety of methods to pursue them. You can pursue them through to the troubleshooter of the Labour Relations Board. You can pursue something through grievances if that's where you want to go. You can pursue something politically because there's a whole lot of political aspect to this that doesn't fit neatly into the terms of health and safety regulations, but is still important because it falls under the office of the Provincial Health Officer. So is that kind of more or less where we're at?

TM: [00:18:04] And through WorkSafe itself. And so there are some issues appropriately dealt with there as well.

AC: [00:18:12] Are you aware of any other teacher organisations in Canada that are doing something like this?

TM: [00:18:18] I know. We are part of the Canadian Teachers' Federation and so we meet regularly with the presidents of the federations from across the country. And their approach really varies depending on what's happening in any given province. And the amount of success people are having is also related to where they're positioned. Ontario, for example, took their government to the Labour Relations Board as well and their employers and they weren't successful. But B.C. labour law is slightly different. And so we had a process we were able to do that with. And so I think there's a lot of commonalities across Canada. However, there isn't a teachers union that I'm aware of that is completely satisfied with the safety measures that are in place in schools. And, you know, there's different levels of participation that the union has. I would say the Ministry steering committee in B.C. does set us aside, though, or set us apart in that we definitely have a lot more communication, I would say, and perhaps influence in terms of being able to bring issues forward. But, you know, there's a variety of differences in Canada. So it's hard to compare. But I would say overall that we have a lot of similarities in terms of being concerned about the safety of people.

AC: [00:19:55] Right. But different starting points and different philosophies of the part of government as well, because some of this is way different in Ontario than it might be in British Columbia, or than it is in British Columbia. And the new Minister of Education. How is that relationship working out? Is that something positive you can point to?

TM: [00:20:15] We've met many times with the Minister of Education and she's very responsive and open to having conversations with us. It's a lot of information to impart to her. It's a huge—obviously, the Ministry of Education is a very complex ministry and she's from Health. And so she's coming up to speed. So we put together a couple of briefs for her and have met with her on them in order to help sort of crystallise some of the issues that we're dealing with. And so we did put together a COVID related brief of all of the recommendations that we have around COVID, and we went through them with her, and they were quite extensive. And then we also put together a second brief, which is all the

non-COVID related issues that still are very important in education. And so a lot of recommendations around curriculum, around assessment, around ensuring that the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Actions are enacted on to ensure that the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous People is enacted. And so these were all the issues that we brought forward in the second brief. And so we've had some really good conversations about where we would like to see education going in B.C. And also to have a conversation about the fact that, you know, the B.C. NDP in their years in government so far really hasn't put their stamp on public education. And we're really interested, and have told the Minister, that we're really interested in working with her on that vision of what public education should be in in B.C. So far, you know, things have really continued on as they were before. And so I'm really hoping that once the Minister has had a little time, perhaps when things aren't in crisis mode all the time, that we're really going to be able to sit down and look at the areas that we can really work together. And I'm optimistic that will happen. And I'm optimistic that the minister is very passionate about both health and education and has a real interest in ensuring that education does move forward, is in a situation where the parties are working together to ensure that public education is what its meant to be—a great leveller. And something that takes its important place in our society. And I would say the years of underfunding has really put us in a situation where we're still dealing with the legacy of underfunding in so many ways within the system. And we're really looking forward to working with her to address some of those areas.

AC: [00:23:21] So just in brief, what do you think the stamp of the NDP government should be on education, which in the view of the BCTF should it look like?

TM: [00:23:31] Well, we think that public education ought to be that great leveller and students ought to receive the supports that they need. And so what we've seen after years of underfunding is just not enough supports for students: not enough counsellors, not enough learning support teachers, too long a wait lists for assessments because we don't have enough school psychologists. You know this is also in the context of an incredible teacher shortage that has only worsened over the years of the NDP in government, with no clear plan to address it. And the teacher shortage has really impacted different parts of the province disproportionately. And so we have students in more rural and remote areas of the province that don't have certified teachers to teach them. And so there are a lot of challenges in B.C. We need to be working with universities to make sure that we're graduating more teachers. We need to make sure that teachers come into the profession, understanding what their rights and responsibilities are. We still lose a lot of teachers in their first five years of teaching. What can we do to better support them? We used to have a provincial mentorship program. That is really missed and much needed. So there ought to be supports in place to support teachers in the field, there needs to be recruitment done and plans around making sure we have enough teachers, and there also needs to be crucial supports for students who are diverse learners. And so we're still in a situation, especially with the teacher shortage, where learning support teachers are pulled from their roles to teach in classrooms, and then those students don't get those supports. We work with some parent organisations that track school exclusions—so the number of times that families are asked to keep their child at home, their child that is a diverse learner—at home, because the schools can't accommodate them for that day or that week or what have you. So there's lots of needs the public education system has. And really, we think it's an obligation of the NDP who came into office saying that education was one of their top priorities. We're looking to see that action. And ultimately, at the end of the day, it's going to mean a lot more investment in public schools. And what we see government doing well is the plan around upgrading, seismically upgrading schools and planning new schools. That's fantastic. But we also need to resource and staff the schools that are in

place and make sure that students, especially our most vulnerable students, get what they need. And so there's a lot of work to do within our system. And we look forward to working with the Minister on these issues.

AC: [00:26:29] So in some of those issues, you really have those issues being exacerbated by COVID. For instance, we had a conversation the other day with Julia McRae from the Surrey Teachers who said to us, well, the other day was a good day because they were only short 50 TTOCs. And so the person in charge of dispatching people—that meant, of course, 50 people had to jump out of their existing non-enrolling support positions to do direct teaching. The support for children, that just dropped. So, a really serious issue. During this whole—going back to COVID for a minute—this whole list of issues that were of concern to teachers and they've been working on with other groups. You issued a press release as an open letter to B.C. parents about the whole issue of masks not being mandatory at all times and looking for the support for a culture of mask-wearing. And some schools have already taken that step. But you're hoping that they come together and start doing some things with that. How has that gone? How are the parents responding to that message?

TM: [00:27:51] Well, I would say it's hit and miss. And that's part of the problem, is that we do have families coming together that are concerned about school safety, that are encouraging their children to wear masks. We have principals working with teachers to ensure that masks are worn. But we have other situations in other districts where administration is basically discouraging teachers from encouraging students to wear masks. And in some cases, there seems to be some sort of liability issue at play, which is not understandable to us. And there's a real resistance to—in some places—to really foster that mask-wearing. And that's been really disconcerting. And so what's happening is that teachers are hearing from the BCTF: We need to wear masks. We need to encourage students to wear masks. And on the other side, they're hearing from district administration, in some cases, especially in elementary schools, "No we're not allowed to encourage children to wear masks. That's not recommended with the guidelines." And so very much mixed messages. Our concern, of course, has been that within the cohort model itself. So when students are in their classrooms, currently the guidelines say they don't need to physically distance, that they don't need to wear masks. And so, you know, that has been very problematic, especially when you're looking at a potential new variant being detected in one of our schools. Basically the only protections that that teachers and students have within the cohorts themselves is handwashing. So when we are looking at the layers of protection, the layers of protection don't exist inside cohorts. And that's been something that we've really been trying to raise awareness around and really encouraging teachers to wear masks.

TM: [00:29:54] Physical distancing is another huge issue. We've got a number of the larger school districts that have implemented a hybrid model and that's enabled them to reduce class sizes for grades 10 to 12. And so that is happening in a few places again. But right now, what's really disconcerting to us is that teacher and student safety is really dependent on the school that they work at and attend. And so if you happen to have a principal that really encourages mask-wearing and works with teachers, and if you have a principal that understands the importance of barriers and you know, and the district has decided to implement a hybrid model to reduce classroom density, then you have one level of safety protections that is really different from other districts that are not doing any of that. And so our concern is safety and safety precautions in place ought not depend on where a child goes to school or where a teacher works in the province.

AC: [00:31:03] So why do you think there's such a resistance to—I'm talking about the office, the Provincial Health Officer within the health side—to not do something with the mask? Why is that resistance both there and also coming from school districts in lots of cases, but at both the district level and school level? What is that? Because in health and safety you would say even if there isn't always direct evidence of something, you exercise a precaution to say, we know this could help. And if it could help, then we ought to do it. But where's that coming from?

TM: [00:31:46] It's been really disconcerting that there is one set of safety measures put in place in public spaces and something quite different in schools. And, you know, we haven't been given any satisfactory answers as to why masks aren't being at least encouraged, at minimum. You know, one conversation is that students will fiddle with their masks. Another issue that was raised is that students need to know how to properly take masks off and put them on. And these are all issues that we've said many times can be taught and is being taught, and successfully so. And so the resistance from the Public Health Office has been really—it's hard to know exactly why—we've been told that there isn't a need because there is very low in-school transmissions. And that may be true, but we have yet to see any data on that. And so for some reason, data on in-school transmissions, on the numbers of classes that need to isolate, on the number of students that have contracted the virus and the number of employees that have contracted the virus, all that data's being withheld. And it's unfortunate because I think that that additional information could really put people's minds at ease if we are able to to see that the transmissions are low. But right now we're just having to take the, you know, government and Provincial Health Office's word for that.

TM: [00:33:23] For school districts I think, for some reason, they have decided that they are—every district seems to be interpreting the guidelines slightly differently. And so when they're, say, seeing words like not recommended, the teachers are being told that if something isn't recommended, it can't be done. And so if you are encouraging mask wearing, you're actually going against the health and safety guidelines. And we see that the mask mandate that is in place right now in high traffic areas and on buses already was government going above and beyond the Public Health Officer's recommendations because public health doesn't recommend mask wearing at all in schools, nowhere in schools. But the Ministry of Education guidelines did put in a mask policy, at least a limited one. But this has been one of the things that we have been really concerned about. And, you know, from the other partners, we hear that we're following the science. Well, the Public Health Agency of Canada is also following the science. And they've been recommending that children ten years old and older wear masks since September. And that's the position we have also adopted. We also see other jurisdictions, for the most part, that have followed the provincial or the public health office of Canada. And so most other provinces have students wearing masks from ten years old and older. And so B.C. is a real outlier in this regard. And, you know, in some ways, it seems like the folks in government and the Provincial Health Officer, for some reason, think that B.C.'s just doing so much better than other places in Canada. And what we see objectively from the data is that B.C. is doing better than some jurisdictions, but not as well as other jurisdictions. And so the idea that we just don't need these health and safety measures is wrong in our view. And the other part that has really been lost on everyone is the feeling of safety. In other words, I need to be safe. I also need to feel safe. And so that social emotional part of it, the social emotional well-being of teachers and students, has not been factored into this equation when it comes to health and safety. And so while we hear from government saying, like, we're concerned about employees mental health, you know, mental health is directly tied to the health and safety measures right now. And there is, you know, there's no space

between the two. Teachers that feel safe and comfortable in their environments are reporting—in our surveys—that their mental health, while not as strong as it was pre-pandemic, just hasn't plummeted like we see teachers who are going to work and not feeling safe. You know, teachers with underlying conditions, for example, or who live with family members who have underlying conditions, who are going to work every day trying to keep themselves safe by wearing a mask, by wearing a face shield, by asking for barriers. You know, it's really created this really oppressive environment in some schools, especially where those safety protocols are not—even the ones that are in place—aren't being enforced. And, you know, and we have to sort of fight for them to be enforced. So it's really set up a very unfortunate dynamic. And, you know, our position has been if the Public Health Office and government really understood how people are feeling in the field, surely they would change their approach. And so that's been part of our work, is trying to establish that communication. And so we did a couple surveys and our latest survey, we've just presented it to our representative assembly. And we're just putting together some information to send out to members. We've also conducted, commissioned, a public opinion poll. And in that poll, we see that 80% of the public, when asked, say that they think that masks should be mandatory in schools. So, you know, we see our desire, which is about 80% of our members that say masks need to be mandated, and the public's feeling really aligning here. So it really is the Public Health Office and government that seems to be really out of step with what people are really needing and wanting to see in B.C. in terms of the protections in our schools.

AC: [00:38:14] So really, you're bringing about the attitude change, the behavioural change by saying, look, here's the dissonance, here's the disconnect. It involves your position versus where everybody else is at, including the people working in schools. What has the—one of the questions we needed to ask or wanted to ask was, when you look at the survey that you've just reported on, how would we rate the current mental health of teachers? You know, we sort of have a sense of it in the general community, both real and speculation, but real in lots of ways that there's a kind of a low level of mental depression widespread throughout the society because of all of those uncertainties that you described and what goes on in schools and what about the teachers? What evidence of that is there amongst the teachers right now?

TM: [00:39:10] Most teachers that we surveyed indicated that their mental health had declined over the course of the pandemic and that they were concerned about student mental health as well. And so, this has been a big concern of ours. And we know that teachers are reporting feelings of isolation because in schools there is a lot of isolation. Teachers aren't going into the staff room to gather together for lunch. They're not able to connect with colleagues in the same way that they normally do. And so we are really concerned about a teacher mental health. And, this information, we've shared our last survey with government, we'll share this survey with government in the hopes that there is an understanding of just what is happening in the field right now. And it's something that we should all be concerned about. And these are issues that we're going to be dealing with for some time post-pandemic as well. And I would say that there's a real distrust amongst teachers, and teachers even report feeling expendable because they see that government finds it important to keep schools open. And yet there just aren't enough safety procedures in place for people to feel that they are as safe as they should be. And a mask mandate, just as a simple one, costs nothing to government because they've already supplied masks to teachers and students. And so it really does beg the question, why is it that those concerns have not been taken more seriously? And I can tell you, it's a huge sense of frustration that we have, and we're continuously trying to find another way to put

our position forward so that it is understood. But it is you know, it is very, very concerning to us.

AC: [00:41:08] Now, have we seen any evidence, just in terms of what the whole issue about that feeling of insecurity and the signs of depression, are we seeing that in observation of teachers, are we seeing that in the use of sick leave, are we seeing that in terms of people applying for salary indemnity or other kinds of - or retired, making decisions of wanting to retire because they just want to leave the system, all the kind of critical things that would fall into that. Are we seeing any evidence in that area?

TM: [00:41:44] Well, likely the evidence in terms of SIP and in terms of retirement, likely that evidence is yet to come because we will be gathering that information closer to the end of the school year. And in terms of the teacher absences, that's not a measure that is really helpful in an environment of a teacher shortage because teachers know that if they are away, their colleagues have to pick up the slack. So if I'm a secondary teacher and I'm away and I know there aren't enough TTOCs, I know that my colleagues will be replacing me in my classroom during their prep time. So we haven't necessarily—and again, this is evidence that we're still collecting in terms of absences. But I can't say that we have that evidence at this moment in time.

AC: [00:42:37] The psychology is that if I take any time off to help with my own mental health, I'm letting the team down and somebody has to get in there and do a whole lot of extra work, which creates problems for them.

TM: [00:42:48] It does. And you know, it's also concerning the... Yeah, it's very concerning right now. It seems like a lot of teachers have their head down. They're doing the best they can in their classrooms, and they're exhausted. So, you know, we have a lot of evidence that we've gathered from surveys about, you know, when we're asking teachers how they're feeling, how they're feeling about the safety of their classrooms, their job, etc., there's a high level of exhaustion reported. And we're January and we didn't see a lot of recovery from teachers over the winter break, for example. So we also see there's been some conversations about spring break, should spring break be delayed so that people don't travel during spring break. There's been a lot of conversations about that. And what teachers are reporting about those conversations is that they're hanging on until spring break. And so there's, there's real morale issues in the field right now that ought to be really concerning to both employers and government. And that's something that we are very, very concerned about.

AC: [00:44:03] Just talk for just a minute about this issue, which is, you know, given we've spent a year with the pandemic, more or less, what are the current challenges for teachers, just in engaging students and motivating them? Because that's the other side of looking after myself is how difficult is my job now, given all the kinds of limitations and barriers to normal engagement with students, all the things we want to do with students, we can't do it right? You can give me the laundry list of 100 things and I could agree with them, we just can't do them. Simple things like students all going to meet together and you're going to discuss some problem or issue and we're going to come up with a bit of an action plan about how we would best deal with that problem and talk to others about it and make that a little project, whatever that issue happened to be. I can't do that any more because there's all these barriers or it's difficult to do. It doesn't mean it's impossible to do, but there's those challenges. Tell us a little bit more about the challenges of teaching, because it sure seems like teaching is way different than it was a year ago.

TM: [00:45:13] Teaching is very different. And, you know, we've come a long way with teaching in terms of really engaging students. If it's a primary class or where it's play based, students are interacting all the time, to working in groups in secondary schools, and going out to the community and sort of doing projects there. All that has had to be halted and we've really needed to change the way that we teach. And that has had an impact on students, how students are learning as well. There's other complicating factors, like we have thousands of students that are still learning remotely and so they haven't returned to school. And especially, I would say in particular in the Vancouver school district and in the Richmond school district, though, you know, many, many other school districts have students that are still learning remotely. The largest numbers of students probably reside in those two districts. In between the two, there's probably around 10,000 students in that situation. And so there's that issue. And, you know, teachers, for the most part, there haven't been additional teachers hired to support those students. Those teachers are having to provide a level of support for those students learning remotely. And consequently, those students aren't getting their entire education. And so government is looking at taking steps to now go back and rectify some of this, now that families are indicating that they're not planning to send their students back this year.

TM: [00:46:47] The other complicating factor is that because of the cohort model and that students need—students and teachers need—to be in groups of 60 in elementary school and no more than 120 in secondary schools. It was really important to us that planning be done in such a way that students still were able to access our entire curriculum, the entire scope of the courses that they would be able to take. And so in order to do that, districts had to change course scheduling and the schedules for secondary schools. And so for the most part, across the entire province, districts have either gone to a quartermester system, it's called, or an octet system. A quartermester system is sort of an old throwback to a quarterly system that used to be in place many, many decades ago. And there's a lot of issues in terms of student learning with that model. In other words, we're asking students to learn, learn the same content in a much shorter period of time. When it comes to the octet system, it means the students are taking one class at a time for one-eighth of the school year. And so we have a lot of concerns about how that will impact student success and student achievement. And so we're having some early indications, and certainly we have anecdotal evidence from students saying, that they're really struggling and it's students that are highly motivated are having to spend many additional hours at home working on schoolwork. And the districts that I referenced that have also implemented a hybrid model to reduce class size, it means that students aren't in school full time. They're in school for every day, but only part of the day. And then they do their work outside of school. So again, that will probably work fairly well for students who are very highly motivated and less well for students that aren't motivated.

TM: [00:48:58] The other issue that we're dealing is, we have a lot of First Nations communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. And so what we're seeing are a number of communities being closed. So the Cowichan First Nations have closed their communities for a while. We saw closed communities happening in Fort Saint James and the Burns Lake area, in many parts of the province. And when those communities are closed, students aren't going to school. And there's also a problem with computer usage, internet access and hardware access in many of those communities. And so there is a lot of factors that are going to contribute to students having a very difficult year this year. And, you know, it again, has a disproportionate impact across the province. So students that have a lot of support at home will probably survive quite well. Secondary students in particular. But those that need additional assistance, that need more support in school, that perhaps don't have the same kind of family support, we're anticipating that

they're not going to see as positive as a year and as positive outcomes in terms of their learning. And so again, it takes some time to really ascertain where we're at. We have asked government to check in with students, to do some surveys with students, to sort of ask them how they think they're doing. That has really been a missing piece of the puzzle here, is finding out from students in their own words how things are going. And so we've been working to push government to gather that data and then to share that data, which is the other part of the equation. But I would say that certainly we're very concerned about what things are going to look like this year. And it's in this context that the government decided to continue with the FSA's. And so the FSA's are going ahead mid-February. We're really concerned about that as well, because, you know, for many reasons, including health and safety reasons.

AC: [00:51:23] You should just tell us what FSA is.

TM: [00:51:26] The FSA's are the Foundation Skills Assessments and students in grades four and seven write them. And for all the reasons I just explained about many students not attending school this year, etc., the data that's collected this year is going to be really skewed. We anticipate that at any given time, classrooms are asked to isolate so won't necessarily be in school to write the FSA. There isn't a coordinated approach to how to deal with students learning remotely. And so we anticipate that any data collected from the Foundation Skills Assessment this year will be really skewed and and not particularly reliable. And so we were hoping that government would suspend the FSA's for the entire school year. They did not do that. They simply delayed them. And we have a lot of concerns about that as well. You know, in addition to everything that I've just said, why are we putting students under the additional stress of these formalized tests on top of everything else when we say that we're concerned about mental health? So, we really wish we could be working a little bit more closely with government on some of these decisions because we just don't feel that all of the variables and factors are adequately being taken into place when these decisions are being made.

AC: [00:52:53] Mm hmm. There's sort of a general kind of view that, because we all want to live in hope, we sort of think that we'll only get the vaccine and then we'll go back in in September next year or January whenever we've properly vaccinated the population, and it'll all be fine. And really what's being said is it looks a whole lot like health care, right? In health care, we had surgeries that were postponed and we put extra resources into health care to make sure that at least we weren't falling behind. And even then, we still are, because it probably needs another injection of resources. But in education, if we're all falling behind, what's our plan? You know, in other words, the whole system needs to kind of—it isn't just a buck up and, you know, get back to school and do your book learning. That isn't what learning is about. It's really about saying, how do we engage kids, how we motivate students, how do we, how do we make up for what effectively has been a loss, both mentally, physically, psychologically, all that kind of stuff, which in total can't be replaced, but at least in part ought to be resourced to a level that provides a child with a given chance or reasonable chance of recovering from the whole thing.

AC: [00:54:15] Okay. I want to do one quick thing before you leave, Teri. We've had some issues around the Fraser Health region and the local presidents involved, the local leaders of the 12 presidents met with the Fraser Health region and they continued to call for monitoring periods. One of the big issues was notices on exposure. Tell us a little bit about that and what's going on there.

TM: [00:54:48] Sure. There are a lot of communication problems at every level. And the presidents of the locals in the Fraser Health Authority wrote a letter to Fraser Health and asked for a meeting to talk about some of those issues. And I would say it's been successful in helping Fraser Health to understand some of the issues that we're experiencing in schools and certainly to keep lines of communication open. Though some changes have been made which are positive, there are still a lot of issues that remain. Some of them involve—and there has been some progress made in how quickly families and teachers find out when there's been an exposure at a school. We had went through a time when it was two weeks before anyone was notified of an exposure, and that would have been past the time that people would have needed to self-isolate. And so that was causing a lot of concern. There's been some improvement there, but this certainly still remains an issue.

[00:55:50] It's not just Fraser Health. All the different health authorities operate independently and so there have been issues in every single health authority. Some health authorities have been more willing to have those meetings with those local presidents than others. But the other issue really revolves around contact tracing. And so teachers are not a part of the contact tracing process. And so what happens is oftentimes they will find out from their students, not through any kind of communication from public health, that their student has tested positive or an adult in the room has tested positive, they'll find out. And they will come to realize that they haven't been identified as a close contact and therefore don't have to self-isolate or even particularly monitor their symptoms. And so this has caused a lot of discrepancies. So, you know, the contact tracing process really is handled differently, it seems, depending on who the contact tracer actually is.

[00:56:59] We've been really encouraging the Provincial Health Office to include teachers in that process, for a number of reasons. One reason is students don't often remember who all was in and out of the classroom and who they might have been working with in any given day, especially when it's a few days later and they have to recall that. Even older students have some difficulty with this. We're also aware that some students sometimes think that they might get people into trouble if they say that they were in close contact or what have you. And so we also just genuinely think that students don't always know the names of all the adults that come in and out of the rooms. And so we think that teachers could help supply more accurate information to the contact tracers. And the other thing that teachers could do is really help provide a support system to students who have been diagnosed. Because right now, as we know, some students have family support to traverse the real stress and mixed emotions around being diagnosed positive. And other students just don't have those supports available. And so they don't have access to a classroom teacher or a school counsellor because they're isolated at home and no one is supposed to know what's happening. We have talked to the Provincial Health Office about the fact that teachers hold confidential information about students and confidential medical information about students all the time. So this ought not be a confidentiality issue. And we also run into issues of not enough information being shared and that causing a lot of issues. And so, in other words, you know, oftentimes there is such concern that whoever is responsible for the school exposure might be found out. But there is lots of information that could be shared, that wouldn't identify any individuals, that would really put people's minds at ease, that is not shared. And so there are a lot of issues.

[00:59:02] The Provincial Health Office and local health authorities have never had to deal with the pandemic in this way, have never had to engage in contact tracing in this way, and we really think a much better job could have been done had the educators been a part of those conversations and part of the planning process. And if we were equal partners in

helping to work with the health authorities to make sure these processes are working and that communication is flowing. Unfortunately, that has not been the case.

AC: [00:59:34] Okay. I'm going to wrap up with two questions. We've talked about a little bit about the challenges, but maybe this question, which is how are you feeling about your position, that is the BCTF's position, relative to supporting teachers developing a better relationship with Government, the new Minister, the provincial health offices with all these changes. How are you feeling about that now relative to how you felt about it four or five months ago?

TM: [01:00:04] Well, we've been really clear with the government that we're here to work with you. We are really interested in solving problems, and everything we've done has been to solve the problems that we see and to ensure that students are safe and teachers are safe and that students are getting the education that they deserve. And so everything that we've been doing has been wrapped around that. And what I would say that, in the early part of the pandemic, in the spring, last spring, there was a high level of cooperation and communication at that point. And I was talking to folks in government every single day, and we were in a crisis and everyone was pulling together. And as we've tried to work through things, as we've moved forward and we in fact have more time to plan, a really unfortunate dynamic developed where government basically, you know, decided that they were going to have us at the steering committee and have us at the working groups, but not necessarily use the information that we were bringing forward to guide decision making. And so it's unfortunate because we are still at the steering committee and we're still at the working groups and we're still really pushing for positive changes to be made. But I would say that there definitely has been some resistance there.

[01:01:31] And I would really look at the mask issue and say, you know, if your teachers, if your 47,000 teachers are saying that masks are needed in schools, why on earth wouldn't you listen to that? And so there's been moments like that. And I understand that government is dealing with a lot of competing priorities. But I would say that, you know, for quite some time, as has been said, you know, consultation needs to be authentic. It can't just be putting together people in a steering committee and saying that, you know, you're at the table kind of thing, it really needs to inform decision making. I am optimistic that that will change as we move forward with a new minister. But, you know, in the meantime, what I would say is that there has been a lot of loss of trust amongst teachers towards government and towards provincial health office. And that's really unfortunate because we have been working to try and prevent that. We saw this unfolding and really have had a lot of conversations about what needs to be done in order to restore that confidence. Unfortunately, you know, those decisions haven't been made, and I'm sure it's complicated by the fact that Government right now is under two authorities. That's Provincial Health and the Health Ministry and Education. And there's been huge communication challenges within Government and between Government and the education partners. And they're just—and those communication problems still continue to this day. So I am optimistic that we'll be able to work together moving forward. I am concerned, though, that there has been a real loss of trust in the process and it didn't have to unfold this way. And it's really unfortunate that it did unfold this way, in my view.

AC: [01:03:28] Okay. And in six weeks, you go into the annual general meeting of the BC Teachers Federation. How are you feeling about that in terms of things drawing teachers together and getting support behind your leadership and the leadership of others, both locally and provincially?

TM: [01:03:45] Well, what has been really positive is, you know, members of the BCTF really have been working together. Our Representative Assemblies have been really productive, really hashing out issues. The Executive Committee has brought forward issues for Representative Assembly. They've been supported. The Executive Committee has worked extraordinarily well under really difficult situations, trying our best to put measures in place to support teachers and locals. And as I was saying, we've put a lot of processes in place to do that. And so at the AGM, I anticipate, you know, a high level of coordination and people coming together. And we've been productively sort of hashing out the issues and coming to ground on them. There's a high level of frustration. There's no doubt about that. But people have been really working well together. So, you know, we're also doing this in an atmosphere where it's all remote. And so it's really challenging to conduct these provincial meetings, especially our AGM, which is going to go over several days remotely. And so we're trying to put processes in place again so that, you know, the fatigue doesn't set in for people and, you know, they have breaks throughout the day and that kind of thing because it's important that we all engage in these issues and we're able to engage in these issues. And not being able to be in a meeting together and kind of get the energy from the room has been extraordinarily difficult, there's no doubt about it. But people have really come together and sort of made the best of the situation.

[01:05:29] At our last Representative Assembly it was different. We only had a few motions come in on time. We had more than double of the number of motions come in later. And we got through them all and talked about them all and came to ground on them all. So we're working really well as a union. We have really good communication processes in place. I'm still meeting every single week with all the local presidents from across the province. We're updating them weekly around what's happening with the steering committee, conversations with government. You know, all that's been really good. The executive committee have been putting in additional meetings. So there's been a high level of communication between—within—our union, I would say. And we're able to be really flexible and can get information to members really very quickly. And so that, you know, the other thing that's kind of changed is that there's more of a reliance on BCTF to communicate with individual members where in the past locals have really taken that on. But it's been really tough to do it remotely. Especially when we're looking at teachers who are exhausted and just don't have anything left in the tank at the end of the day to additionally attend meetings. So there have been consequences to—some of the members on our advisory committees have had to say, you know what, I just can't do this right now. And we've absolutely respected that. So it's a real tough time for everyone. And I would say that we're all doing our best to try and find the best way that we can support each other. And you know that I'm attending lots of general meetings. That's the other side of it, is it's easier for me to actually get on Zoom and attend provincial meetings across the province. And that's been a really important part of this work as well, to make sure individual members are hearing from us, in terms of what's going on. So, you know, it's really a difficult time. It's a difficult time for our union. It's a difficult time for teachers in their classrooms. But we're certainly working together and trying to make things work as best we can.