



Message from the Honourable Jennifer Whiteside, Minister of Education

Dear educators, school staff, leaders and trustees.

As the holidays approach, I wanted to take the time to introduce myself and let you know what a true privilege and honour it is to serve as your Minister of Education.

I've spent the last 20 years working for unions and community organizations, both provincially and nationally, on a broad range of health policy and labour relations issues. Most recently, I was the secretary-business manager and chief spokesperson of the Hospital Employees' Union, which represents more than 50,000 health care workers across our province.

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned all of our lives upside down. This year, all of us have faced obstacles like never before. But very few professions have faced the same challenges as those of you working in education. And you have faced those hurdles with such grace and resilience by putting students, and their health and wellbeing, in mind every day.

I've spoken to many families, and I've heard time and time again that your professionalism and dedication are making a significant difference for their children, allowing them to connect with teachers and fellow classmates in person and preventing learning loss. We know that school is the best place for most students to learn, and for their social and emotional wellbeing. And that's why keeping schools open remains a priority for our government.

I also recognize that it's concerning to hear about exposures in our schools. Those exposures reflect what is happening in our communities. It's important to note that in-school transmission remains low. It shows us that the K-12 guidelines, as well as the layers of protection that have been put in place, are keeping people in our classrooms safer than almost anywhere else in the province.

As we work together to fight a second wave of COVID-19, we're going to miss our usual ways of connecting with each other over the holidays. And I can appreciate that this is going to be incredibly difficult for many people in our province.

COVID has highlighted the critical importance of having strong supports for students and staff in our K-to-12 sector with respect to their mental health. I'm learning about, and I'm deeply impressed by, how much work has been done to support trauma-informed practices and compassionate leadership to support students and staff during these challenging times. Supporting both student and staff mental health is a significant part of my mandate letter and it is a priority for our government.

While we still have a challenging road ahead of us until vaccines are widely distributed, I am confident that, together, we can continue to provide a safe and healthy school environment for all our students and staff. We will get through this health crisis. And we will look back at the most demanding time in B.C.'s education system with pride, and maybe a little awe, at all we have accomplished in the face of adversity.

I hope you have a safe, healthy and happy holiday season and you're all able to enjoy some much-needed downtime before the new year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennifer Whiteside". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Jennifer Whiteside
Minister of Education