

Mike Smyth: Make sure you stick around here all morning with me as we kick it off now on BC's back-to-school plan. Have a listen to this here. Here is Premier John Horgan yesterday responding to some of the criticism and concerns about this back-to-school plan.

John Horgan: I believe that going into this September we need to be more flexible than ever before. I know that community leaders in the education sector will be focused on that; making sure that they are do everything that they can to make sure children are safe, the people that work in schools are safe. I am confident that as we evolve through the plan into September, October, and into November, and then into the spring, it will be different when we finish than it was when we started.

Smyth: He's trying to sound this will be a flexible plan. It may be amended. It may be changed, because there are people raising concerns about it as we get set to send our kids back to school in September.

We've heard from the government. We've heard a lot from the teachers, the principals, the trustees. What about all the other support workers in our school system? I'm talking about caretakers and librarians and education assistants. So many support workers in our school system, the bus drivers. The education assistants are absolutely crucial. What do they think about this plan?

Let's check in now with Paul Faoro. He is the president of the CUPE BC union. He represents these workers.

[Let's talk about the back-to-school plan.](#) We've had several days now to digest the basics of this plan. Do you have any concerns?

Paul Faoro: Look, Mike, the key to this plan is the local safety plans that are going to be developed at the local school districts. Every one of the 60 school districts is required, not voluntary, required to put together a safety plan that is done in full consultation with all of the staff and then get sent into provincial health for sign-off.

If those safety plans are weak, are not done, are incomplete, then schools will not open, in my opinion.

Smyth: Does that include consultation with the support workers I just described, like the caretakers?

Faoro: Yes, absolutely. This is where our 60 local presidents, who represent those workers around BC, are key to this. Superintendents need to be setting up meetings, and they are now, to start consultation with support staff workers as well as teachers and other employees.

We're in this together, and again, everybody needs to be effectively ensuring and feeling good about those safety plans. Talking about when we're opening is part two of this. Those safety plans are number one. I'm not going to move. I'm not going to say green light

anything unless I know health and safety is there for our members, all employees and students.

Smyth: Your union represents. did I get that number right, 27,000 school support workers?

Faoro: Yeah. It's actually about 30,000 in K-12. We also represent about 70,000 other public sector workers in BC.

Smyth: Some of these workers are obviously crucial to the system, but I think especially now during this pandemic because when you talk about school cleanliness, for example, and custodians and caretakers in schools. they're going to play a critical role here in keeping these schools clean. I remember the last time I talked to you, you were concerned about the lack of resources for cleaning schools.

Are you satisfied now that you've had a chance to look at this plan that that's going to be adequate to keep schools clean?

Faoro: Let me say this, the school system will not run without CUPE members in schools, full stop. I say that they are the heart of the school system. You recognize that, and I know the ministry recognizes that.

Custodians are certainly top priority of this safety plan. Unfortunately, over the years and in particular under the previous government, cutbacks for custodian and cleaning has happened. There was an erosion from going from daytime custodians to evening shifts. I think everybody realizes the importance of cleaning right now in a pandemic.

The government has put \$23m more into this. I spoke with the ministry earlier in the week, I spoke with Minister Fleming last night about this topic. I made it crystal clear that we need to spend every one of those 23m dollars to find extra employees and extra supplies to make this plan work. That has to happen, in my mind.

Smyth: I know a whole bunch of education assistants. I was speaking to one of them the other day. She told me one of their concerns is how this plan is going to work for education assistants who work with special needs kids in the school system. They do such a crucial job. They were wondering about how this cohort system is going to work. For example, if they're working multiple kids. are they going to be going into various bubbles to help the special needs kids that need the help that they supply? How is that going to work?

Faoro: The word cohorts is confusing. I've been using word learning groups. It is going to be different in sizes of schools and across BC. Whether we look smaller schools or secondary schools, it's going to be broke up.

Education assistants have one heck of a hard job. I am so proud of our education assistants. They are, quite frankly, undervalued for the work they do. There's not enough of them. They have a heck of a hard time. Look, how they operate with the students is going to be based, again, on that safety plan.

I'm not a doctor, I'm not a scientist. Every decision that I'm making is based on provincial health. I think one of the documents that, if you haven't looked at, I encourage everyone to read. It's a document just issued on July 29th from the BC Centre for Disease Control. It's an 18-page document, solely on K-12 school settings. It covers everything. I think everyone should have a cup of coffee and read that document. I think it adds a lot of clarity to the unknown coming up in the days ahead. But we're going to need to work out how education assistants work in the days ahead. Again, it's part of the safety plans in my mind. If it's not good enough, I say school shouldn't start potentially in a district that's weak in some of those areas.

Smyth: On that point, are you confident that schools can reopen as scheduled on Tuesday, September 8th, right?

Faoro: I'm a facts-based guy. I think the consultation that I've seen, that I've been part of that other of our staff has been part of, has been very good. One heck of a lot of hard work is going to have to happen in the days ahead. Can we do it? I think we can, but I have to fully agree with the premier, and specifically the words he used. The sole word being flexible. We have 60 different school districts. Some may be ready to go more than others on September 8th. We have to get it right. If it takes an extra couple of days, we should take the extra couple of days. We are so reliant on one another, we have to be all comfortable and confident that this plan is going to go ahead. Especially since when we think about this. By September, the majority of students have been away for more than five months out of the schools.

Smyth: Let's take a quick break.

I was talking to a teacher the other day who was concerned about the lack of staff to clean schools. She told me there was one part-time janitor in her school who was often not there. She said sometimes there's not even soap available in the bathrooms. She was concerned about it. She was wondering if they might be able to get the kids to pitch in, issue them all a spray bottle so they could spray down their own desk. Is that something that could be done?

Faoro: Not on. Let me make this perfectly clear, and I made it perfectly clear to the minister. There needs to be fully-staffed custodians in every school. Quite frankly, I will not give my level of green light unless I'm confident that's there.

I heard from one of my colleagues in one of the districts that there may be a lack of supplies. I haven't seen documentation on that, but quite frankly if there's not enough supplies in those schools, then I would say those schools or that district needs to be delayed in its opening.

Smyth: When you say it's not on, you mean the idea of having kids wipe down their own workplaces?

Faoro: Our custodians are trained. Their job is knowing how to clean. That's their work, that's what they get paid for. They're proud of that work. It's not the role of students or teachers to be doing that work. It's our members. [inaudible]

Smyth: I'm just talking about them wiping down their desk during the day.

Faoro: I think everyone's walking around I know you are and I am with personal hand sanitizer and everyone needs to be taking care of their own environment. I think everyone recognizes that.