

EDITORIAL

Going Back to School at all Ages as the Fourth Wave of COVID-19 is Upon Us

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As the vaccination program ramps up in the United States and Canada as well as in the European Union and the United Kingdom and we hope the rest of the world we are all considering how best to get our students whether children or adults, back to the physical as opposed to the virtual classroom.

The University of Calgary is one of those Canadian institutions that are determined to have all, or as many as possible, students and teachers back in the physical classroom by September 2021. As a preliminary to this, the teaching faculty have been surveyed voluntarily to get some sense of how many of us have been fully (usually doubly) vaccinated. It turns out that the percentage is very high, in the high eighties. But there are also indications that quite a few are not vaccinated. As to the students, less is known but it is argued that the more highly educated tend to get vaccinated. So the students in general, if not universally, ought to be protected at least for a time by the high rate of vaccination among themselves and the teaching faculty. Interestingly there does not seem to be any actual interest in requiring vaccinations among all teaching staff and students except in those cases where they may be for special reasons at risk from the vaccination process itself. Instead, we have been promised that there will be rapid COVID-19 testing for everybody who needs it and that air circulation, physical distancing, and where necessary the wearing of masks will be required. It will be interesting to follow this regimen to see how things actually work out in the Autumn term. One suspects that most Canadian post-secondary institutions will have similar provisions for their staff and their students.

As for the schools across the country, there seems to be a wide range of different approaches. Most Canadian jurisdictions seem to have made little or no changes to the physical space in the classrooms and plan to require no masks, though in some cases

physical distancing will be attempted. But one interesting development is that worried parents have organized in many places across the country in order to pressure school boards to require masks, physical distancing, rapid COVID-19 testing, and mandatory vaccines for all those staff and students who are eligible for vaccines. The main worry seems to be that the Delta variant of the coronavirus seems to spread quickly among the children and is more likely to make them sick or even hospitalized. As it is quickly becoming the standard variant in the Canadian context this is worrying many parents.

Of course over the course of the last seventeen months from kindergarten to post-secondary levels pretty well everybody has been involved in versions of online educational and/or homeschooling with parental involvement for the younger children. While the success of online education has been variable, most seem to have been able to cope with it at the level of instruction and learning without too much loss. So one supposes that if the Delta variant or even deadlier ones like the Colombian variant that has just begun to spread do begin to take over we will be well-armed to return to our strategies of the previous seventeen months and still manage a semblance of education for all at all levels while maintaining safety for most of us. Happily on the economic front most “front line” workers will have been vaccinated and we are now told that a booster show is probably in the works so that continuing protection, perhaps directly aiming at the most rapidly spreading or most destructive variants, will be available. So in spite of the continuing worries, we will all potentially face we have much grounds for optimism.

Perhaps the only residual problem that is now a considerable threat is that the mental health of us all is potentially at threat from the worry, the fear, and the actual grief and destruction that the coronavirus has caused. We will all have to be careful to see to our own mental health and those around us and at the organizational level to make provisions at all levels of education to look at the mental health of the teachers and students as well as the support staff working in the background that enables us all to manage with our tasks. As we have now become aware of this new and widespread threat to our wellbeing we are at least forewarned and one hopes therefore forearmed.

The last seventeen months have brought out previously hidden problems, hidden prejudices, and forms of social unquiet that had been suppressed by the normal run of the times. The Black

Lives Matter movement began in the United States incited by the murder of George Floyd by the police in Minnesota but spread to the entire world during the pandemic. Clearly, there are systemic difficulties relating to the treatment of Black people by police in many jurisdictions. In Canada, we have also learned that there are similar problems with respect to our indigenous peoples and their treatment at the hands of our police. Another recent development because the coronavirus appeared first in Wuhan in China many people of Chinese and other Asian origins have been unfairly abused publicly across the globe as if they had somehow made us all sick. There has also been a widespread rise in dangerous and violent incidents involving Muslims and Jews not only in Canada and the United States but around the world during the strain of these times. The only way to combat such irrational and unnecessary and dangerous developments is through education. So when our schools and colleges and universities reconvene in the Fall we have to be sure that we tackle such irrational fears and prejudices in our classrooms as well. In that regard, we have a universal educational opportunity for which we can thank the coronavirus.

May the next school year be a time of great health, great learning, and great social improvements for us all!

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