

April 16, 2024

Dear Saanich School Trustees,

We are writing as a Staff Committee to express our grave concerns about the District's new Health and Wellness Program, which is being included in the current budget process and has already been approved by the board. Because there has been no consultation about this program with the Saanich Teachers' Association nor information about its nature provided to teachers, we can only make assumptions about this program and associated manager based on similar initiatives in other school districts.

We suspect that this program will include the monitoring and analysis of the use of contractual sick/medical days by teachers. The idea that the 15 days 1.0 FTE teachers are entitled to per year would be scrutinized by a manager at the School Board office is very upsetting. If the plan is that this manager will reach out to teachers who are at home sick to make inquiries or suggestions is even more concerning. Although this new program aims to be "budget neutral," meaning it will be funded through the 'saving' of sick days teachers are entitled to use, it most certainly will not be neutral in terms of the relationship between Saanich teachers and the School Board and District Executive. It will be extremely damaging. The implication is that teachers are not truly free to take the sick leave to which they are entitled and, more seriously, that there is a lack of trust on the part of the employer.

We have heard that there is a concern regarding an increase in the use of sick/medical days over the past few years. This increase was totally expected and predictable for several reasons. First, following the pandemic, teachers are no longer coming to work sick. Society now has a widely held understanding and expectation that workers, especially those working with vulnerable populations, stay home when they are sick to avoid the spread of illness. Teachers are attempting to do this, but our workplace environment increases our exposure to illness as parents continue to send their children to school sick. Second, if a teacher has young children, they will likely need to stay home more often as the children are not welcome at preschools and daycares. Third, if a teacher gets COVID, the recovery time can be significantly longer than other illnesses resulting in the use of more sick days. Lastly, mental health is now more understood, accepted, and honoured in society and certainly within our School District. If a teacher needs to use sick time in order to work on aspects of their mental health so they are able to teach and care for their students, they should be encouraged to do so. This new Health and Wellness Program seems to do the opposite of supporting the physical and mental health of teachers as it implies that teachers should be taking less sick time and working through illness, pain, or mental challenges.

In closing, we ask that you seriously reconsider including the Health and Wellness Program in this year's budget and instead consider alternative ways to support teacher health and wellness. This type of program is certain to cause a divide between teachers and the employer. If such a program is to be at all successful in the future, it **must** be developed in collaboration with the Saanich Teachers' Association honouring the "Saanich Way," we value so dearly.

Sincerely,

The Sidney Staff Committee