



Not enough in-person school hours for Vancouver School Board secondary students: A violation of the right to education

Mary Kestler, Jen Grant, Laavanya Srichandramohan and Kate Butler

As of September 2020, elementary students of The Vancouver School Board (VSB) have been in full-time instruction alongside neighbouring school districts in BC. However within this same timeframe, VSB secondary students have been largely forgotten - only receiving 1.75 hours of instruction per day. This stark difference of instruction time violates the right to education each child within the district is entitled to.

The provincial School Act requires students to have a total of 25.5 hours of instruction every week. Currently, VSB secondary students are receiving only 8.75 hours of instruction per week. Accommodating only one third of the instruction time students are warranted by law.

All neighbouring school districts, including ones with one of the largest secondary schools in BC, have more instruction time than the VSB. Additionally, all private secondary schools and all CSF secondary school students in BC are in school full-time in-person. The chart below illustrates the distinct difference of instruction received within the VSB and other districts in BC.

	VSB	Burnaby	North Vancouver	Surrey
Gr 8-9	8.75 hrs/wk	Full-time in-person	Full-time in-person	Full-time in-person
Gr 10-12	8.75 hrs/wk	17.75 hrs/wk (in-person + remote)	18.7 hrs/wk (in-person + remote)	22.7 hrs/wk

Public health data from September to December 2020 has confirmed that despite the majority of schools going back full-time, schools are not COVID-19 super spreaders. For example, in Vancouver Coastal Health (the health authority in which VSB is situated), 700 students and staff have had COVID-19. **This comprises only 0.7% of the school population.** Of the 0.7%, over **90% cases did not lead to any school-based transmission.**

And yet, our high school students continue to go to school for 1.75 hours per day with no end in sight and no explanation from the VSB about how this educational time will be made up.

Recent surveys of students, teachers and parents performed by the VSB and the district parent advisory committees has also shown that:

1. A large majority of parents want more in-person education for their high school students
2. Students want more social interaction
3. Teachers are very stressed out with the current model and are concerned that students are falling behind

These survey results clearly indicate that VSB students are struggling both academically and socially due to their current circumstances. The lack of hours of instruction not only infringes on each child's right to education, but also their right to have protection from violence, freedom of thought, access to information, the right to play, access to social support, and many others. In many ways, schools are seen as "critical infrastructure" for realizing these rights.

Infringing on a child's right to academic education also often coincides with infringing on a child's education about their rights. The social setting of a school, whether online or in-person, provides an accessible institution to ask for help and to grow as an individual. Taking instruction hours away from VSB students limits their ability to understand, validate and connect their experiences to much larger issues at hand. Consequently, the mental health of children are declining. Grade 8 and 9 students are particularly vulnerable, which is why other school districts have these students in full-time instruction.

The consequences of delayed full time instruction and remote learning for students are already being seen across North America. For example:

1. Oakland hospital has seen almost **3X increase in suicidal ideation in children.**
2. Quebec is reporting a **threefold increase in failure rates in high school students**
3. The CDC in the US is reporting **increases from 24-31% in emergency mental health visits.**

Moving forward, greater emphasis must be placed on the best interest of the child and ensuring students are given the right to be seen and heard. Understanding the long term consequences of violating a child's right to education must be taken seriously in order to prevent further hardships.