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PRDTU Response to School District and Northern Health Townhall Meeting:

“It’s Time to Require Masks in Prince Rupert Schools and Classrooms”

(PRINCE RUPERT) School District 52 hosted a Townhall Meeting on COVID-19 on Thursday Nov. 19, 2020. The Prince Rupert District Teachers’ Union (PRDTU) responded to the Townhall Meeting with the following points:

- When mentioning mask requirements in the introductory slides, the District did not clearly specify that middle school and high school students are **only** required to wear face masks when in common areas or hallways, **not** when in their cohort or classroom.
 - “Students, staff, and the public should be required to wear masks in all public indoor spaces, including in classrooms and schools,” said Gabriel Bureau, President of the PRDTU. “With masks now required in public indoor spaces throughout BC, the same rules should apply for students and school staff.”
- Northern Health described the contact tracing and notification process. While this process is essential for limiting the growth of COVID-19, schools require precautionary measures as well.
 - “More is needed for schools to be safe for students and staff,” said Gabriel Bureau. “Precautionary measures like mask mandates, lower density, remote learning supports, and adequate ventilation are needed. Parents expect schools to be safe. So do teachers.”
- Northern Health shared information on the level of infections due to exposures at schools. So far, school outbreaks have been limited. While that is good news, more is still required to keep schools safe.
 - “Parents and staff members do not care about averages. Families care about their child’s safety. Staff members have a right to safety at work,” said Gabriel Bureau. “That’s why safety in every school and classroom should be the school district’s first and foremost priority. All measures to keep kids and schools safe should be put in place.”

- Who's in charge?
 - “Teachers want more leadership from the School District,” said Gabriel Bureau. “The buck stops with school leaders here in Prince Rupert, not from officials based in Victoria and elsewhere. Teachers want improved safety, including mandated masks in classrooms and schools, to protect our students and staff members.”
- Northern Health confirmed that schools, according to public health officials, are not considered “public spaces” where mask requirements apply.
 - “This simply makes no sense,” said Gabriel Bureau. “Masks in schools and classrooms limit the spread from exposure and protect people from COVID-19 and should be part of school safety plans.”
- Northern Health does not currently have a plan for how to work with teachers to help educate the public on the health benefits of vaccines.
 - “It's time to start listening to the professionals who understand schools: Teachers,” said Gabriel Bureau. “Teachers are already trusted in the community and we have the tools and relationships needed to help inform the public in the role of science and public health in keeping people and communities safe during this pandemic.”
- Can the School District do more? The School District claims that it must follow orders and the *School Act*, but does not answer the question of whether or not it has the authority to exceed minimal standards set by the Ministry of Education or other agencies.
 - “There is not a prohibition for the School District to enact higher standards for school safety. It must do what is in its power to protect its employees and the students in our schools,” said Gabriel Bureau. “We have local School Boards in place to ensure that communities have input in the education of their own children. Now we need local leadership more than ever.”