

**CTF/FCE Ed Talks**  
***Special Edition Podcast:***  
***A Conversation on Pan-Canadian Teacher Mental Health***

Episode Transcript

**Julieanna Mawko**

Hello and welcome to this special edition podcast brought to you by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE). I'm your host, Julieanna Mawko of the Public Affairs team, and today we're talking about CTF/FCE's latest pandemic research report, titled [\*"But at what cost?" Teacher mental health during COVID-19.\*](#)

The Canadian Teachers' Federation is the national alliance of provincial and territorial teacher organizations, and the national voice for the teaching profession, representing over 365,000 elementary and secondary school teachers across Canada.

**Julieanna Mawko**

In this episode, I'm joined by Dr. Pamela Rogers, CTF/FCE Director of Research and Professional Learning, and Nichole Grant, Researcher and Policy Analyst; these two are the small but mighty research team behind this report on the first-hand experiences of Canadian teachers and education workers throughout the pandemic.

Later on, CTF/FCE's President, Sam Hammond, weighs in on behalf of the Federation and what's next on the national stage.

**Julieanna Mawko**

So welcome Pam and Nicole. Thank you for joining me today for this very special episode.

**Pamela Rogers**

Thanks, Julieanna.

**Nichole Grant**

Thanks so much for having us.



**Julieanna Mawko**

So, let's get right into it. So CTF/FCE's latest mental health report was just released on January 24. And I have to say, this is so timely and important.

**Pamela Rogers**

Thanks so much. It is quite timely. And just to add, this report is actually the third research study from the CTF/FCE on teachers' experiences in the pandemic. So, our first two surveys were from June 2020 and October 2020.

**Nichole Grant**

And this study really is to humanize the survey results. We wanted to better understand educators' experiences and to learn more about the connections between workload, changes to practice in pedagogy, digital technologies and mental health and well-being. Over 2,300 teachers from the October 2020s Teacher Mental Health Check-in survey volunteered to be contacted for a follow-up interview. And 110 teachers were recruited from across CTF/FCE's 18 Member and Associate Organizations. We ended up with a total of 32 open-ended, semi-structured interviews that were conducted from February 20 to April 4, 2021. And interviews were in both official languages depending on the language preferences of the participants.

**Pamela Rogers**

Yes, exactly. And the research question that underlined the research report really is: what are teachers' day-to-day realities living and working in the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Julieanna Mawko**

Wonderful, thank you so much for that helpful overview. Now, I think it's fair to say that this report generated a lot of rich data; can you give us a quick recap of the report and its findings?

**Pamela Rogers**

Sure, so overall, we gathered about 24 hours of education workers' and teachers' narratives. And so what we were looking for was an in-depth understanding of what living through a pandemic and teaching or working in schools through a pandemic look like, especially during the 2020 and 2021 school year. And so in the report, what you'll find is just how complex and entangled teachers lives are with their personal life, their work life, and their mental health and well-being. And so our analysis really aimed at taking apart these threads to make it understandable and approachable for all readers,

but also to provide specific examples from teachers lives as it connects to mental health more generally.

### **Nichole Grant**

And what we found was that there was deteriorating mental health in Canadian public school teachers and educators, and it has been caused in part by continued increased workload, uncertainty, and inadequate support from schools, boards and districts and Ministry leadership. Overall, we found that this report really reinforces prior research that Canadian education workers' [and] their experiences teaching through COVID-19 are intimately connected in their mental health and their sense of well-being.

### **Julieanna Mawko**

I see, especially with the recent launch of CTF/FCE's social media campaign #WeNeed2Talk, we're seeing a collective sense of emergency, uncertainty and crisis among teacher and education workers from coast to coast to coast. Can you tell me about some things that are unique about teachers' realities, working and living during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### **Pamela Rogers**

Yes, so I mean, there's several, or there are many that we could point out, but the first thing that comes to mind for me is that teachers are very much at the center of socio-political and economic decisions in ways that many people haven't experienced. So, just as an example, decisions to close or to open schools, to provide or not provide proper personal protective equipment (PPE) and masks, to spend or not spend any of the federal money that was set aside for each province and territory to safely reopen schools, and that includes updating ventilation systems. So many of these decisions to use or to not use, or to open or to reopen, many of these are political decisions. So many teachers had to rely on the provincial and territorial leadership, and depending on the region, what you think might be very common sense, so you would think that money would be used to make schools safer, actually ended up being incredibly political and controversial. And so education workers, like health care workers, were frontline workers in that sense, throughout the pandemic and continuing in the pandemic. Yet they're at the mercy of decision-making that shape their daily lives and the work so much so that in some cases, what we heard from teachers was that their daily work was no longer recognizable to them.

### **Julieanna Mawko**

Now amongst these realities, we're also seeing the lines between home and work life being blurred below and beyond belief, and teachers being pulled in multiple directions and are increasingly always

"on". Can you speak to some of these realities that teachers are facing both in and out of the classroom?

### **Nichole Grant**

Of course, again, there's so many things we could talk about. But the reality is the classroom is a very different place now. Teachers provided stories of needing to do so many things in their professional repertoires from scratch. They had to rethink their pedagogies to be adaptive to multiple and changing modalities, they had to find ways of embedding enhanced health and safety protocols into their classrooms. It was taking teaching time to clean desks, it was forgoing sensory bins because they didn't have time to sanitize. It was using personal funds to buy ready-made digital lessons because they had no time to plan for their own. These were just some of the things that teachers did to survive as best they could and to maintain their classrooms as best they could. The classroom is also no longer simply a physical space. So, educators described that one of the biggest effects was often losing that physical ability to connect with students that the classroom really gives them. So, they emphasized how difficult maintaining connections with students and with colleagues are when you can't physically be together. And when students are struggling and disengaged, it's really hard to connect when all you get is a black screen. Online distant teaching is part of the current teaching reality. And it's one that scares educators in its potential trajectories from industrial and privatized models of education, but also for how it takes away from those important connections with students. There were so many stories of teachers making hard decisions always at their own risk or detriment, but always for students and their success. Teachers consistently went through great lengths to connect and support their students in whatever kind of classroom context they found themselves in.

### **Julieanna Mawko**

Now, I know it's been said before, and it deserves repeating: Teachers and education workers are honestly superheroes. I could not even begin to imagine juggling all those demands and growing workload, on top of navigating and implementing the often-changing protocols for enhanced health and safety, as you mentioned, Nicole. So, I'm curious to know, as you were conducting the research, what stood out to you the most or surprised you?

### **Pamela Rogers**

For me, there were so many moments that were surprising or stood out, but I'm just thinking of teachers and education workers, and they really are superheroes, and they should be commended for all that they do. But at the same time, I think we also need to recognize that teachers are humans, and that they have finite amounts of energy and resources just like anyone else. And so, it's great that teachers are receiving praise, and they absolutely deserve it, but I think it's also very difficult to live up to being a hero or being held to an impossible standard over such a long and arduous period of time. So, this was something that stood out for me, just how teachers were struggling with the hero

identity. And what I found surprising was how difficult it was also to do this research and to speak to teachers about this. So as a former high school teacher, I deeply empathize with their experiences, and I could really feel what it would have been like for them in the classroom at this time. So going through lockdown at the same time, and having my own experience of the pandemic just made the research all the more real. So, it didn't really feel like I was studying teachers per se, it was much more immersive in that respect. And something else I want to mention was, that was unexpected in some ways, was how generous the participants were. They were very honest. They were open and authentic. And it was like we were sitting in the same room in our conversations, even though they were virtual. So even though they were strangers at the beginning, by the end of every conversation, it definitely felt like we were more like colleagues. And that connection really surprised me every time. And so, I think one of the unexpected outcomes emerging from the interview process was realizing that the sustained depth and intensity of education workers' struggles across Canada really needs to be looked at closely and carefully. And so, although we have data indicating what difficulties teachers faced earlier in the pandemic, after listening to the accounts of personal and professional struggles that teachers were facing, it just gave a different type of research that humanized the earlier data that we had collected.

### **Nichole Grant**

I think that really builds on what I was thinking, I would say too Pam, in that I didn't expect to carry the emotions of the whole research and reporting process as much as I did. Like I didn't foresee the amount of closeness or how deep the relationships would be, even from such short conversations and with people I was speaking with for the first time. And that was really something that we wanted to make sure we communicated in the report, that kind of emotional weight of these topics and the connection that that emotional weight gives these topics and these issues, and it's a connective affect. And despite that, I was still surprised how much the graphic components of the report would amplify the message in the way that it has. So, I'm gonna thank our graphic artist, Rolf-Carlos Klausener, here. And he really brought our sketches to life, and not just our sketches, but the stories and quotations of educators. The words and images really speak together. And I find that also speaks to how we concluded the report, that we're connected and recognizing those connections through the conversations we had with teachers is an important step for advocacy.

### **Julieanna Mawko**

Wonderful, thank you so much, Pam and Nichole, for that. Now, looking forward, what has your extensive research revealed in terms of what needs to happen to address this crisis?

### **Pamela Rogers**

So, Julieanna, with our recommendations, we've been pretty consistent since our first pandemic study in June 2020. But of course, a lot of the recommendations have not, unfortunately, been implemented.



So, they need to be repeated throughout the studies that we've produced. So, it's left a growing list of necessary supports for education workers that have built over time. One simple and very profound recommendation mentioned in the report is the need to listen to education workers, to value their experiences and professional expertise, and to include teachers into decision-making processes, as they're the expert problem solvers who were working in classrooms every day. And if given the chance, they would have contributed greatly to managing the educational change and alternatives throughout the pandemic that were sorely needed. And unfortunately, even though this seems to be a very, again, common sense approach to talk to the workers and consult the workers that do the work, unfortunately, that has not happened, in most cases, almost all cases. But even more broadly, I think the work culture itself needs to shift away from the expectation that teachers need to be everything to everyone at all times. And having that constant pressure on them, to fix and take on more all the time, that needs to shift. So, I think understanding the various layers of the system and its full complexity, like the ecological view that we forward in the conclusion of the report, would really help in conceptualizing how work culture plays a vital role in mental health.

### **Nichole Grant**

So, the ecological view that Pam just mentioned, of mental health and well-being, it moves beyond seeing certain factors as affecting teacher mental health. And ecological view sees how teachers, their immediate experience, the institutional systems and processes in which they work, as well as the society in which they live, are entangled and interconnected. So there's an outer sphere of this ecological understanding, and that would be kind of the atmosphere of education, that's an external influence and historical context about schooling, public education, as well as aspects outside of education specifically, like determinants of health. And then there would be that next middle sphere or layer that would be that kind of terrain of praxis. So when pedagogical and institutional processes, where they happen, and then where they're acted out. And that encompasses things like mandates and directives, pedagogical modalities, and health and safety protocols. And then there would be that kind of inner sphere or core, and this is the place where personal areas of teaching and being a teacher, so personal agency, coping, and the outlook and personal goals as a personal professional. And so these fears all interact to form the whole of teacher's experiences in their mental health and well-being context. So it's seeing teacher mental health in this way means that the idea of the kind of "add-in/stir-in" solutions won't work, because the culture and systems that are contributing and affecting teacher well-being and mental health aren't addressed through single resources or methods. So we need to broaden our view and have an interconnected understanding. And that's really what our research tells us.

### **Julieanna Mawko**

Wonderful, thank you for those next steps, Pam, and also Nichole for breaking it down and explaining those different layers. That's really helpful. Now, before President Sam Hammond joins us to weigh in, is there anything else that either of you would like to add about the research?

### **Nichole Grant**

There's so many things to speak about. But I believe I can say for both of us that we're really honored that teachers trusted us, that they took the time and space to be part of this research, and entrusted their personal stories to people that they don't know. Also, this research required a lot of planning and organizing that would not have happened, especially over lockdowns here locally, without the help and support of our admin, Sophia Dominguez Robledano, and our Co-op student at the time, Alice Prindiville-Porto, and then the amazing Linguistic services team that helped us translate all of the documents involved in this work.

### **Pamela Rogers**

Definitely. And I have to add, Communications and Public Affairs team as well, who's rolled out the research over social media this week as well. But in terms of the research, I think for me, lastly, it's important to note that the strength of the research is really due to the membership. So without having members on board to participate, we wouldn't have had as much success in the surveys or the qualitative study. So really, a lot of recognition should be with our members as well. And so I think, from what we heard from teachers and education workers across the country, they've really told us similar stories, regardless of where they're teaching, whether it's grade, or province or territory, any level or any course. And so because of this, we hope it sends a strong message about the current and very tenuous culture of work in public education. Because we really need to have education workers, teachers and students' mental health and well-being at the center of the work that we do. And also, it's been a really large privilege to be part of the evidence-based advocacy work with the CTF/FCE and its members. So, thank you Julieanna.

### **Julieanna Mawko**

That's great. Thank you so much, Pam, and Nichole, and thank you for taking the time to discuss your research findings. It has really shed light on a conversation that needs to be brought to the forefront. So, thank you once again for your work.

### **Pamela Rogers**

Thanks so much.

### **Nichole Grant**

Yeah, thank you.

**Julieanna Mawko**

Now, I'm joined here with the CTF/FCE President, Sam Hammond, to talk about the report's significance and what these findings mean at the national level.

Hello Sam, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with us today.

**Sam Hammond**

My pleasure. Thanks for the invitation and thanks for doing this, it's so very important.

**Julieanna Mawko**

So, we heard from Pam and Nichole about the research findings, but what do these findings mean for the teaching profession and publicly funded public education at large?

**Sam Hammond**

What it means quite clearly is that teachers and education staff in every corner of this country are stretched to their absolute limit, that their mental health and well-being are in jeopardy. And they need more resources, and they need on the ground, immediate, consistent, supports. Educators and education staff across this country are the heart and soul of publicly funded public education. And if they're not working to their absolute maximum or have the resources and the supports to do that, everything within public education begins to crumble and students will feel that, and we'll feel that in our community. So, it's so vital that this call from teachers and education staff in this country be listened to and acted upon.

**Julieanna Mawko**

Now, based on these findings, can you tell listeners what the CTF/FCE is calling for?

**Sam Hammond**

So, we're calling for the federal government and governments across this country to work in collaboration, to support teachers and education staff at every level within the K to 12 publicly funded public education system and to do it now and not to wait any longer. We need supports and resources to better support and strengthen publicly funded education.

We need better supports and resources to assist and help educators in this country do what they need to do. Frankly, what this report tells us is that we have a national crisis on our hands and the federal





government needs to step up and deal with this national crisis in conjunction with the provinces and territories.

And we think to do that, step one, the federal government should be convening a national advisory table on public education to deal with issues related to mental health and well-being of educators in this country, and students. And also, to deal with issues around Truth and Reconciliation and a national consistent curriculum, for example.

But based on the report, the immediate needs are those related to the health and well-being and the mental health and well-being of educators in this country.

**Julieanna Mawko**

Thank you, Sam, for your time and for sharing your valuable insights.

**Sam Hammond**

My pleasure, thank you.

**Julieanna Mawko**

After my discussion today, it is so important to have these conversations about teacher mental health, and although we are coming to the end of our episode, the conversation doesn't stop here.

I'll take this time to invite you all to take part in collective action by joining us on social media with the hashtag #WeNeed2Talk. Check out the "Show Notes" for ideas on how you can join the national conversation, along with the link to the full report, "[\*But at what cost?\*](#)"

Thank you for listening to this special edition podcast, brought to you by the Canadian Teachers' Federation.

And stay tuned for more podcasts like this, as well as a new CTF/FCE podcast series dropping soon.