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Press Release

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The Executive Committee of the Bermuda Union of Teachers wishes to inform our members of a decision post an emergency meeting last Friday. As you know, the Department of Education is directing all staff to report for pre-return to school testing on January 1, 2022.

As shared in correspondence sent from the Union Office, the BUT proposed a pre-return to school testing regime that is in line with our Collective Bargaining Agreement, as the current schedule infringes upon the rights of our members. This Union shared with the Ministry and Department of Education that we are willing to provide additional administrative assistance and resources to ensure testing could occur on January 4, with results processed for the next day. All professional development for January 4 should remain remote, as is custom and practice since the beginning of the pandemic.

Neither the Department, nor the Ministry of Education engaged the Union in creating a pre-return to school testing schedule. Our proposal for staff testing on January 4, which allows results to be returned for January 5, does not impact teaching and learning. We are also aware that the School Principal's recommendations for the pre-testing schedule were denied.

Unfortunately, the Department and the Ministry of Education have missed another opportunity to collaborate with stakeholders. As communicated to both the Department and the Ministry of Education, no teacher is obligated to perform any work-related duties before January 4, 2022. Additionally, no teacher is to be penalized for not submitting to any demands of the Department of Education outside of paid working hours (including preparing packets, downloading of workshop material, or attendance to mandatory pre-entry testing).

Therefore, we are calling members to stand in solidarity and not fulfill any demands by the Department of Education during the Christmas Break. Do not attend the January 1, 2022, testing site, do not interrupt your family time to answer any emails, calls, or perform any tasks requested by the Department of Education.

We note that, during the Government's Technical Briefing on Friday, December 17th, Minister Wilson said of our current situation: "We've been at this for 20 months and we've maintained that ... we have to get to a point in our life where we are living with Covid. We have to live with this. This is here to be with us and walk within our presence for some considerable time. And to do that, we need to ensure that we reiterate the messaging to the public that this is about personal responsibility. The Government can't be all and do all."

This Union completely agrees with this sentiment, and we posit that, by mandating workers to test on days off 20 months into a pandemic, we will set a dangerous precedent to continue in years to come. This does not demonstrate moving beyond the pandemic. Taking personal and collective responsibility means working together, *not* dictating.

With the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, the most responsible thing for staff is to “know before you go” as per Minister Wilson. Therefore, taking a PCR test on Jan 1st to receive students on January 5th gives false security. Rapid antigen, or PCR, testing on Jan 4th provides more reliable, more secure data.

It is important to note that this Union supports the efforts of all stakeholders in their attempts to keep our schools safe as we are still amid an active pandemic. However, we will not support the expectation that our members give up 2-3 hours on their holiday when there are other viable solutions readily available.

In closing, we encourage our members, as well as the wider community, to remain vigilant in these precarious times. Practice good hand hygiene, wear your mask, and maintain social distance as much as practicable.

In Solidarity.