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What happens when students break new rules?

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Take some strict new rules and a bunch of cooped-up teenagers. Add some anxious adults and a system already marked by systemic discrimination. Welcome to the reopening of high schools in Ontario.

When Toronto students return to the classroom this fall, they will be required to wear masks indoors where social distancing cannot be maintained, subject to medical exemptions. The public health evidence is clear: social distancing and wearing masks significantly reduces the risk of transmitting COVID-19.

But what will happen to students who forget? Who lower their masks, remove them or lose them? Teens who walk the wrong way down a hallway now marked one-way, or friends caught sharing a snack? How will school officials and teachers respond when adolescents breach, as they inevitably will, the new rules and guidelines?

Making mask wearing and physical distancing a condition of school attendance seems a logical extension of a rule imposed on or adopted by businesses: no mask, no service. But a "no mask, no en-

try" policy in schools raises more questions than it answers.

While we have some assurances that compassion and patience will be the approach to younger elementary students, Ontario's current plans for reopening secondary schools are silent about enforcement. Will momentary or accidental failures to follow the new rules be treated differently than outright refusals? What about students who cannot comply because they lack the necessary items - thermometers, masks, a lunch packed at home?

In recent decades, policy-makers, courts and the public have become rather obsessed with school safety. Schools have deployed harsh discipline, zero-tolerance policies, police officers and surveillance cameras in their safety mission. But demanding punishment in the name of safety can create its own dangers. Too often, parental calls for protection of "my child" are invitations to neglect and subordinate "other children."

These concerns are amplified by what we already know about how discrimination can infect both school discipline and the policing of public health. In

March and April, as COVID-19 hit, many locales experimented with punitive enforcement of health-related rules.

Researchers with the "Policing the Pandemic" project found highly inconsistent enforcement. Some people received hefty fines for breaking rules that were nearly impossible to know about, or for activities that were not illegal.

Authorities failed to collect data on race or income, but anecdotal reports suggest enforcement targeted working-class neighbourhoods and racialized people. Most of these punitive approaches were significantly scaled back.

New public health rules will be layered on top of a school discipline system that is already unevenly deployed. The Ontario Human Rights Commission has repeatedly found that Black students, Indigenous students, students of colour, poor and working-class students, and students with disabilities are disproportionately punished, especially under strict discipline policies.

Data collected in recent years by the Toronto District School Board and York University Prof. Carl James found a staggering 42 per cent of all Black stu-

dents in the TDSB had been suspended at least once by the time they finished high school. A punitive approach to the new rules will only drive these numbers up.

Attending to race and class is all the more urgent because neighbourhoods with significant working-class and racialized populations have been hit hardest by the pandemic. COVID-19 rates in Toronto are disproportionately high for all racialized groups except East Asians - ironic, given the rise in anti-Chinese racism during the pandemic. Anxiety, fear and parental pressure might push local school administrators into heavily surveilling, scapegoating and punishing specific groups of students.

We must make equitable access to quality education a priority in implementing adaptations to in-person schooling. That means ensuring that schools do not default to "policing" the pandemic in ways that replicate discriminatory approaches to surveillance and punishment.

Harsh punishment will not end this pandemic. It will not protect adolescents or anyone else. With all eyes now on schools, perhaps we might finally acknowledge and confront the inequalities that have long defined education in so-called normal times.

Every high school student deserves respect and a chance at an education in our strange new reality. All of them are learning, and they learn, in part, from how adults act.

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