OPINION

TIMES&TRANSCRIPT
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COVID-19 pandemic

Back-to-school plan gets it right

The provincial government's back-to-school plan strikes the right balance for the school year ahead. The plan reflects the ongoing risk of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to get students back to normal after the last 17 months of pandemic education.

The plan was released last Friday, just a few weeks ahead of the return to school after Labour Day. It's clear the measures outlined by Education Minister Dominic Cardy were drawn up with the pandemic still in mind – both its continuing risks, and the progress we have made against the disease.

On the one hand, masks will still be required in a variety of settings: in common spaces such as buses and hallways, and among high school students where the local vaccination rate for people aged 12 to 19 is less than 90 per cent. Students showing even one symptom of COVID-19 will also have to mask up.

Vaccination against COVID-19 or regular testing will be required for teachers and staff, and the province is planning to add COVID-19 vaccines to the regular immunization schedule for students.

On the other hand, classes will be back to their regular size, and students will no longer be limited to their classroom bubbles. Extracurricular activities can also resume as normal.

High school students, meanwhile, will no longer be required to stay home several days a week: in-person learning will resume on a full-time basis for all students.

This plan is a clear reaction to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet over, and that the unvaccinated are now most at risk, particularly from new variants of the disease. For schools in particular, that poses a problem, since younger students are not eligible to be vaccinated and yet are going to be in close proximity to each other every day.

To protect those students and their families, encouraging vaccine uptake among the eligible staff and students must continue to be the top priority. In the meantime, tying policies such as masking to vaccination rates is a common-sense way to spur on more vaccination.

Yet the situation is very different from last year. Then, with no vaccines available, tough decisions had to be made about extracurricular activities and in-person education to help cut off the spread of COVID-19. Repeated outbreaks in schools across Canada last year provided ample evidence that this was the right decision.

But with most of New Brunswick now vaccinated, it's no longer fair for students to continue these sacrifices. In particular, allowing high schoolers back into the classroom full time will give them a chance to make up lost ground, and allow teachers and staff to identify what learning gaps must be addressed.

Students and teachers will need to be prepared for more setbacks in the year ahead – but the education plan unveiled last week shows we are in a much better position than we were a year ago.

Letters to the editor

Tories should nominate a diverse slate

The efficient machine that propelled the Tories to power in Nova Scotia remains ready to go, and can transition to the federal campaign to help crush the myth that Atlantic Canada is a Liberal bastion on election night.

Did anyone else notice the Bluenose Tories nominated a diverse array of candidates from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as a plethora of women candidates?

Federal Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole should heed this lesson. Canada is no longer a country of people only from British or French backgrounds. The very capable Leslyn Lewis, a woman of colour who almost pulled off a major upset in the federal Tory leadership campaign, is a star candidate in southern Ontario. She is cabinet material and potentially a future deputy prime minister. If only the capable, universally respected Rona Ambrose could be lured back to a candidacy. This could offset Alberta Premier Jason Kenney's lack of popularity. Tories must avoid their perpetual mistake of stereotyping Canadians in the pre-Second World War period when choosing candidates.

The federal government has made it far too easy for many to sit comfortably at home on their posterior awaiting their next federal cheque, for which they have been "pigeon-holed" for eligibility. That is especially true given that one of about every five stores in the Shediac region seems to have larger and larger "Nous embauchons - Staff wanted" signs due to the government's reinforcement of citizen reliance on the public purse. My prediction: New Brunswick is not going to be a bonanza for the federal Liberals. The province will split evenly between the Liberals and Conservatives. The Green party has imploded, and their voters will drift to the New Democrats or Tories. The jig may be up for the Liberals: too bad, so sad.

M.B. Sullivan
Shediac

Let citizens choose on vaccines

The unvaccinated are fast on their way to becoming Canada's untouchables, deprived of access to employment and services available to the rest of society. Sadly, even New Brunswick is hurdling down this unsettling road.

If vaccines are truly effective, then the health of those who want to be vaccinated is already protected.

In a free society, citizens have the right to put themselves at risk if they choose to do so. By extension, they should also have the right to avoid risk if they believe these new vaccines are dangerous. Governments, schools and corporations have no right to force you to inject something into your body against your will.

Recently, Premier Blaine Higgs had the courage to say that we need to learn to live with this virus when he announced our move to green. Part of living with this virus is to allow citizens to make their own decisions about what risks they are prepared to take.

Hopefully, during this federal election, we can finally have a free and open discussion about mandatory vaccines and voters can have their say if this is the path they want.

Ian Gray
Dieppe

Nuclear needed to fight climate change

A recent letter writer wants to phase out "heat engines" (fossil-fuelled and nuclear) for power generation and transportation because they are inefficient and half the heat they generate is lost immediately to the environment ("Phase out heat engines," Aug. 19).

Of course, eventually all the energy is taken up by the environment and contributes to the heating of the planet. Out of context, however, the statement is not meaningful. The energy input to the surface of the planet from thermal generation of electricity amounts to an average of 0.015 W per square metre and the input from the sun averages 240 W per square metre. With that in mind, it becomes clear that the "heat engine" input is negligible. Still, we should consider that fossil-burning generators add the greenhouse gas CO_2 to the atmosphere, and since 1980 this has been responsible for an increase in the heat balance to the earth of 1 W per square metre – the major contributor to global warming that prompted the Code Red emergency declaration from the United Nations. Substituting fossil-burning power generators with renewables like wind and solar is a popular but only partial solution, totally inadequate for sustaining large economies. Nuclear power generation is already contributing to CO_2 reduction and needs to be more widely adopted urgently if we are to make significant inroads against global warming. The author's footnote about the longevity of nuclear waste is a red herring: Canada is executing a plan for its management that has been in place since 2007.

Derek Lister
Fredericton

Proper storage needed to meet green energy goals

Maurice Dusseault & Grant Wach
Commentary

Energy and power systems are complicated systems to build. The major hurdle in bringing more renewable electricity into our grid is not simply a matter of bigger, better and more wind turbines. The big roadblock is storage. Renewable electricity is not "dispatchable." You cannot send it to where you want, when you want, in the quantities you want. The wind, tides and the sun are all intermittent. Renewable electricity is not regular: it varies from day to day, and even second to second.

Storage is the key to make renewable electricity both dispatchable and of high quality. Electricity fed to the grid from renewable sources requires a precise frequency and voltage, and the assurance of a sufficient quantity (demand). Irregular solar energy has none of these characteristics. It has to be stored (at least the irregular part), and it has to go through devices such as rectifiers to supply it to the grid with high quality.

So, to clean up the irregular and variable renewable energy and save it for when it is needed, at the grid scale, we need a lot of storage. There are only a few options: pumped hydro, batteries, compressed air (CA), and creation of a fuel such as hydrogen. We are a generation away from an integrated hydrogen economy; today hydrogen is barely used, and we are running out of time to meet our 2030 and 2050 emissions commitments.

Pumped hydro works well, but there is actually not a huge amount of energy in falling water, despite appearances. To store a lot of energy you have to store vast volumes of water at an elevated site. Dams such as Mactaquac in New Brunswick have some storage capacity, but there is little remaining potential in the Maritimes and there is even a desire to decommission existing dams because of the ecologic havoc they create. Pumped hydro can help a bit, but not at the scale we need.

Batteries are unlikely to be the only solution. The metals that go into batteries are already in short supply worldwide, and demand is increasing. Even if we start now, it would be more than a decade before large-scale Canadian production would be in place, if the environmental hurdles were met. Batteries contain chemicals, have risks of fire and breaching, and we have not even begun to recycle grid-scale numbers of batteries that have a life span of perhaps seven to eight years. Finally, they are a high-cost storage medium. We all hope that in the future environmentally friendly, high-efficiency, fully reliable and low-cost batteries will emerge. Many promises are being made, but no "miracle battery" has yet emerged.

This leaves compressed air (CA). Air is compressed using surplus and irregular energy, stored underground or in high-pressure steel-cased wellbores, and passed through expanders when electricity is needed. The spinning generator operates at the right frequency, voltage and power level, and can provide more or less energy as the demand changes. The CA technology has operated for 40 years at one site in Germany, and is approaching 20 years for another site in the United States.

And the Maritimes are fortunate to have some of the most suitable storage sites anywhere. An energy storage park in a proposed energy corridor across the Isthmus of Chignecto would store about three per cent of the renewable energy in batteries to supply power very rapidly for short times, and would store 97 per cent of the energy for high power output using compressed air.

The salt structures in the Maritimes, such as the Sussex anticline in New Brunswick and the salt domes along the east coast and mainland of Nova Scotia, provide the potential of millions of cubic meters of CA storage for grid scale use. This means that the superb wind energy potential of New Brunswick and the Gulf of St Lawrence coasts can be stored and made available in large amounts, when needed, and of high quality. These salt structures are reasonably close to where the wind energy is harvested, and the entire Maritimes grid could then accommodate far more renewable power. This means that coal stations can be retired over the years, and the Maritimes could become even greener.

Sustainable energy is a complex social, political, economic and technological challenge. However, massive wind power potential and storage capacity in the Maritimes are a great asset, and power authorities in the region should establish an aggressive program to develop it with our Indigenous partners.

Maurice Dusseault
is a Geological Engineer at the University of Waterloo in the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences.

Grant Wach
is at Dalhousie University in the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences.

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