

---

# Open letter from Manitoba Band Parent Advocacy Group

## Request to immediately resume indoor wind instrument band rehearsals in Manitoba education settings

---

February 24, 2021

The Honourable Brian Pallister, Premier of Manitoba  
The Honourable Cliff Cullen, Minister of Education  
Ms. Audrey Gordon, Minister of Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery  
Ms. Dana Rudy, Acting Deputy Minister of Education  
Dr. Brent Roussin, Chief Provincial Public Health Officer

Dear Premier Pallister, Minister Cullen, Minister Gordon, Ms. Rudy, and Dr. Roussin:

As a group of parents of band students from middle schools, high schools and universities across Manitoba, we are deeply concerned about the immediate and long-term impacts on our children of prohibiting wind ensemble playing indoors. We are unaware of any compelling evidence that indoor band rehearsals (with proper safety protocols in place) would contribute to the spread of COVID-19. We therefore request that this restriction be immediately removed from schools, which are not “Code Red” zones.

It has now been almost a year since our children have played or rehearsed with a band. No other jurisdiction in Canada has had such restrictive or lengthy constraints on school band programs. For many Manitoba students, these extreme restrictions have not only impaired their musical development, but destroyed the centre of their social lives and sense of belonging at school. Students in Grade 12 (some of whom plan to pursue music in university and as a career) face the prospect of graduating without having participated in band for the entire school year.

For these students, band is not a recreational pursuit. For the most part, our children represent accomplished student musicians who can no longer withstand the lack of skills development and motivation that comes with playing in band. This situation is seriously affecting their emotional and mental well-being, leaving many isolated, depressed and anxious about their futures. In short, taking a band student out of the music room is like taking a fish out of water. Four personal stories are appended to this letter to illustrate the serious impacts of the current situation on our children.

It is especially aggravating that band rehearsals continue to be prohibited while indoor sports such as volleyball and basketball has returned to many schools – where students breathing hard and dripping in sweat surely pose equivalent or greater virus transmission risks than playing in a socially distanced band.

We understand that the Province must carefully weigh the risks of openings during a pandemic. However, considering the current available research (see <https://twin-cities.umn.edu/news-events/musical-instruments-dont-spread-aerosols-far-you-might-think>), and the fact that at least three other provinces are now allowing indoor band

---

rehearsals, we urge you to reconsider this restriction. Schools and school divisions have confirmed that they need this restriction lifted first before they can make changes to the status quo; so as parents, we need the indoor rehearsal constraint relaxed immediately by the Province as a first step.

Just as National Hockey League players, Olympic athletes, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet are permitted to practice and play, we ask that our young musicians be allowed to pursue their passions as well through indoor rehearsals. Alternatives simply do not work. Teachers have tried online classes but computer lags prevent students from playing together. Playing outside is not an option because musicians find it hard to hear one another with no acoustics and weather conditions are unpredictable.

The Manitoba Music Educators Association is up to date with current research and excellent recommendations for safe return to the music room, which are consistent with other Canadian jurisdictions. (See: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/587ea63a86e6c0a517b5f9d3/t/5f259110d9bc7b2a92afd12b/1596297595645/returning-to-manitoba-music-classrooms-july31-2020.pdf>.)

We also worry about the following long-term effects of restricting ensemble playing:

1. Manitoba is stifling support and production of elite musicians. These students have devoted years of practice and financial resources toward their musical education. Above all else, they need playing spaces and ensemble opportunities, just like the provincial Olympic athlete hopefuls who have been afforded practice space and access to coaches/teammates.
2. Future educational and musical opportunities will be affected. Many students not enjoying their elective band course this year are choosing non-band electives next year. Some schools have not even offered band this year. The reduced number of band students will affect the quality of ensembles for all. The Manitoba Band Association confirms that auditions for provincial senior honour band are down by almost 30 per cent, and middle years honour band auditions are expected to decline by approximately 50 per cent. Similarly, we understand that applications for university music programs in Manitoba have sharply declined. The International Music Camp at the Peace Gardens – a source of Manitoba pride in musical education excellence – is also struggling as it faces the possibility of a second consecutive summer with no on-site enrolment.
3. Stress levels on our music educators is taking a toll on their mental health as well. We care about these teachers who have worked so hard to mentor our children. They have lost the opportunity to inspire emerging musicians through rehearsals and performances – resorting instead to lessons based on online theory, conducting, listening and drumming. As they struggle to prepare creative, engaging lessons, they stare into large, empty rehearsal spaces that could easily accommodate safe, socially distanced rehearsals.

Thank you for your immediate and affirmative response to our request to reinstate indoor band. We ask that any correspondence in response should be sent to Sheri-Lynn Skwarchuk at [skwar@mts.net](mailto:skwar@mts.net) and Maureen Fitzhenry at [fitzhenry@shaw.ca](mailto:fitzhenry@shaw.ca).

Yours sincerely,

**Manitoba Band Parent Advocacy Group (for return to indoor wind instrument playing in Manitoba)**

---

The following list of endorsing parents represents those who have signed on the days prior to our public request. Additional names will continue to be added at: <https://www.mbband.org>

Paul Betts, Vincent Massey Collegiate (Winnipeg)  
Heather Clarke, Gimli High School & Dr. George Johnson Middle School  
Melissa Davidson, Vincent Massey Collegiate (Winnipeg)  
Maureen Fitzhenry, Oak Park High School  
Augustina Harker, Transcona Collegiate  
Shauna Humphrey, Teulon Collegiate Institute and Teulon Elementary  
Kristen Hepworth, Transcona Collegiate  
Lynn Hepworth, Transcona Collegiate  
Lori & Rob Finlayson, Vincent Massey Collegiate (Winnipeg)  
Demorie James, Green Valley High School  
Paul and Linda Lambert, Vincent Massey Collegiate (Winnipeg)  
Cindie McKinnon Dunn, Brandon School Division  
Ryan Murphy, Kelvin High School  
Sheri-Lynn Skwarchuk, Vincent Massey Collegiate (Winnipeg)  
Jennifer Tarrant: Westwood Collegiate, Lincoln Middle School  
Ursula Torquato, École Charleswood School, University of Manitoba  
Lisa Woelk, Fort Richmond Collegiate  
Ten additional parents from Manitoba schools have asked that their names not be published.

cc. Chelsey Hiebert, Executive Director, Manitoba Band Association; Virginia Helmer, President, Manitoba Music Educators Association; Barb Isaak, Executive Director, Manitoba Association of School Superintendents

---

## Appendix: Personal Stories

(1) “COVID has had a very hard impact on my teenage daughter,” says a parent in the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine (name, grade and school withheld) who has been struggling with a decline in her child’s well-being. “Her motivation has dropped as she hits waves of depression, having difficulties, in her words, ‘to find a purpose in life.’ When her jazz band classes were suspended in October, the music literally and figuratively stopped playing in our home and in her spirit. All her passions have been put on hold for mandated courses that are not fulfilling her personal needs as a student. We are failing our kids if we are not allowing them to thrive in the areas that keep their spirits alive.”

(2) “Since last March, my Grade 12 son’s entire social world has evaporated and he now barely leaves his bedroom,” says Oak Park parent Maureen Fitzhenry. “Instead of a busy life full of rehearsals and performances with four different bands, planned trips to Vancouver and the United States, and sessions at the International Music Camp, he watches videos about music in a darkened room and hardly ever practices his instrument. His sense of self-esteem and belonging were entirely based on his circle of band friends, who he now never sees, since they are in different cohort groups. As a parent, this is very difficult to witness.”

(3) “My Grade 10 boy from Transcona Collegiate has been taking band remotely since March,” says Transcona Collegiate parent Kristen Hepworth. “He loves music, plays both the piano and a wind instrument. Like most kids, he struggled with going remote for all subjects last spring and was elated when he could return to school in the fall. However, my son’s excitement quickly turned to disappointment when his favourite subject of Jazz Band was cancelled. The disappointment continued when he discovered that Concert Band would only be offered remotely. He misses the camaraderie of band playing, and how fun and exciting it is to make real music together. He has lost motivation to practice and is tired of playing his instrument alone. It saddens me to say that he is wondering if it is even worth taking band as a course next year if the same conditions are going to continue.”

(4) “My Grade 12 wind instrument player deeply misses her band experiences from 2019,” says band parent Sheri Skwarchuk of Vincent Massey Collegiate in Winnipeg. “She commented that at least last year’s graduating class had half a year of ensemble playing, competition and normalcy. She has been completing university auditions online, without in-person coaching of band and private music teachers. Rehearsal rooms are closed. Consequently, she must record and re-record her playing in our home as there is nowhere else to rehearse, until she gets just the right cut. Manitoba’s decision has created an unfair disadvantage for her, as students from other provinces have the competitive edge for admissions where resources are less restricted. What she is gaining in perseverance, she is losing in self-confidence and mental health. Skills development aside, listening to practicing—even from an experienced musician for hours per day, takes its toll on family relations and serenity. We feel trapped as provincial restrictions have left no other options.”