



Mandatory home-schooling a ‘failed policy,’ says Nova Scotia psychologist

By [Alex Cooke](#) Global News Posted May 31, 2021 12:48 pm

Throughout the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, parents have had to grapple with taking on a new role on top of caregiving and their own jobs: teaching.

After a month of learning from home, Nova Scotia Premier Iain Rankin announced on Friday that many Nova Scotia students are returning to the classroom this week.

But those in the Halifax and Sydney areas aren’t returning to in-person learning yet — though some exceptions will be made for students with complex needs — as the province fights to flatten the third wave of COVID-19, which has been mostly concentrated in those areas.

According to the province’s at-home learning plan, students learning from home are doing a combination of online instruction with their teachers and self-directed learning, either by themselves or in groups.

Dr. Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University, said learning at home may cause more harm than good.

“I think parents and children are being subjected to a failed policy,” he said in an interview last week.

“There’s little or no progress being made in terms of learning, and on top of that, we have distress in parents, distress in children, and a lot of negativity and friction in parent-child relationships.”



Dr. Simon Sherry

Sherry recently worked on a study that linked mandatory home-schooling with anxiety, depression and substance use among parents.

Dr. Simon Sherry is a clinical psychologist and professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Dalhousie University. THE CANADIAN PRESS/HO – CRUX Psychology.

The study, conducted among 758 families across Canada – including 211 who home-schooled their children during COVID-19 – said those who home-schooled had “significantly lower levels of optimism,” as well as higher use of cannabis and alcohol to cope.

The more time parents spent on home-schooling, the more likely they were to experience emotional distress and substance misuse, said Sherry.

“Even the most capable of parents, people with a lot of skills and resources, are being overwhelmed by mandatory homeschooling,” he said.

Sherry said the additional work of teaching their children is causing “role strain” among parents and causing daily negative and tense interactions between them and their children.

“We’re already burdened by many roles of our day-to-day life, and, not surprisingly, people have gotten overwhelmed when we add the role of teacher into their pre-existing responsibilities,” he said, adding that it’s “enormously painful” for parents to fail in the act of homeschooling.

“Parents overwhelmingly love and support their children, and it’s very painful to have a sense that you’re letting your kid down,” he said.

“I do not blame the parents, I do not blame the children, I do not blame the teachers. I really think everyone is doing their best. But this is a failed policy and it should be abandoned.”



Sherry said Monday he was pleased the province is reopening schools outside Halifax Regional Municipality and Sydney, and was “very glad to see” that it will make exceptions in those areas for students with complex needs.

“I’ll commend our province for showing greater agility and flexibility in wave three than wave one,” he said. “I’m certainly glad to see parents, children and teachers in parts of the province released from the enormous and painful stressor of home-schooling.”

Still, he said he was “saddened” that many people in the province are still required to continue at-home learning.

“We’re leading parents and children into a situation where they are COVID-safe, but mentally ill,” he said.

Highlighting inequities

Sherry also said the research has highlighted pre-existing gender inequities among parents.

Traditionally, the roles of child-rearing, cooking and cleaning have disproportionately fallen on women, and now home-schooling has been added to the list, he said.

“This isn’t to say that men aren’t helping, but disproportionately, women are bearing the responsibility of mandatory home-schooling,” said Sherry.

“And so this is exacerbating pre-existing difficulties in our society, where a disproportionate amount of cooking, caring, cleaning, is dumped upon women.”

Sherry said this presents an opportunity for fathers to step in more. He said “one of the few encouraging” parts of their study is that in households where fathers were doing more, mothers were less stressed and families were doing better.

“So there is an opportunity for all fathers to do more and to make an important contribution in this area,” said Sherry.

No easy answer

While he identifies mandatory home-schooling as a problem, Sherry said there’s no easy solution.

He noted that while closing schools helps to contain and prevent the spread of COVID-19, learning from home isn’t necessarily the answer.

Keeping schools open should be a priority, but if that doesn’t happen, he believes the province should “do the humane thing and shut down mandatory home-schooling as soon as possible.”

“If there’s only two choices – between an extended summer, and continuing a futile and failed policy – let’s go for an extended summer,” he said.

If mandatory home-schooling continues, he advises parents “to do less and to care less.”

“Rather than investing several futile and tense hours with your child every day ... perhaps you should invest in play, or leisure, or recreation, or socializing,” he said, noting that kids have spent much of the last year indoors, away from their friends and in front of screens.

“Realize right now that our children and adolescents are in a state of social and emotional malnutrition. And rather than battling Zoom over the latest geometry lesson, which is going to go in one ear and out the other, parents should invest in their children’s social and emotional well-being.”

Global News has reached out to the province for comment.