

## Teachers' Organizations Responses to COVID-19 in Canada: Balancing Resistance, Rapprochement, and Renewal

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[See table of contents](#)

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## **Teachers' Organizations Responses to COVID-19 in Canada: Balancing Resistance, Rapprochement, and Renewal**

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### **Abstract**

Teacher federations are often criticized as “roadblocks” to educational change. It is arguable, however, that their advocacy work has been paramount in securing safer return to school conditions across Canadian Educational jurisdictions. Utilizing Carter et al. (2010) framework of union responses to changing policy environments, this paper draws on publicly available documents and social media posts from March through to October of 2020 to examine the ways in which teacher unions in various Canadian contexts have responded to the issue of school reopening plans amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the paper analyzes the extent to which Canadian teacher unions have been able to move into the realm of union renewal as a means of building internal capacity and developing external networks to strengthen their public advocacy work.

*Keywords:* teachers' organizations, union renewal, COVID-19, teacher advocacy

### **COVID-19 and Canadian Schooling**

Like other educational jurisdictions around the world, Canadian school systems first began closing schools in March of 2020 in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. At the time, much was unknown about the virology and epidemiology of the Novel Coronavirus and there was widespread concern about schools as a vector for the pathogen. In a matter of days, hundreds of thousands of schools across the country were shuttered and millions of students and their teachers began to adjust to new forms of remote and online teaching and learning.

Amid issues of inequitable access (Kapoor, 2020) and concerns around student wellbeing (UNESCO et al., 2020), however, it became apparent that the remote learning options used during ‘emergency teaching’ in the spring would not suffice going into the 2020/2021 school year. Educational scholars, child psychologists, and other medical professionals began sounding alarm bells and calls for full-scale school reopening plans began to emerge (Osmond-Johnson et al., 2020; Sick Kids, 2020). At the same time, teachers and their professional organizations were raising their own concerns, not only about the impact of school closures but also with respect to their trepidation around reopening plans. For instance, in June, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) (the national association for teacher organizations in Canada) released results from a national survey of teachers in which 74% of respondents cited being concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of their students and 83% reported being concerned about returning to schools after the first phase of the pandemic (CTF, 2020).

Within this context, the purpose of this paper is to examine the responses of Canadian teachers' organizations to the challenging policy environment surrounding the issue of school reopening plans. Also known as unions, in Canada, many teacher organizations have adopted the moniker of federation, society, and association. Hence, we use organization as a collective term, inclusive of union, federation, association and society. In particular, the paper seeks to address the following research question: to what

extent have teacher organizations in Canada adopted an agenda of union renewal within the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant impact on the teaching profession? A framework of teacher organization responses developed by Carter et al. (2010), further explicated by Bascia and Stevenson (2017), is utilized to highlight the delicate balancing act that teacher organizations in Canada must maintain in order to manage what were, in some cases, already fragile relationships with governments while, at the same time, advocating for safe teaching and learning conditions for teachers and students.

It is important to note that education in Canada is governed provincially, with each of the ten provinces and three territories having their own individual education branch of government. Within that context, approaches to school closures varied, with some provinces (like Ontario) initially announcing short term closures of a few weeks (Westoll, 2020) and others (like Saskatchewan) choosing to end in person schooling for the remainder of the school year (Giles, 2020). In the end, the vast majority of students and teachers closed out the 2019/2020 school year ‘at a distance’, with a few provinces (like Quebec and British Columbia) choosing to reopen schools at partial capacity for May and June (Hunter, 2020; Lowrie, 2020).

Subsequently, it is expected that the responses of teachers’ organizations were appropriately nuanced according to jurisdictional contexts. That said, the vast majority of Canadian teacher organizations have experienced strained relationships with local governments over the years and months leading up to the pandemic. As such, it is also likely that their responses will demonstrate a significant level of coherence. It is also necessary to situate the Canadian context within the broader historical framing of teacher organizations and the uphill battle they have faced as policy actors. As detailed in the section below, safe school reopening is just one item on a long list of concerns teacher organizations have raised over the course of their more than 100 years of existence.

In that manner, this paper contributes to the growing base of scholarly work that seeks to illuminate the important and necessary role teachers’ organizations and their advocacy work occupy with respect to advancing Canadian education systems. At the same time, the paper also seeks to underscore potential blind spots and stumbling blocks teachers’ organizations might encounter as they continue to evolve to meet the needs of their members. Understanding and being aware of both possible pitfalls and opportunities for growth will be important in the ongoing efforts of teachers’ organizations as the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath continues to unfold in months and years to follow.

### **Teachers’ Organizations and Educational Reform: A Brief History**

Legislation requires all public-school teachers in Canada to belong to one of sixteen teachers’ organizations (one in each jurisdiction, except for Ontario, which has four organizations). Although this situates teachers’ organizations within a legal mandate to represent their members through the collective bargaining process, it is important to point out that labour laws in most Canadian jurisdictions prevent teachers’ organizations from officially participating in policy decisions. With their members on front lines of education, however, teachers’ organizations are uniquely positioned as one of most capable sources for assessing ‘on the ground’ conditions of teaching and learning. To that end, teachers’ organizations in Canada have a long history of playing important roles as unofficial policy actors and strong advocates for high-quality public education (Bascia, 2015; Maharaj, 2015, 2019).

Yet, as planning for school reopening began in Canada, teachers’ organizations in some jurisdictions found themselves shut out of many of the official policy conversations (Gray & Alphonso, 2020; Junker, 2020) and, in some cases, fighting public admonishment and portrayals of their organizations as uncooperative and difficult to work with (Davidson, 2020). This isn’t the only time teacher organizations have been in this position, so it is important to set the context around the work of teacher organizations and the history of vilification they have endured (Bascia, 2015; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Goldstein, 2014; Henderson et al., 2004; Murphy, 1990).

With roots in both labour and feminist movements, teachers’ organizations in many places were initially formed to protect a largely female profession from the dominance of their male employers (Smaller, 1991, 2015). Emboldened by notions of professional independence, self-determination, and teacher voice, teachers’ organizations have also developed significant professional agendas that include a focus on teacher leadership (Osmond-Johnson, 2019), professional learning (Osmond-Johnson et al., 2018), and democratic professionalism (Osmond-Johnson, 2016). In other words, teachers’ organizations are com-

plex entities that must often juggle traditional union issues of pensions, salaries, and benefits with their aspirational goals of promoting and ensuring high-quality education systems (Bascia & Osmond-Johnson, 2013). While some teachers' organizations have struggled to embrace these often-competing interests, others have embraced and united these dichotomous operations to become strong sites for social justice and equity in education (Rottman, 2008; Weiner, 2012).

Despite these efforts, teachers' organizations have often been vilified in both the media and scholarly literature. Branded as 'unions' (an unsavory word in neoliberal times) they have faced many criticisms; accused of sabotaging education and holding education hostage (Lieberman, 2000), referred to as "The Worm in the Apple" (Brimelow, 2003), and often identified as the root cause of whatever ills are afflicting education at the moment (see Friedrichs; 2018; Moe, 2011). For instance, summarizing the attack on teacher organizations in the United States, Ravitch (2010) posits:

One would think, by reading the critics, that the nation's schools are overrun by incompetent teachers who hold their jobs only because of union protection, that the unions are directly responsible for poor student performance, and that academic achievement would soar if the unions were to disappear. (p. 175)

While the context of education in Canada is considerably different than that of the US (there are no value-added measures of teacher quality and teachers and school leaders are not fired for poor test results), Canadian teachers' organizations have long withstood criticisms for promoting "policies that serve their particular interests rather than those of students, parents, and the general public" (Zwaagstra et al., 2007, p. 2) and making out like "bandits" (Wente, 2015) with respect to salary. Such portrayals are especially dominant during contract negotiations, particularly when traditional union tactics of strikes or work to rule actions have been utilized.

The vilification of teachers' organizations, however, is part of a larger neoliberal attack on the teaching profession (Bascia & Stevenson, 2017; Poole, 2015; Weiner & Compton, 2008). Occurring on a global scale, ideologies of effectiveness, efficiency, and competition have dominated educational agendas with increasing prominence. This is perhaps best summed up by Bascia and Stevenson (2017), who describe the neoliberal machine as a trifecta of work intensification, privatization, and de-professionalization. Here, teachers are asked to do more with less as funding for public education is redirected to private enterprise under the guise of efficiency. This undermines the professionalism of teachers who have dedicated their lives to understanding the complexity of teaching and learning.

Particularly relevant to this paper, COVID-19 and its impact on Canadian schooling has deepened the challenges teacher organizations are facing, creating new kinds of tensions around workload intensification and de-professionalization. Teachers are reporting high levels of stress, burnout, and exhaustion as a result of the increased workloads and ongoing uncertainty associated with teaching during a global pandemic (CTF, 2020). In this sense, it is arguable that there has never been a more critical need for teachers' organizations to focus on building their internal capacity and strengthen member resolve.

## Framework

As the voice of the teaching profession in their respective jurisdictions, teachers' organizations are inevitably tasked with responding to neoliberal discourses and presenting counter-narratives that challenge these narrow portrayals of teachers and public education more broadly. To better understand and situate the specific responses of Canadian teachers' organizations to the issue of school reopening, this paper draws firstly on the work of Carter et al. (2010) and secondly on the more recent work of Bascia and Stevenson (2017).

As illustrated in the section above, the challenges faced by teacher organizations both during and leading into the pandemic are situated within a larger global neoliberal context which aims to limit teacher autonomy and de-value teacher professionalism. In that manner, an analysis of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic would be incomplete without consideration of the relationship between educational policy and wider social discourses around teacher union-governmental relationships on a global scale.

To that end, the analysis of data in this study was firstly rooted in the framework of union responses to neoliberalism initially developed by Carter et al. (2010). Operating from a UK context, arguably the birthplace of neoliberalism under the Thatcher administration, the authors adopt an interdisciplinary fo-

cus across education, industrial sociology, and labour process theories to locate teacher professionalism and identity within the broader context of educational reform as an extension of employment relations. While Canadian educational landscapes vary from those in the UK, the continued proliferation of austerity budgets and the growing tensions between teachers' organizations and governments lend legitimacy to the use of this framework in the Canadian context.

Moreover, the work of Bascia and Stevenson (2017) furthers the use of this framework as they extend the work of Carter et al. (2010) and add an international context through their examination of the efforts of teacher organizations in seven countries. This paper adds to this body of work by analyzing the Canadian context of teachers' organizations' responses to neoliberal reforms, with particular reference to the issue of school reopening amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Carter et al. (2010) point out, teachers' organizations typically embody three reactions to neoliberal educational reforms:

1. Resistance (challenging neoliberalism). This response includes strategies that "actively seek to challenge the trajectory of neo-liberal restructuring in education - to 'interrupt' the policy agenda of the conservative modernisers" (p.14). This runs the gamut from traditional union tactics like strike action and work to rule, to less overt forms of advocacy like media campaigns and lobbying actions. On the one hand, it is resistance that tends to garner the most condemnation from critics of teacher organizations. However, as Bascia (2009) suggests, resistance to neoliberal reforms often serve necessary purposes and have largely protected the teaching profession from one-sided and short-sighted reform agendas.
2. Rapprochement (accommodating neoliberalism). This response includes "strategies that go with the grain of the new educational agenda and seek to maximize gains for their members within that" (p.14). In this approach, teachers' organizations acquiesce with government reforms, yielding some of their collective power as a sign of compromise and good-will. This response is sometimes strategic – a means to accomplish a different end on another more pressing issue. In other instances, it may be a response to particularly hostile policy environments – an attempt to avoid being completely shut out of the conversation.
3. Renewal – Unlike the first two responses (outward reactions to external change), renewal is rooted in proactive, internal changes that focus on "building the capacity, commitment, and confidence of individual members to act collectively" (Bascia & Stevenson, 2017). Attempting to deepen participatory forms of democracy and improve member engagement, renewal is predicated on the notion of 'unionateness', where teachers' professional identity and membership in a teacher organization are interdependent and inseparable.

As Bascia and Stevenson (2017) suggest in their study of seven international teachers' organizations, however, engaging in renewal isn't necessarily a process that is intuitive or natural for many teacher organizations. In particular, they identify seven challenges to renewal:

**Table 1**  
*Challenges to Union Renewal*

Reframing neoliberal narratives	Reframing neoliberal discourses around public education through simple and clear messaging. Creating new and alternative narratives to counter neoliberal portrayals of teachers and their organizations creates a stronger platform from which to situate the various elements of proactive advocacy work while gaining additional public support.
Connecting the industrial and professional	Teachers' organizations have long struggled with their dichotomous operations as professional unions. Yet, as Bascia and Stevenson point out, bridging the gap between their industrial roots and their professional futures is imperative to renewal.

Working in and against policy environments	Teachers' organizations often find themselves in a perpetual cycle of resistance and rapprochement. At first blush, this might seem to be akin to such pendulum swings. As Bascia and Stevenson (2017) describe, however, working with and working against within the context of renewal requires a more collaborative approach, one where teachers' organizations are "genuinely involved as co-constructors of the policies that frame their work context" (p. 58). They go on to note, however, that this relationship must be "based on open and transparent processes, reflecting equality between the union and other parties" (p. 58).
Building at the base	'Unionateness' is the alignment of teachers' professional identity with their membership in teacher organizations such that the two may be considered as indivisible. Developing this sense of belonging and connectedness is a key component of growing member engagement, which is, in essence, the heart of renewal. Moreover, "it is through this connectedness that loyalty and commitment are developed and from which solidarity can be mobilized" (ibid, p. 59).
Developing formal and informal democratic engagement opportunities	Bascia and Stevenson share, "union democracy, and unions as democratic spaces, are now more important than ever as many education systems are restricting the spaces for public, democratic engagement" (p. 59). Given the powerlessness many teachers feel at the present time, providing an outlet for members to be empowered decision-makers is even more imperative. It also serves as another mechanism to ensure that the messaging and advocacy around school reopening is truly reflective of the will of the membership.
Connecting the profession horizontally and vertically	Teachers' organizations are complex, often representing multiple groups of both professional educators and educational support staff. Sometimes these groups have competing needs (for example, when teachers go on strike, educational support staff are often laid off), often making it difficult to present one coherent voice. Consequently, teachers' organizations "must unite the profession if they are to speak for it" (p. 61). This involves both horizontal (different subsets within the same occupational group –secondary and elementary teachers, for instance) and vertical collaborations (different occupational groups – teachers and principals, for instance).
Creating broader alliances	As Bascia and Stevenson posit, "by definition, public education is a public issue" (p. 61). In this manner, cultivating a wide range of alliances creates a stronger platform for teacher advocacy; you cannot shift public discourse without engaging the public.

These challenges are fraught with tensions, making them difficult to untangle. That said, at their core, they are all rooted in the basic premise of capacity building, both internal to the organization and beyond. As the findings presented in this paper illustrate, Canadian teachers' organizations have demonstrated varying levels of each of these three responses and have grappled with all seven challenges related to renewal.

## Methodology

To gain a better understanding of the responses of teachers' organizations in Canada to the issue of school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic, data for this paper was collected using qualitative document analysis. As explained by Bowen (2009), "document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer-based and internet-transmitted) material" (p. 27). Documents that may be used in this kind of analysis run the gamut from newspaper articles, policy documents, advertisement materials, promotional brochures, meeting minutes, press releases, photos, research reports, memos, and other institutional or organizational files. Like other qualitative approaches, this method requires that data be examined and thematically interpreted to gain insights into ongoing social phenomena. In this sense, document analysis is not significantly different from other forms of qualitative research, other than the point at which the researcher initially interacts with the data (data already created prior to the researcher's engagement vs. data created as a result of the

researcher's engagement).

In many instances, document analysis has been used as part of a multi-methods approach in an effort to promote triangulation. That said, as more and more document-based materials are produced as a result of the digital age, document analysis has gained additional footing as a stand-alone procedure (Grant, 2018; Tight, 2019). This is a particularly relevant method during current times (Bania & Dubey, 2020) as COVID-19 has altered the ability of researchers in many fields to continue with traditional qualitative methods. The field of educational research has been particularly hard hit (DeMatthews et al., 2020) for several reasons, including not being able to access schools and, from an ethical perspective, hesitation to add more to the plates of educators who have essentially become front line workers during the pandemic. At the same time, the proliferation of social media and other online and digital spaces has also produced a huge amount of publicly available content, making document analysis a particularly accessible methodology with respect to meaningful and rich qualitative data. Moreover, shifting to new, less-invasive forms of research allows educational researchers to continue to support the education sector by evaluating ongoing adaptations and new practices in order to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement and provide valuable insights around next steps (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

That said, as Bowen (2009) details, document analysis as a primary methodology has limitations, including that most documents are created outside of the purposes of research studies and, as such, may not always contain sufficient or relevant details. Additionally, organizations often have internal documents that are unavailable to the public. These documents may provide a more accurate portrayal of organizational perspectives than those made public. In other words, there may be a 'biased selectivity' with respect to the documents a researcher can access. That said, as Bowen (2009) states, "These are really potential flaws rather than major disadvantages" (p. 32).

One of the caveats of document analysis is that researchers must a) determine what documents are to be used and b) what time frame the analysis will cover. For the purposes of this paper the inclusion criteria were based on two factors; that the material was publicly available and accessible online and that the content was specific to the issue of responses to school re-opening plans from the period of May to October 2020 (the time during which most of the discussion around school reopening was occurring).

Several strategies were used to isolate such data. First, tweets were gathered from the public Twitter feeds of all 15 provincial English teacher organizations (one in each jurisdiction, minus Quebec, with the exception of Ontario, which has three English teacher unions). In particular, an online tool (allmytweets.net) was used to capture all tweets posted within the specified timeframe from each of the organizations included in the study. These tweets were then filtered to remove all retweets, leaving only original posts. Lastly, the original posts were filtered to remove content unrelated to the issue of school reopening. Teachers' organizations in the Territories, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island were removed from further analysis at this stage in the research as cases of COVID-19 were very low in those regions and Twitter activity around school reopening resulted in less than 10 tweets over the timeframe of the study.

Twitter was also a source of locating additional documents such as news articles, press releases, official statements/briefings, research reports, and survey findings related to union responses to school re-opening as many organizations retweeted or shared these documents through their Twitter accounts. In addition to Twitter, the websites of each of the nine teachers' organizations included in this study were also examined for additional documents related to school reopening. As noted in the table below, some teacher organizations have a much larger social media presence than others, which impacts the data available within some jurisdictions. In total, over 40 documents and over 2000 Tweets were collected. The breakdown of these documents is provided in the table below:

**Table 2**  
*Summary of Data Collection*

Teacher Organization	Original Tweets (n)	School Reopening Tweets (n); % of total Tweets	Documents (n, type)
British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF)	370	194 (52%)	9 (2 research reports, 4 press releases, 1 letter to Minister, 2 submissions to government)
Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA)	933	175 (19%)	12 (1 letter to Minister, 2 research reports, 1 infographic, 7 press releases, 1 submission to government)
Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF)	181	89 (49%)	8 (3 infographics, 4 press releases, 1 submission to government)
Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS)	275	73 (31%)	3 (3 press releases)
Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)	869	329 (38%)	8 (6 press releases, 1 letter to school boards, 1 submission to government)
Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF)	1236	215 (27%)	8 (4 summary reports to members, 1 advice to members, 2 press releases, 1 submission to government)
Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA)	1345	302 (22%)	No original content on public website (joint press releases were retrieved from other sites).
Nova Scotia Teachers' Union (NSTU)	1058	274 (26%)	3 (member magazines)
Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA)	92	21 (23%)	2 (1 press release; 1 submission to government)

Data analysis occurred in three phases. First, all documents and tweets were read, in full, highlighting and making notes of particular passages that were relevant to the issue of school reopening. In phase two, the highlighted passages were analyzed using a qualitative thematic coding structure based on Carter et al.'s (2010) framework of renewal, resistance, and rapprochement. Lastly, each of these themes were further analyzed to identify particular issues and strategies within. In particular, the theme of renewal was further analyzed according to the areas of challenge identified by Bascia and Stevenson (2017).

## Findings

Data from this study illustrates that Canadian teachers' organizations are maneuvering within all three spheres of Carter et al.'s (2010) framework. In particular, there is significant public discourse that high-



lights their resistance to proposed plans and, more specifically, the lack of consultation that occurred during the summer of 2020 when the plans were being developed. Resistance, as we highlighted earlier, can be a slippery slope for teachers' organizations. They must balance their public opposition and be careful not to lose public support, which often means making concessions and conceding on some points. In this manner, there are also elements of accommodation in the responses of Canadian teachers' organizations, as they shift back and forth between rapprochement and resistance. At the same time, there is evidence they are also attempting to engage in renewal in meaningful ways.

### ***Resistance as an Important Form of Activism***

Teachers' organizations in Canada are no stranger to resistance tactics, and their response to school reopening amid the COVID-19 outbreak was no exception. In particular, their resistance centered around two primary issues; safety issues they felt were inadequately addressed in school reopening plans, and the extent to which they were involved in the developmental stages of such plans.

### ***Where is Teacher Voice?***

With respect to their involvement in the creation of reopening plans, the participation and influence of teacher organizations are essentially at the whim of government officials - who may or may not value their contributions. Like most issues in Canadian education, this differs from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. For instance, while the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation was invited to be a part of the Ministry's Response Planning Team, their Ontario and Alberta counterparts were publicly critical of what they deemed to be a lack of access to such conversations in their respective provinces. The presidents of both organizations took to Twitter to voice their concerns:

We were in consultations in early stages of planning but beyond the June 25 letter and the Minister's reply, that was it. All requests for a meeting came with "no time". There is no quote from me or the ATA on the press release yesterday [reopen plan announcement] and there's a reason for that. (JSchilling, ATA President, Tweet, July 22, 2020.)

You asked about 120 meetings with #Onted unions and you get a response that includes meetings/calls with Directors of Ed, Trustees, Chairs, CMEC, UNESCO, Principals Ass, and University groups! None of these are #onted Unions! (Hammond, 2020.)

This was a common theme, with a number of the organizations in this study expressing concern at some point about the lack of teacher voice in reopening plans, the details of which they primarily acquired from public press conferences.

### ***Finding Voice***

With little formal access to much of the official discussions taking place around school reopening plans, teachers' organizations in Canada utilized whatever forums they could to voice their concerns about the plans, their timelines, or lack thereof, as the case may be. In particular, the use of social media as an influencing tool was a prominent tactic, often centering around the discourses of ensuring safe learning conditions and instilling teacher confidence in returning to the classroom:

We all want our kids to be back in school - but we need a plan to make it safe. That means smaller classes, 2 metres of social distancing for everybody, and masks for those who can wear one. (NSTU, Tweet, August 13, 2020.)

The NLTA has initiated a province wide online petition calling on government to ensure safe schools when students, teachers, & other school staff return in September 2020. (NLTA, Tweet, August 10, 2020.)

Teachers' organizations also heavily engaged in sharing data from several polls and surveys that highlighted teachers' safety concerns, providing a strong evidence-based foundation for their resistance

and building public credibility for their claims. Findings from an ATA survey released in June (2020a) revealed that 66% of over 2300 respondents felt health and safety issues (smaller classes, PPE, safety protocols) needed to be addressed for a successful return to school and almost 65% disagreed with the statement “I feel control over the circumstances surrounding my return to my classroom when schools re-open”.

In July, the ATA survey was adopted by the CTF (2020a) and completed by another 15,000 educators. Nationally, the data from this survey highlighted that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of respondents reported being concerned about student wellbeing and mental health and 83% were concerned about returning to schools after the first phase of COVID-19.

Jurisdictional results from this study were compiled by a number of teachers’ organizations and shared via various social media platforms throughout the summer of 2020. In Saskatchewan, for instance, the STF (2020a) released a report in July based on the CTF data, commenting that teachers needed “clear, consistent, specific guidelines and communication about the resumption of classes and safety protocols from both the provincial government and their school division” (p.1).

Once school reopening plans were released in August, data from surveys and polls were used to continue to highlight teachers’ concerns about the adequacy of the plans, particularly with respect to masking policies, social distancing requirements, and class size:

Less than 2 weeks until many AB students are back in school and #abed re-entry plans still contains serious deficiencies (1/2) (ATA, Tweet August 18, 2020). We’ve laid out 7 priorities parents and teachers require in order of safe re-entry to Alberta Schools (2/2). (ATA, 2020b.)

Even in places like Saskatchewan, where the pandemic response planning team did include the Executive Director of the STF, final decision making around the content of school reopening plans lay strictly in the hands of the Ministry of education. On August 4<sup>th</sup>, when the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education released their plan, the STF (2020b) immediately issued a press release outlining a number of questions and concerns. STF President, Patrick Maze, was quoted in the presser:

We all want to return to the classroom, but it must be done safely...Parents, teachers and students deserve to be confident in the plans. Resources to prevent transmission, access to testing and capacity of public health to handle large volumes of contact tracing are imperative (p.1.)

Likewise, Manitoba’s reopening plan was also developed in consultation with the Manitoba Teachers’ Society. Yet, the release of the official government plan drew sharp public criticism from the union on several safety issues including physical distancing, access to rapid testing, and mandatory masking. In an internal news release in August, for instance, the MTS stated, “While Premier Brian Pallister has said teachers shouldn’t give in to fear, MTS continues to press the government for measures that would ease those fears for teachers, students and parents” (MTS, 2020b).

In these cases, teachers’ organizations may have been present at the policy table, but their clout or influence on such plans was circumspect, despite their position as a credible source of understanding the impact of reopening plans on the ground. Consequently, teachers’ organizations continued to publicly display their dismay and frustration with reopening plans across the country throughout August and much of September:

The NLTA has initiated a province wide online petition calling on government to ensure safe schools when students, teachers, & other school staff return in September 2020. Please sign the petition through the following link: <https://t.co/l2R3ytZ9TT>. (NLTA, Tweet, August 10, 2020.)

The Manitoba Teachers’ Society is calling on the government to mandate the wearing of masks by all staff, students and visitors in the province’s public schools. (MTS, Tweet, August 13, 2020.)

In addition to social media advocacy, teachers' organizations in BC and Ontario demonstrated resistance in the form of challenges to labour laws with respect to unsafe work conditions (Jeffords, 2020; Lindsay 2020). In Ontario, all four teachers' organizations came together to file a joint complaint:

TODAY: Four of the major #education unions in Ontario will hold a media conference alongside experts who will share their views on the government's flawed plan for #onted schools. Tune in at 2:00 p.m. to watch <https://t.co/7kGYsQuote> #onpoli <https://t.co/kIu1ZjNs9l>. (ETFO, Tweet, October 07, 2020.)

This was a strong show of solidarity across these organizations, which is particularly important in a multi-union context.

### *Resistance Leads to Rapprochement and Vice-Versa*

Resistance to reopening plans, however, didn't occur without some pushback. As noted earlier, teacher organizations walk a very fine line in terms of challenging neoliberalism through resistance. In that realm, it isn't surprising that teachers' resistance to school reopening plans was met with varying levels of disdain in some provinces. The most overt example of this occurred in Ontario, where teachers' organizations had been battling the Ford government over class size, e-learning requirements, and funding leading up to the pandemic. In response to their resistance to reopening plans, both the Education Minister and the Premier publicly bashed teachers' organizations on numerous occasions, accusing them of "playing politics" (Jeffords, 2020b) with their labour board challenge. In a live interview (Toronto Star, 2020) in August, Ford claimed: "99.9% of everyone is getting along. Except there's one group; it's the teachers unions... If we can get along with everyone else in the country, why can't the teachers' union get along with us?" Hence, teachers' organizations have to ask themselves, how much push is enough and how much is too much? It is a delicate balance.

Knowing when to take a step back from resistance is an important strategy. We saw this in both Saskatchewan and Ontario early in the pandemic when teachers' organizations quickly moved to settle outstanding collective agreement issues to avoid being seen as difficult during a very unsettling time. As STF President Patrick Maze noted in April of 2020, "While we had hoped to do a bit better, at the same point, we know that that the province is also facing uncertainty going forward and so that plays into our decisions as well" (as cited in Martell, 2020). Certainly, teachers in both provinces saw some gains, but there were significant concessions, particularly with respect to the issue of class sizes. Ironically, this became a major obstacle to the reopening plans, with both organizations arguing that existing class sizes rendered physical distancing an impossibility. Twitter was flooded with thousands of teachers posting photos of their overcrowded classrooms using the hashtag "myclasssize". In hindsight, had the issue been settled before the ratifications of new agreements, reopening plans may have looked much different. In another show of rapprochement, and in spite of discussions of labour action and complaints around unsafe work conditions, teachers in every jurisdiction in Canada returned to school in September and, at the time of writing (February 2021), there has been no strike or work to rule action thus far.

The return to the classroom hasn't been without opposition, however. In September and October, more statistics were publicly released from teacher federations highlighting the challenges teachers were experiencing upon returning to school. In October, the ATA (2020c) released data from their pandemic pulse survey, where 94% of respondents reported feeling fatigued, 95% reported high levels of stress and 81% report feeling anxiety. In Saskatchewan, teachers completed a survey from the chief medical office, which revealed 22% still lacked access to proper PPE, 9 out of 10 reported not being able to physically distance 2m in their classrooms, 80% reported increases in workload, and almost half reported feeling that they were unable to meet the needs of students under current conditions (STF, 2020c). Results from both surveys were widely shared on Twitter and organizational websites.

### *Renewal: An Elusive Goal*

Amid the pendulum swings of resistance and rapprochement, there are also signs of renewal, which focuses more heavily on building strength from the inside out. In this framing, rather than simply being responsive to change, renewal is rooted in adopting a more proactive approach by building internal

capacity. Renewal isn't an easy process, however, and it is not something that is necessarily intuitive to teachers' organizations. As Bascia and Stevenson (2017) outline, there are several challenges teacher unions must take on as they engage in renewal. As discussed in the sections to follow, there is evidence to suggest that Canadian teachers' organizations are engaging with each of these challenges and finding spaces to work both from within and without.

### ***Challenge 1: Organizing Around Ideas***

With respect to the issue of school reopening, teachers' organizations in Canada have been very targeted in their messaging, effectively using hashtags and catchy slogans to build momentum both within their membership and with the general public at large. #SafeSeptember (and the various jurisdictional forms) is perhaps the best example of this, quickly becoming the mantra of Canadian teachers for most of August and September.

I would much rather be over prepared than underprepared for the start of the school year. Delay the start of the school year and give us time to get it right. -Schilling #SafeSeptemberAB #covid19ab #abed #ableg. (ATA, Tweet, August 19, 2020.)

We all want our kids to be back in school - but we need a plan to make it safe. That means smaller classes, 2 metres of social distancing for everybody, and masks for those who can wear one. Add your voice at <https://t.co/8D6s95wg3U> #SafeSeptemberNS [https://t.co/GKg5S-D0WyM\\_](https://t.co/GKg5S-D0WyM_) (NSTU, Tweet, August 13, 2020.)

Another look at an #onted classroom. Teachers and students were excited to return to school this week, but the reality on the ground contradicts the govt's claims that they're doing everything possible to keep schools safe. It's not too late for the govt to fund a #SafeSeptember. <https://t.co/cr0MrhO0Do>. (OECTA, Tweet, September 11, 2020.)

A search of #SafeSeptember on Twitter now yields hundreds of thousands of hits from teachers, parents, teacher organizations, educational advocacy groups, and concerned citizens alike. This kind of cohesive messaging and demonstration of solidarity, both within and beyond teachers' organizations is critical to renewal.

### ***Challenge 2: Connecting the Industrial and Professional***

In Canada, there is some evidence that teachers' organizations are beginning to blur the lines between labour and professional issues with respect to school reopening plans. In Ontario for example, at the same time they were advocating around health and safety standards for school reopening, teachers' organizations were also pushing back against legislation that removed the requirement for Directors of School boards to be professional teachers. In a presser released in July, ETFO President Sam Hammond suggested, "At a time when the focus should be on providing adequate funding and resources to ensure a safe reopening of schools, this government is instead choosing to rush through legislation that undermines public education and threatens further privatization" (ETFO, 2020). Overall, there appears to be growing recognition that the challenges teachers currently face are simultaneously rooted in both increasing labour expectations and the undermining of their professionalism. That said, the BCTF is the only teachers' organization in Canada that is an affiliate for their jurisdictional labour federation and the Canadian Labour Congress (the national association for Labour unions in Canada). Consequently, it would seem that the challenge of connecting the industrial and professional remains a stumbling block with respect to renewal.

### ***Challenge 3: Working With and Working Against***

Developing trusting, collaborative relationships that enable them to balance working with while simultaneously working against has been a particularly difficult feat for most teachers' organizations in Canada with respect to school reopening. To this end, there was very little in the way of data in this study that illustrated this level of collaborative relationship. There is evidence, however, that questions whether

governments were fully transparent with teachers. As illustrated in the following Tweets, a number of organizations have suggested that the government has withheld information or inadequately consulted them on major issues:

According to @ricardo\_tranjan's analysis, the Ford gov't is being "deceptive" and "disingenuously inaccurate." Students and education workers deserve a real plan so that there can be a safe return for all. <https://t.co/iCsVDI7P22> #osstf #onted #onpoli @CCPA\_Ont (OSSTF, Tweet, August 28, 2020.)

While nobody has ever planned for this, I think the lack of leadership from the Ministry of Education is evident and you hear this from parents, teachers, and board members. It's reflective of their lack of transparency with everyone." <https://t.co/XkCeZeXsR2> (OECTA, Tweet, September 10, 2020.)

ETFO educator Sarah Peek speaks out to say all families deserve to know that the government is keeping its children and adults safe. "Enough empty words of this government; Ford needs to step up with paid sick days for all workers." #SafeSeptemberON #PaidSickDays #canlab <https://t.co/U7K80cujlD> (ETFO, Tweet, August 29, 2020.)

Now we see a return to school plan that lacks clarity and adequate funding, a plan forcing teachers and families to make difficult choices. We continue to work to strengthen that plan. -Schilling #ARA2020 #abed (ATA, Tweet, August 13, 2020.)

Additionally, for some, entering the pandemic on the heels of heated contract negotiations did not leave them in a particularly strong place for establishing equitable and collaborative relationships around school reopening plans. In this manner, working with and working against has remained somewhat elusive.

#### **Challenge 4: Building at the Base**

Promoting 'unionateness' is an aspect of renewal where Canadian teachers' organizations have done well, demonstrating an ongoing and continued effort to both reach out to their members and provide opportunities for members to continue to grow their commitment to and engagement in their organizations. This has included hosting numerous member surveys, town halls, and focus groups to ensure their advocacy work around school reopening plans is embedded in the realities of what is happening on the ground in classrooms and schools.

How is teaching in the pandemic affecting your mental health and well-being? Use your voice and be sure to complete the @CTFFCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in survey before it closes tomorrow. <https://t.co/p1OyZaDUj1> <https://t.co/GdGkNkzfIF> (MTS, Tweet, October 24, 2020.)

We're working hard to keep you informed, and we're updating our re-entry pages frequently! Please continue checking to see info including right to refuse unsafe work, substitute teacher questions, and more. <https://t.co/H0OBZ82ZOp> #abed #ableg <https://t.co/qrv4IBZIAB> (ATA, Tweet, July 22, 2020.)

TODAY: If you care about the safety of children and educators in #childcare, join the Assoc. of Early Childhood Educators Ontario & @ChildCareON, 11 am-12 pm, for a virtual rally. Let's raise our collective voice and take action together <https://t.co/7cAZiVOIOe> #onpoli #onted <https://t.co/qQsIIQfCiA> (ETFO, Tweet June 12, 2020.)

The @NLTeachersAssoc is pleased to present a new dialogue series with @MUNEducation on educational matters – Let's Discuss. The first installment, Reframing COVID-19 – Find-

ing New Opportunities in a New Normal, takes place tomorrow, Oct. 28. <https://t.co/yz0lul-JcCi> <https://t.co/bwlysD3IvU> (NLTA, Tweet October 27, 2020.)

Are you a Principal or Vice-Principal in your first five years? Check out our joint study with the @UofRegina on leadership during COVID-19 and join tomorrow's focus group! You can learn more and find the link to register on our website. #skteach <https://t.co/aB5A8vf8Jd> (STF, Tweet October 19, 2020.)

At the same time, many have also provided online professional development opportunities to assist members in coping with these same realities. The ATA website, for instance, shows over 100 PD offerings for teachers from March to August. Moreover, looking across all their websites and Twitter feeds, efforts to build at the base have spanned the vast majority of the organizations in this study.

TODAY: We're holding a virtual media conference alongside other education unions and health experts who will share their views on the province's flawed return to school plan. Tune in to the public livestream at 2 p.m. here: <https://t.co/geGEgv9aaO> #onpoli #onted <https://t.co/mMykhI0IKi> (OECTA, Tweet October 07, 2020.)

#ETFO members: Join us for an online conversation! SPECIAL VIRTUAL LEARNING: Emerging Equity Issues in a COVID-19 World with @JILLSLASTWORD @Pam\_Palmer @jaclynwong Thursday, June 18, from 4-5 p.m. REGISTER <https://t.co/VQGLDxUrwf>. More info at <https://t.co/WIASbGgFoM> <https://t.co/JnRTpzOar8> (ETFO, Tweet June 09, 2020.)

MTS president James Bedford wants to welcome teachers to tomorrow's virtual #MTSPD-DAY and thank SAGEs for creating engaging and educational online sessions. <https://t.co/4BHbfzg8ap> <https://t.co/paT8gx6G5c> (MTS, Tweet October 22, 2020.)

The shift to online experiences aimed at growing unionateness is critical to renewal in a time when face to face events, which have long been the hallmark of building organizational commitment, are prohibited.

### ***Challenge 5: Increasing Democratic Participation***

As teachers' organizations shift to online professional development opportunities, they are also having to find unique ways to increase democratic participation within their rank-and-file members. During the pandemic, most teacher organizations in Canada have again shifted this aspect of their operations to online spaces, hosting virtual AGMs and committee meetings.

Attention #OSSTF members: 1. Virtual town hall meetings on your Central Tentative Agreement continue today and end on May 14. Meeting information was distributed by bargaining unit leaders. 2. Tentative Agreement info is available on myOSSTF portal - <https://t.co/I4x-zloOR9A> <https://t.co/HUq7YohLzK> (OSSTF, Tweet, May 08, 2020.)

Yesterday, we made it through day 1 of our 104th Annual General Meeting. Using 4 different platforms, 600+ delegates could listen and debate. A virtual AGM can't replace the in-person connections, but we'll get the core work done. Thanks to our staff and #bctfAGM2020 Chairs! <https://t.co/jMHP1Csfe> (BCTF, Tweet, May 26, 2020.)

Our first-ever virtual Annual Representative Assembly takes place Aug 13-14! Over 400 teacher delegates will debate and pass Association policy, leading its direction over the coming year. Follow the proceedings at #ARA2020 #abed <https://t.co/FUvRronpc2> (ATA, Tweet, August 11, 2020.)

The move to online platforms for governance structures also has the additional bonus of providing new opportunities for members who may not be able to easily travel to the larger centers (where these meetings have tended to be held in the past) and therefore may not have been able to participate in these opportunities in the past.

### **Challenge 6: Uniting the Profession**

While there was evidence of horizontal and vertical collaborations in a number of jurisdictions, the teacher organizations in Ontario are perhaps the best example of what is possible when the profession unites. As noted earlier, Ontario is the only province in Canada with four teacher organizations (English public elementary, English public secondary, English Catholic, and French teachers). Although they are typically on good terms with one another, they have not always presented a united front. In the last round of contract negotiations, however, they jointly held several one-day strikes and mass protests at the Ontario legislature (CBC, 2020). During the pandemic, they presented a united front once again when all four jointly submitted a complaint to the labour board. They also united around the #SafeSeptember slogan, forming one solid voice across the teaching profession:

ICYMI - Ontario's education affiliates joined forces to release an ad in newspapers across the province yesterday, calling on the Ford government to create a real plan that puts safety first when moving towards schools openings this September. #SafeSeptember #osstf #onted #onpoli <https://t.co/smlaikLbHE> (OSSTF, Tweet August 02, 2020.)

Together with @AEFO\_ON\_CA, @ETFOeducators, and @osstf, we're taking action by filing #OLRB appeals against the govt due to their failure to meet health and safety obligations for a #SafeSeptember. #onpoli #onted Read news release: <https://t.co/BwXBn7a7fN>. <https://t.co/KHPxBsiPKV> (OECTA Tweet, August 31, 2020.)

Four education unions put the education and labour ministries on notice that the government's return to school plan fails to meet the legal health and safety requirements. Read release <https://t.co/aYZIIW6O8o> #onpoli #BackToSchool2020 #SafeSeptember <https://t.co/B2oONZpftO> ETFO, Tweet August 13, 2020.)

This kind of solidarity strengthens member resolve, brings power to the membership, and forms a strong basis for gaining public support.

With respect to vertical collaborations, Alberta education workers across four bargaining units (ATA, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and Unifor) came together to release a joint statement calling on the Alberta government to “ensure there are adequate resources to ensure safety” (2020, p.1). Again, in Ontario, the Ontario Principals Council (OPC), various school board directors, and the school boards association tweeted and retweeted support for teachers' organizations, openly exhibiting solidarity across the profession and creating stronger platforms for teachers' advocacy work.

Here is another clear message from an education partner to the Ford government. Ontario Principals add their voice to say that they want class sizes that support physical distancing. Smaller classes are needed for #BackToSchool2020 and a #SafeSeptemberON #onpoli <https://t.co/MbW6fiIiNe> (ETFO, Tweet August 13, 2020.)

Parents, advocacy groups, health experts, unions, @OPSBA, @OPCouncil, all agree - the Ford plan falls short of providing the necessary precautions for a #SafeSeptember. Take action today! 🙏🙏 #StayStrongStaySafe #onted #Onpoli #OSSTF <https://t.co/DWZ2JCatx5> (OSSTF, Tweet August 18, 2020.)

### ***Challenge 7: Creating Broader Alliances***

There is also evidence that Canadian teacher organizations have moved beyond the profession and are working on building broader alliances with parents, the larger school community, and other professional groups like nurses and doctors. When it comes to the issue of school reopening plans, Canadian teachers' organizations utilized a host of tools to appeal to the public and implore them to join the fight. The ATA and STF, for instance, hosted town halls with parents to build support:

Parents: do you have remaining questions about the relaunch of schools? Join us for a tele-townhall tomorrow at 7pm where we will be joined by infectious disease specialist Dr Lynora Saxinger to talk about the return to schools. Sign up here: <https://t.co/v7oBK9sMMk> #abed #ableg <https://t.co/dMsbYVQF7C> (ATA, Tweet July 29, 2020.)

Several teachers' organizations created online email campaigns, complete with standard emails that parents and other concerned citizens can send to government officials directly from the organization's website:

Parents, advocacy groups, health experts, unions, @OPSBA, @OPCouncil, all agree - the Ford plan falls short of providing the necessary precautions for a #SafeSeptember. Take action today! 📧📧 #StayStrongStaySafe #onted #Onpoli #OSSTF <https://t.co/DWZ2JCatx5> (OSSTF, Tweet August 18, 2020.)

There has also been a lot of twitter activity which engages nurses' associations, colleges of physicians, and children's hospitals. Such alliances help build momentum, offering stronger challenges against government claims that school reopening plans were adequate and safe.

### ***Hitting the Sweet Spot: Balancing Resistance and Rapprochement While Pursuing Renewal***

As noted earlier, resistance is often viewed in a negative light, giving rise to characterizations of teachers' organizations as destructive, greedy, and self-interested. Yet, amidst the continued proliferation of neoliberal education policies, their resistance serves a very important role in tempering partisan reforms focused more on economic impact and budget than securing the best conditions for teaching and learning (Bascia, 2009).

Consequently, it is arguable that resistance has been a necessary response among Canadian teachers' organizations amidst an onslaught of neoliberal reforms that threaten education as a public good. There are numerous examples of this pre-pandemic. In 2012, for instance, the Ontario government legislated a contract that removed teachers' right to strike, reduced sick-benefits, and imposed a wage freeze (Skorbach, 2012). Teachers' organizations took the case to the Ontario Supreme Court, which ruled that the government interfered with teachers' right to collective bargaining (Gunn, 2016). In British Columbia, legislated contracts removed teachers' right to strike and limited their ability to negotiate class-size and workload issues (Judd, 2016). In 2016, a Supreme court of Canada ruling forced the government to hire over 3000 teachers to restore class sizes to pre-2002 levels (O'Neil & Sherlock, 2016). Most recently, in Nova Scotia, an imposed contract removed school psychologists, speech language pathologists and social workers from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, a move deemed to be a breach of the collective agreement by an arbitrator in 2019 (Gorman, 2019).

In all these instances, teachers' organizations cycled back and forth between resistance and rapprochement. There were strikes, work to rule orders, and legal battles. There were negative media portrayals and public attacks by the government. In each instance, however, teachers eventually returned to classrooms, conceding on some issues and gaining on others. This cycle will only take teachers' organizations so far, however. Rather, the persistence of neoliberal agendas and the intensification of their impact on the teaching profession has placed significant demands on teachers' organizations' resources and it is questionable whether they can continue to meet the needs of their membership within their current capacity (Bascia & Stevenson, 2017). In this manner, Bascia and Stevenson (2017) position renewal as being imperative to the future longevity of teachers' organizations with respect to their significance in



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the daily professional lives of teachers. As they point out:

While a union's effectiveness rests on its engagement with the greater educational policy context, at multiple levels, real renewal is fundamentally a matter of building the union from within through the engagement and development of its own membership. How to make this happen is the most basic challenge of union renewal. (p. 63.)

They go on to conclude that "renewal is, by definition, the only way a teacher union can maintain itself as an organization of, and for, teachers over time" (p. 63).

On the matter of school reopening plans, data from this study illustrates that Canadian teacher organizations are attempting to balance resistance and rapprochement while simultaneously engaging in renewal efforts. The nature of this balance varied slightly across jurisdictions, however, and were shaped by localized factors. In Ontario, for instance, the multi-union context served as a point of strength and solidarity during the pandemic, uniting the profession as a single voice. At the same time, recent teacher strikes and work to rule campaigns in Ontario and Saskatchewan meant that teachers' organizations entered the pandemic in a compromised situation and were struggling to make up ground on outstanding collective bargaining issues.

That said, while unique provincial contexts contributed to some nuances in their approaches, as discussed above, by and large teachers' organizations in every jurisdiction have had strained relationships with government for some time now. In that manner, there were considerable similarities across their responses to the issue of school reopening. Familiar territory, resistance and rapprochement were widely used by all the organizations in this study and were largely successful approaches, achieving changes to masking policies, upgrades to ventilation systems, securing personal protective equipment, and even making gains in some provinces on class size. Premiers in a number of provinces also experienced a significant drop in their public approval rating leading into September. While this cannot be directly linked to teachers' organizations or education more broadly, public support of teachers' organizations on Twitter would suggest it was a strong influence.

For teacher organizations in Canada, however, the battle is far from over, with threats around future budget cuts and privatization of online learning looming daily. In that manner, continued renewal efforts are imperative. In particular, teachers' organizations must address renewal challenges that continue to present stumbling blocks; creating stronger alliances with other public sector labour organizations and attempting to repair and restore good working relationships with governments. Add to that the growing evidence that teachers were feeling "June tired" in September, and another key element will be finding unique and innovative ways to capture the membership and continuing to build capacity for engagement and unionateness. Much like a house of cards, teachers' organizations must carefully plan their next move, while ensuring their current move does not bring everything down around them.

## Conclusions

The goal of renewal is for teachers to recognize the value of their collective agency and to be confident in asserting that agency, both within the policy-making structures of their teacher organizations and the larger context of educational policy arenas writ large. As illustrated throughout this paper, maintaining their legitimacy has been an ongoing struggle for teacher organizations for some time now. In that sense this is not new territory. That said, the impacts of COVID-19 and the intensification of the neoliberal agenda following the biggest spending deficits the country has ever seen adds a new sense of urgency around collectivism and solidarity. In this manner, the ability of teachers' organizations to gain momentum with their members, create new opportunities for democratic participation, and build collective efficacy during this critical time is likely to be a strong indicator of their post-pandemic sustainability.

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