

COVID-19 FAQ #26 Responding to COVID-19

In FAQ #26, you will find information on: health and safety; voluntary COVID-19 vaccines; personal protective equipment (PPE); staffing; and child care.

Need a refresher on ETFO's last COVID-19 update?

[View a version of COVID-19 FAQ #25.](#)

Stay informed about your health and safety at work at etfohealthandsafety.ca.

Frequently Asked Questions

Are schools going to close again given the increase in cases? How many cases are required before the government will act?

The third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is here, and it is a different phase because variants of concern are spreading faster than the original virus did.

The government hasn't been willing, at any point, to give clear criteria for closing schools, but we know that when there have been outbreaks in some schools and boards, workers advocating for safety have forced authorities to act. If you do not feel safe going to work because of the number of cases in the school and/or the community, make sure you understand your right to refuse unsafe work.

Appealing to public health units (PHUs) can have an effect because PHUs make individual school closure decisions for health reasons. When an outbreak reduces the number of available staff to the point that it is difficult to operate a school, the school board has the authority to shut the school for operational reasons. Several PHUs, including in Peel, Toronto and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph, have also taken action to stop in-person learning at school boards in their areas prior to the delayed March Break.

In addition to other advocacy efforts, this week, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) took the following action:

- April 5 – ETFO issued a [media release](#) calling on the Ford government to take immediate action to ensure the safety of students and educators.
- April 6 - ETFO President Sam Hammond [wrote to Ontario Medical Officers of Health](#) urging them to prioritize education workers and other essential workers for access to the COVID-19 vaccine, and to temporarily shut down in-person learning to protect students and educators, where necessary.

- April 7 - ETFO hosted a [virtual press conference](#) to share its concerns about school safety and to demand the urgent prioritization of education workers, and other essential workers, for vaccines. ETFO President Sam Hammond was joined by presidents of Ontario unions representing education workers, an epidemiologist, and representatives from parent advocacy groups. A recording of the press conference will be available shortly on [etfo.ca](#).

Where can I learn more about my health and safety rights?

Review the [Ontario Federation of Labour's Guide to Health and Safety for Education Workers](#) for a clearer understanding of your rights.

When can education workers expect to have access to COVID-19 vaccines?

On April 7, 2021, the Ontario government announced that, beginning next week, education workers who provide direct support to students with special education needs across the province, and all education workers in **select** hot spot areas, will be eligible to register for vaccination. Vaccinations will commence during the April break starting with **priority neighborhoods** in Toronto and Peel, then rolling out to priority neighborhoods in other hot spot regions, including York, Ottawa, Hamilton, Halton and Durham. This will be followed by a rollout across the province as supply allows.

There is some confusion about which education workers in Peel and Toronto will be eligible for vaccinations. Minister Lecce did indicate that education workers would be eligible if they live and/or work in these priority neighbourhoods; however, a lack of clarity remains. We expect details about their vaccination plan for education workers will be posted to the [government's vaccine program website](#) as they are available.

In addition, because the responsibility for the implementation of the vaccination plan has been downloaded to PHUs, there will be differences in how things are done based on local factors. As such, it's important to watch for information from your local, your school board, and the PHU in your area.

ETFO continues to lobby the government and PHUs to ensure all education workers and other essential workers will have immediate access to the COVID-19 vaccine. You can find [a letter to send your MPP on BuildingBetterSchools.ca](#).

Face shields are uncomfortable, and goggles aren't much better. I'm usually able to distance from students and colleagues, so are they really necessary?

It is important that we are vigilant about the precautions we take, and a part of that includes wearing eye protection. Being able to consistently distance from students is next to impossible. Always wearing eye protection (i.e., face shield, goggles or safety glasses) is a part of your defense against COVID-19.

At the Provincial Working Group for Health and Safety, both the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development indicated that they believed eye protection should be required at all times in school buildings. It has been mandated in some boards, and is recommended everywhere. If you are not wearing PPE required by your employer, you may be subjected to discipline, professional college complaints or financial penalties from the Ministry of Labour.

Usually, by this time of year, I know my assignment for next year as well as the staffing for our school. This year, we haven't been told anything yet. What can be done about this?

Each local collective agreement contains language that covers the staffing process for each school board. As this is an unusual year, education funding announcements have been delayed and this has had an impact on staffing.

Your board and local ETFO office are the best source of information on staffing at this time. Please contact your local if you have questions regarding staffing and assignments.

My child has been advised to quarantine, but I have been told I still need to report to work. What are my options?

PHUs and district school boards are working together to determine the level of risk for each contact of a COVID-19 positive case based on several criteria. If you have been deemed low risk, you are expected to report to work.

However, if finding care for your child while they are home is the concern, there may be some options. Please contact your local ETFO office to discuss any leave entitlements in your collective agreement. You may also be eligible to take an Infectious Disease Emergency Leave (IDEL), which provides for unpaid leave days to care for a child due to COVID-19. In addition, you may be eligible for the Canada Recovery Caregiver Benefit (CRCB) for the time you are off work caring for your child.

For other information, please check [ETFO's dedicated COVID-19 webpage](#).