

Important ETFO Update #11: Responding to COVID-19

July 27, 2020

In Update #11 on COVID-19 related issues, you will find information on ETFO's advocacy around return to school and issues including: possible models; emergency funding; health and safety concerns; high risk medical conditions; work refusal; and child care issues.

Keep reading, stay safe and please wear a mask and wash your hands!

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

[Download a PDF version of FAQ update #10](#)

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While summer is normally a time when ETFO members rejuvenate and prepare for the upcoming instructional year, the summer of 2020 is different. ETFO members face a great deal of uncertainty about the reopening of schools in the middle of the pandemic. This uncertainty has caused anxiety that has been heightened by the changing messages from the Minister of Education and the Premier.

While there are still more questions than answers, ETFO has been working hard on your behalf advocating for a safe return to work in September. Our advocacy has been based on [ETFO's submission to the government about the reopening of schools](#), which contains 40 recommendations.

Polling has been conducted among ETFO members, parents and the general public to assist with identifying concerns and barriers to reopening schools in September.

ETFO staff has been researching other jurisdictions that reopened schools and identifying practices to incorporate into Ontario's reopening of schools plan. The general consensus is that a successful reopening of schools should include:

- Smaller class sizes to allow for a contained cohort of children and staff;
- Enhanced cleaning protocols;
- Screening protocols;



- Masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff and masks for students;
- Restrictions on movement and interactions within the school; and
- Emergency funding to support the reopening.

These principles have been central to our advocacy efforts throughout July. The ETFO President has participated in numerous media interviews to get our concerns on behalf of members out to the public. ETFO staff has been participating in three working groups where key aspects of the reopening have been the topic of discussion. The ETFO General Secretary has participated in weekly meetings with senior Ministry of Education officials focused on the reopening. The Federation participated in a consultation focused on the appropriate professional learning that needs to be provided to educators to support the safe reopening of schools. Recently, ETFO has participated in discussions regarding each of the three models for return to school and enhanced health and safety protocols needed to support a safe return to school.

ETFO has engaged in public advocacy as well, [asking parents and educators to write their MPPs immediately](#) and call for more emergency funding for reopening schools. If you have not participated in this lobby effort, please lend your voice to our advocacy efforts. Share this link widely and encourage others to participate in the lobby effort.

Local leaders have also been busy working through the summer. As school boards have developed their proposed reopening plans, your local leadership teams have been participating in discussions and advocating for a safe reopening of schools. These efforts are not done and will continue throughout the summer.

Later this week, you will begin to hear public messages from ETFO about the need for essential funding to support a safe reopening of schools. In addition, we will continue our lobby efforts to support the necessary equipment to ensure the safety of all students and educators.

Frequently Asked Questions

There is much speculation as to what school will look like in the fall. What are the most likely models for a return to school?

The Ministry of Education has asked school boards to develop contingencies based on recommendations from health authorities. The two most likely models are a full return to school with protective and distancing measures, and an adaptive model that blends distance learning with attending school on alternating days or weeks. The Ministry will announce its recommended model in the coming week.

It is possible that the models will contain some of the following components. The most significant difference between the two is the attendance of students:

Full return model:

- Students attend school on a five day schedule;



- Enhanced cleaning and disinfectant protocols, especially with respect to high-use areas such as washrooms, water fountains etc.; and
- Information re: personal protective equipment (PPE) and masks will likely be shared at a later date.

Adaptive model:

- Classes would be split into cohorts with half of each class attending school on alternating days or weeks;
- Enhanced cleaning and disinfectant protocols, especially with respect to high-use areas such as washrooms, water fountains etc.; and
- Information re PPE and masks will likely be shared at a later date.

Distance learning remains a third possible option that could be implemented in accordance with the direction of public health authorities.

It is possible that there may be a need to switch between delivery models based on local or regional health concerns. It is also possible that a particular school board may implement one model depending on the health advice that is provided locally while other school boards implement another.

Once more information on the model chosen is available, it will be shared with members as quickly as possible.

If there is a return to in-class instruction in September, will there be enough masks, PPE, hand sanitizing stations and enhanced cleaning and disinfection to keep everyone safe?

ETFO has called on the Ford Conservative government to provide sufficient emergency funding to ensure there is a safe and effective re-opening of schools this fall. School boards need this funding for masks and personal protective equipment (PPE), handwashing facilities and twice-daily enhanced cleaning and disinfection of schools, which will require additional custodial staff and supplies as well as ventilation to recommended standards. Funding for additional staff will also be critical to a safe and healthy return.

I have a medical condition that puts me at high risk of serious illness or death if I contract COVID. Should I take a leave of absence rather than return to work?

It is not known when a vaccination for COVID-19 will be available. The Ministry of Education is relying on public health authorities to provide recommendations for a safe return to classrooms for students and educators.

Members with a medically supported condition that may make returning work hazardous should speak with their doctor. There may be certain restrictions and limitations that the employer might be able to accommodate for a safe return to work, or consideration about whether a different work location is available and more suitable to the member's

needs. School boards are only required to accommodate to the point of undue hardship and that can include the health and safety of others as well.

If a doctor advises that a return to work would create a significant medical risk and a member's medical needs cannot be accommodated to substantially reduce or eliminate such risk, then members may be entitled to sick leave. Members are advised to involve their local in the process as local school board policies or collective agreement provisions may be relevant to any decisions made.

I have a family member who has a medical condition that puts them at high risk. Should I take a leave of absence to avoid giving my loved one COVID-19?

Members should discuss with their doctor or the doctor of their loved one the extent of risk involved in a return to work. Discuss if the risk can be substantially reduced or eliminated through a range of cleaning and disinfecting steps that can be carried out or that the employer may be able to carry out as part of an accommodation.

If needs related to a family status situation cannot be accommodated for a reasonable return to work, then a leave of absence may be the accommodation needed. Members are advised to involve their union in the process as local school board policies or collective agreement provisions may be relevant to decision-making.

With COVID-19, can I refuse to work because I feel it is unsafe?

Teachers and education workers have the individual right to refuse work that they have "reason to believe" is likely to endanger their health and safety or that of other workers. They can also refuse if the unsafe conditions are a result of the employer not taking all reasonable precautions for the protection of workers, such as following the protocols set by public health authorities or not providing proper training.

To date, the Ministry of Labour has not been supportive of the vast majority of COVID-related work refusals, even in health care facilities. Generally, workers may exercise their right to refuse if there is a known threat in the workplace. Workers should first report any concerns to their supervisor and if those are not addressed, they should seek the support of their Joint Health and Safety Committee and their ETFO local. If the issue is still not resolved, the Ministry of Labour can be contacted with a complaint.

Once at work, if a member believes that specific conditions at their school are endangering their "life, health and safety", they should contact their ETFO local or call Health and Safety Services staff at the ETFO provincial office.

Many teachers are posting their concerns on social media about requiring doctor's notes, buying masks and other issues for September. Should I be concerned?

Many of these comments and issues originate in the United States and do not apply in Ontario, which relies on public health and medical professionals for direction. The Minister of Education has said that plans for back to work focus on student and educator health and well-being as the top priority. Members should look to their school boards and local ETFO office for direction before making decisions on what is required. The most up-to-date, accurate information will be sent out by the employer and the local ETFO office in August. Members should direct any questions or concerns to their school administrator, school board and/or local ETFO office.

I work in a Northern community. Will my return to work plan look different than my colleagues in Toronto?

Each school board is submitting a return to work plan to the Ministry of Education. These plans will be reviewed and approved or modified on a board-by-board basis. There may be differences in how these plans look and how they will be implemented at a local level. Members should look to their school board and ETFO local for the most up-to-date information. School board plans may need to be modified throughout the year based on the trajectory of the COVID-19 virus and ongoing input from public health authorities.

I'm a parent and I'm concerned about potential child care issues in September. What should I do?

During the pandemic, many ETFO members have been teaching remotely while caring for children. Some may not have child care spaces upon return to school which could impact members' capacity to work.

Members who are parents should plan for their return to work in September and should make every effort to ensure that child care arrangements are in place for their children. If this is not possible, members should seek advice from PRS staff at ETFO provincial office or speak to their local office for information on whether they can seek accommodation on the basis of family status.

Resources and Financial Support Links

[Apply for the Provincial Child Benefit](#). Eligible parents will receive \$200 for children up to 12 and \$250 for children with special needs up to age 21.

[Apply for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit Program](#)
[Learn more about the CERB at \[etfo.ca/link/FAQ-CERB\]\(https://etfo.ca/link/FAQ-CERB\)](#)

[COVID-19 Self-assessment Tools](#) tool to determine what steps you should take should you exhibit symptoms.

For updates, please check ETFO's dedicated webpage at etfo.ca/link/covid19

