

# Important ETFO Update #12: Responding to COVID-19

July 31, 2020

In Update #12 on COVID-19 related issues, you will find information related to the government's return to school plan including: access to classrooms; student groupings and instruction; public health nurses; masks; and Joint Health and Safety Committees.

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

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On July 30, the Ontario government released its *Guide to Reopening Ontario's Schools* in September. The plan calls for students to be in class five days a week. ETFO is concerned that the plan and the funding to support it falls far short of what schools need to keep students and educators safe in September.

This week, [ETFO wrote to all school board chairs and directors of education](#) asking for the following to be included in local school board plans:

- Smaller student cohorts to ensure physical distancing for students and educators based on the current two-metre guideline;
- Mandatory masks for all educators and students with exemptions for those that require special accommodations;
- Improved health and safety protocols that ensure frequent cleaning and disinfecting of school facilities;
- Additional mental health supports for students and educators;
- Resources to address equity learning gaps, which have been worsened by the pandemic; and
- Adequate supports for students with special needs.

In a [media release](#) issued in response to the report, ETFO voiced concern that the government is not reducing elementary class sizes to allow for two-metre physical distancing, nor requiring students in Kindergarten to Grade 3 to wear masks. It said that smaller classes and mask requirements for all students are necessary to ensure the safety and health of everyone in elementary schools.

ETFO has launched a public campaign to address the need for sufficient funding to support the safety and well-being of staff and students returning to school in September, beginning with radio ads this week. The campaign will involve lobby efforts, continuing radio ads, social media ads and action and other components.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Now that we know the school reopening plan and what the parameters are, when will I be able to access my classroom to start preparing for the fall?**

Individual school boards will be working with local public health units to develop protocols and timelines for when schools will be open to members who want to prepare for the year ahead. Locals will work with school boards to determine appropriate timelines to enhance adherence to safety protocols. Members should check with their principal to see when their school will be open.

### **What will teaching look like in my classroom this fall? Will I be able to have my students work in groups?**

Information from the Ministry yesterday indicated the following:

- Students maintain one-metre physical distance from other students;
- Teachers should maintain a distance of two metres (6 feet) from students and other staff as much as possible, recognizing that distancing will not be feasible in classrooms with the youngest children;
- Seating in classrooms must be arranged so that students face the front of the room, avoiding circles or groups;
- Elementary school children in Kindergarten through Grade 8 will attend school five days per week, staying with one cohort for the full day, including recess and lunch;
- A cohort in the elementary classroom includes the same number of students as in a normal class in each division;
- Cohorted classes will stay together with one teacher, where possible;
- Students in grades 4 to 12 will be required to wear non-medical or cloth masks while in school; and
- Students in Kindergarten to Grade 3 will be encouraged, but not required to wear masks in common spaces.

Traditional styles of teaching may have to be modified to accommodate for the current health pandemic. Creating or converting activities from a collaborative format will need to be considered. This means a significant rethink to the way educators teach. Group work could be problematic, given the physical distancing requirements. Members may be encouraged to take students outside to learn, when possible.

Student desks or workspaces will be separated to adhere to social distancing requirements. Educators must also consider strategies that do not require students to share materials, equipment, manipulatives and/or writing tools unless they can be

disinfected between usage by students. Enhanced health and safety protocols will be in place for educators and students. Medical masks will be provided for teachers and all other school staff. Teachers will be wearing a mask at all times.

More information will be provided by individual school boards in the coming weeks.

### **Will my core students receive instruction from other itinerant staff?**

A cohort in the elementary classroom includes the same number of students as in a normal class in each division. Cohorted classes will stay together and with one teacher. Where possible, an elementary student should be cohorted with their classmates and their homeroom teacher with some contact with other subject teachers for classes such as French as a second language/Anglais, the arts and physical education. Specialized teachers, like French teachers, will still be able to go into classrooms to provide the full breadth of programming for students.

### **My principal has advised me that time will be provided on a PA day prior to September 8 for team planning. When I plan with my grade team partners, what issues should we consider?**

As members plan for the upcoming school year, it would be beneficial for grade team partners to discuss the following issues:

- Organization of the physical classroom;
- Management of materials and resources;
- Changes to instructional strategies to adhere to physical distancing mandate and decrease group work, and small group instruction;
- Integration of social-emotional learning, well-being, safety and community building;
- Changes to assessment strategies to adhere to social distancing;
- Integration of diagnostic assessment throughout the year to determine learning gaps for individual and group of students; and
- Strategies to support ELL learners and students with special needs.

### **I understand that the government is hiring up to 500 public health nurses to assist schools in the reopening plan. What does this mean? Will a nurse be on site at my school every day?**

The plan includes the hiring of up to 500 public health nurses to support schools and be the link with public health units. They will work to assist with training, advise schools on appropriate safety protocols and provide support in responding to suspected cases in schools. When asked about the role of these medical professionals in schools, Ontario Associate Chief Medical Officer Dr. Barbara Yaffi answered that they will work with a family of schools supporting the schools, parent councils, teachers and the public health unit. They will be the link with the public health unit to ensure there is contact tracing and rapid testing in case of outbreaks. When there is an issue at a school, the nurse will

be on site as much as possible to make sure protocols are followed and appropriate measures are in place.

Given that the number of elementary and secondary schools in the province far exceeds 500, there will not be a public health nurse in each school.

### **If I contract COVID-19 at work, will I be entitled to WSIB?**

If a member is diagnosed with COVID-19 after returning to school and believes it may have been contracted from an exposure at work, a WSIB claim should be filed. More information on the steps to take to file a WSIB claim for COVID-19 can be viewed [here](#).

For more information on how the WSIB decides claims for COVID-19, see the [WSIB's Adjudicative Approach document for COVID-19 cases](#).

### **My principal/board is asking me to complete a survey or indicate my intention to return to work in September. Should I comply with this request?**

Members should work cooperatively with their school board to provide information about their availability to return to work. Some members may not have enough information to provide an accurate response at this time. For example, a member may have a medical condition that includes limitations and restrictions, and it may not be known at this time what accommodations the school board may be able to provide. Members requiring accommodation should consult with their medical practitioners as soon as possible in order to provide the necessary information that the board is requesting.

### **I feel overwhelmed with what I need to do to get ready for September. What should I be focusing on in the first few weeks that will meet the needs of my students?**

ETFO has made it clear to the government that teachers will need greater flexibility in lesson planning and additional time to make their students feel safe and welcome at school. September will bring an opportunity to focus on building a sense of safety and community in the classroom. There are many ways to build community that easily adapt to new distancing measures. Building community is important to promote inclusivity, belonging and safety. It is also a way to bring some fun back for students.

Members will also need time to teach students the new hygiene routines and ways that the classroom will operate within the COVID 19 guidelines (i.e., how to wash hands, manage classrooms materials, how their cohort will travel throughout the school day, etc.). Members will receive assistance on how to do this.

Additionally, focus on lessons/activities that will reduce anxiety for students. Starting with student mental health is essential for setting the groundwork so that academic learning can occur. Mindfulness activities such as deep breathing, increased physical

activity and listening and sharing experiences are ways to support student mental and physical health. Resources to help you get started with these types of activities can be found at [Every Day Mental Health Classroom Resource](#) and [CIRA Ontario](#).

**I teach a Grade 3/4 split class. Grade 4 students will be required to wear a cloth mask. Can I ask students in Grade 3 to wear a cloth mask?**

As laid out in the government's *Guide to Reopening Ontario's Schools*, it is a "requirement" for students in grades 4 to 8 to wear a non-medical or cloth mask while in the school. However, masks are not mandatory for Kindergarten to Grade 3 students. In the reopening plan, students in Kindergarten to Grade 3 are "encouraged" to wear masks. To date, Grade 3 students cannot be asked to wear a mask, unless the government or local health unit revise this requirement. Parents and guardians of Kindergarten to Grade 3 students can be informed through regular school communications that these students are encouraged to wear masks.

ETFO's position is that Kindergarten to Grade 3 students should be required to wear masks and ETFO will continue to lobby for that requirement to keep students and educators safe.

**What is the role of the Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) in the reopening plan for schools?**

The government's July 30<sup>th</sup> *Guide to reopening Ontario's schools* document states that "Joint Health and Safety Committees are required to be established, engaged and meeting regularly to inform the reopening plan and ongoing operations." Members of a site-based JHSC should contact their principal to discuss setting up regular meetings, and members of a central multi-site committee should contact the worker and management co-chairs of the committee to discuss meeting regularly. These meetings should occur virtually as often as is necessary to fulfil the duties of the JHSC such as assessing hazards and making recommendations.

Members with any questions regarding the role of the JHSC, and regular meetings to inform the reopening plan and ongoing operations should contact the ETFO provincial Health and Services Area staff assigned to their local, or contact the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, if necessary, at 1-877-202-0008.

**Will staff and students have their temperature taken before entering the school each day?**

At this time, there is no plan for screening to include temperature monitoring before entering the work site since it is not currently seen to be an effective measure by public health authorities. The only screening required of staff and students is to self-screen every day for symptoms of COVID-19 before attending school.

School boards should provide parents with a checklist of symptoms so they can perform daily screening of their children before arriving at school. School staff, including occasional staff, will receive training on awareness of possible symptoms of COVID-19 and what the protocol will be should a student or staff member exhibit symptoms while at school. Signs should be posted at entrances to the school to remind students, staff, parents/caregivers and essential visitors of screening requirements.

**If the Ministry implements a temperature screening protocol before entering the workplace, is that a violation of my privacy?**

Currently the Ministry of Education and public health authorities are not considering a requirement for mandatory testing or temperature screening since they are not seen as effective measures for a number of reasons. At this time, the employer is responsible for taking every reasonable precaution to keep staff and students safe. During a pandemic, emergency measures are put into place in consultation with the public health authorities. If there is a particular concern, members should contact their local or provincial office for advice. For more information on this issue please refer to [Question 11 from the OHRC FAQ](#).

## 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](#)

[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](https://etfo.ca/link/covid19)