

Important ETFO Update #14: COVID-19 FAQ and Returning to School

August 25, 2020

In this membership update, the union is providing important information related to the reopening of schools; it includes information related to health and safety protocols, the right to refuse work, and mental health supports.

The information in this newsletter is up to date to the best of our ability and current as of 1:00 p.m. on August 24, 2020. While the situation evolves, ETFO will provide regular updates to keep members informed and safe.

Stay informed about health and safety at www.etfohealthandsafety.ca

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

My school board has denied my request for accommodation due to COVID-19, what can I do?

Each request for accommodation must be considered individually, on its merits. When considering any request for accommodation, school boards and all employers have a duty to accommodate an employee unless it would amount to undue hardship.

A school board has a legal obligation under Ontario Human Rights Code to consider all reasonable requests for accommodation. If you find that the board has not objectively considered your request, you should contact your local as soon as possible to review the specifics of your request and to determine the appropriate next steps.

Given that the in-person school attendance plan is optional, how is parental choice an equity issue?

Having the choice to opt out of sending your child(ren) back to school is a privilege because it assumes that all parents/guardians have access to the same resources and supports for their children. Some parents/guardians who feel that it is unsafe to send their child(ren) to school will have to make troubling choices between economic security and keeping safe. This is particularly true for those in marginalized communities who

may be faced with precarious employment, few sick days or a lack of childcare. On the other hand, other parents/guardians with greater resources and the same concerns about the risk from COVID-19 in schools are able to choose to keep their child(ren) at home and [pay](#) for additional educational support for their child(ren).

Many ETFO members are parents/guardians who must assess the risk of sending their child(ren) to school while physically returning to the classroom themselves. Family circumstances with little support and/or financial insecurity leave some members with no choice but to send their child(ren) to school.

Under what circumstances during COVID-19 has the right to refuse unsafe work been supported by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD)?

So far, the Ministry of Labour has supported COVID-19 related work refusals due to the lack of PPE or the lack of training. If the school runs out of medical masks, or other PPE that is prescribed for specific tasks, or if the board does not provide training, you would have “reason to believe” your work is now “likely to endanger” you, which is the criteria for the right to refuse unsafe work as defined in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, S.43(3). If you are a teacher, you also have a limited right to refuse unsafe work as you must first ensure “that the life, health or safety” of their students is not in “imminent jeopardy”.

If you are considering a work refusal, you should contact your ETFO local or your health and safety representative for advice. If the danger is immediate and you do not have the opportunity to speak to a local representative first, then you would take the concern directly to your principal. If the principal is not able to immediately resolve the concern, then you should follow other steps as advised by your Joint Health and Safety representative whose name is posted on the health and safety bulletin board in your school or contact ETFO. Additional steps may include making recommendations through the Joint Health and Safety Committee, contacting the Ministry of Labour with a complaint, or invoking your right to refuse unsafe work. A work refusal, whether related to PPE, training or other circumstances, can be resolved at the school level with you, your principal and your health and safety representative without having to involve the Ministry of Labour.

It is important that members exercise their right to refuse unsafe work carefully, when necessary, and preferably after consulting with your local.

What supports exist for my mental health when schools reopen in September?

Navigating uncertainty amidst a pandemic has resulted in what some believe will be a [mental health crisis](#). According to ETFO’s Summer 2020 Survey, 70% of members answered that they were “concerned” or “very concerned” about mental health and wellbeing. As members prepare for September, mitigating the risk of exposure has

shaped everything from classroom setup to the curriculum implementation. Further adding to the uncertainty, school board reopening plans continue to evolve. The compounded stresses of what members are facing with respect to September and schools, and how this impacts family and home situations can take its toll on mental health.

Members are reminded to prioritize themselves and ensure that they maintain healthy boundaries between school and their personal lives. We realize that ETFO members maintain high standards for not only their students but also themselves and we encourage you to practice [self-care](#) and build support networks of solidarity with colleagues.

Should members experience anxiety about health and safety within their school site, they should speak to their Joint Health and Safety Committee representative, steward, local and/or provincial office for guidance. Additionally, members have benefits and can seek assistance with their insurance carrier.

How can I support student mental health when schools reopen in September?

Members will be supporting students to transition back to structured time and re-establish social connections after several months of disconnection from the classroom. As noted in previous COVID-19 FAQ communications, there are a variety of ways the pandemic has affected our society and families. Students have not been immune, often not only dealing with their own anxieties but also being aware of the increased stress on their caregivers and in have witnessed it in their communities.

Easing student stress as they learn amidst new public health protocols requires educators to be mindful of the toll on student mental health. The Canadian Pandemic Society offers [tips](#) on speaking to young children about COVID-19. School Mental Health Ontario also provides a number of [strategies](#) for mentally health classrooms. For older students, Teen Mental Health has tips about [stress](#), a [toolbox](#) of resources and a school mental health [curriculum](#). This is a shared experience by Canadians of all ages.

Canadian stats on mental health issues during this time can be viewed at <http://kh-cdc.ca/en/img/KH-infographic-covid-1.pdf>.

I am concerned that one of my Grade 6 students has been exempted from wearing a non-medical cloth mask. Is there anything else that can be put in place to prevent this student from spreading the virus?

Exemptions for wearing a mask can be granted with reasonable exceptions for medical conditions or sensory or breathing difficulties. Depending on the circumstances of a case, the school board can provide accommodations for students exempted from wearing a mask, such as: a face shield; having the student's desk distanced greater

than 2 metres; installing a plexiglass cubicle divider on the student's desk; installing a low walled impermeable barrier at the front of the classroom for you and other staff; and removing the student from the classroom until appropriate accommodations can be put in place. If there are no accommodations in place, please raise your concern with the principal immediately. If the principal does not address and resolve your concern in a timely manner, contact your ETFO local or JHSC representative.

Our Kindergarten team has heard the government say that there can be two cohorts of 15 in our classroom. Can we split the Kindergarten class into two groups and teach individually to have smaller cohorts?

ETFO recognizes the importance of the Kindergarten teacher and DECE working together to support students. It is not uncommon for a DECE and Kindergarten teacher to work with a smaller group of students within the classroom, but each educator shouldn't be planning and teaching a cohort on their own. The program is designed to be delivered by the team with each member of the team having specific responsibilities. At this time, the Kindergarten class size has not changed, and educators should not be making plans to cohort students themselves.

ETFO continues to advocate on behalf of members and is pressuring the government to provide funding for smaller class sizes that would accommodate appropriate spacing in a classroom.

How do I know all of the surfaces in the school are being cleaned and disinfected throughout the day?

Often times, staff do not see the custodians complete these tasks, but, with additional cleaning and disinfection protocols required by public health, you will see cleaning and disinfection happening more often. The principal should share with staff the plan for cleaning and disinfecting, along with an established list of high touch surfaces, all of which should have been reviewed by the JHSC.

At this time, it is recommended that high touch surfaces be cleaned and disinfected at least twice a day, at a minimum, and when visibly dirty or known to have been contaminated. However, more frequent cleaning and disinfection may be necessary depending on the frequency of use and extent of soilage. The plan should also include the timing, such as mid-day and the end of the day.

School boards have been provided with government funding to hire additional custodial staff to support enhanced cleaning and disinfection in schools. There should also be a mechanism for custodial staff to log when areas have been cleaned and disinfected. Follow your school's protocol to report areas in need of additional cleaning. **Since a surface can be contaminated at any time, the most important protection is frequent handwashing.**