

# Important ETFO Update #15: Responding to COVID-19

September 22, 2020

In Update #15 on COVID-19 related issues, you will find information related to: physical distancing; masks; member roles regarding safety; and Kindergarten.

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

[View a version of FAQ update #14](#)

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Significant changes to the enrolment in my school board are resulting in changes to teaching assignments. How should these be handled?**

The rights and entitlements of the collective agreement have not changed, and the *Education Act* and its Regulations are also fully in place. School boards have the ability, depending on specific language in a local collective agreement, to assign teachers to positions for which they are qualified.

Most collective agreements have language governing how teachers are declared surplus when there are enrolment changes at a school, particularly in this case with the shift of some students from in-person learning to virtual learning. In a general sense, surplus is applied to the teacher(s) with the lowest seniority. This is the process that should be being followed if the collective agreement allows for surplus from schools at this point in the year. Regulation 274 covers how long-term occasional teaching assignments are to be filled.

If a member believes that any of the collective agreement entitlements have not been followed in the reorganization of schools, change in teaching assignment or filling of teaching positions, they should contact their local as soon as possible with all of the details concerning the situation.

**My large class size does not allow for physical distancing in my classroom. What can I do to pressure the school board to address this issue?**

Members should take measurements and report the concern to their administration verbally and in writing, requesting a larger space to facilitate the recommended physical distancing. Remind the administrator that two meters is the acceptable distance in all

other community spaces and, even with wearing masks, it is expected that the two meters should still be maintained in group settings. Share a photo with your Joint Health and Safety Committee Representative that they can present as evidence as they advocate for you with your school board to address this issue.

ETFO has continually called on the Ford government to provide sufficient emergency funding for a safe re-opening of schools, and its complaint to the Ontario Labour Relations Board also called for 10-15 students per class to reflect the advice from SickKids Hospital. Members can assist by sharing specific concerns about the implementation of return to school plans with their supervisor and their local.

**A social media outlet has asked educators to share concerns about the lack of physical distancing in their classrooms. Can I post photos of my classroom or concerns publicly?**

Members should exercise caution when sharing information that may reflect negatively on their employer or breach the privacy of students. Both ETFO and the Ontario College of Teachers provide guidelines to educators for the use of social media, including reminders to use personal accounts not connected to their workplace, not to include any photos or information about students, and to always maintain a professional tone.

Many websites and social media accounts are asking ETFO members to share their school experiences. Some are publicly accessible and have been created by grassroots parent and education worker groups. Although ETFO supports these groups, members must exercise caution when sharing information on a website that is anonymous and unmoderated.

Members are strongly advised to share their information with ETFO. Please share a photo or email your story, including the class grade(s) and size to [communications@etfo.org](mailto:communications@etfo.org). Alternatively, tag @ETFOeducators in a post on social media, clearly indicating the provincial government's responsibility for addressing these concerns with funding and guidelines. Such examples are useful for ETFO provincial and local leaders who are advocating on members' behalf.

Most importantly, members are reminded that they have a duty to first report any safety concerns to their principal, and if necessary, request assistance from their health and safety representative and ETFO local office.

**My school board is requiring masks and face shields to be worn at all times, but they are uncomfortable, and I need to occasionally take a “mask break”. What is a reasonable expectation for mask use by staff?**

Face masks should be worn the majority of the time in the school building except when eating or drinking or while alone in a room. Outdoors, some school boards state masks should continue to be worn when assigned supervision duty or when two-metre physical

distancing cannot be maintained. Face shields are required when maintaining physical distancing is not possible, for example, when a teacher or DECE is moving around the classroom or when staff is working in close proximity to students.

School boards are required to supply personal protective equipment (PPE) and should address any concerns if the PPE is causing discomfort or creating other hazards. Boards must also provide training on the proper donning, doffing and cleaning or disposal of PPE.

### **Can I wear my own mask that I have made because it is more comfortable?**

An employer has a general duty under the *Ontario Health and Safety Act (OHSA)*, Section 25(2)(h) to "take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances" to protect workers. This means PPE should be provided to workers wherever there are health or safety risks that cannot be adequately controlled in other ways. If PPE is provided, then employees are required to wear it. There may be cases where deaf and hard of hearing educators are required to wear masks that are slightly different due to lip reading requirements. School boards are attentive to these needs and should provide PPE that is acceptable to the needs of staff and to the program.

### **My colleague is not wearing a mask in the halls or following the entry/exit directions. Should I say something?**

Yes, you should have a conversation with your colleague about your concerns. If this is not successful, you should report any health and safety concerns to the attention of the principal. Such concerns can first be addressed in a general way. If you raise specific concerns about your colleague's actions, you are required to notify them of the report made to the principal within 72 hours. The concern can also be taken to the worker's Health and Safety Representative or the Joint Health and Safety Committee.

### **How can I verify that face masks provided by school boards are medical grade?**

School boards were provided masks through the Ministry of Education. It has assured ETFO that the masks have met Health Canada's standards and are considered medical grade. Due to government actions to acquire sufficient supplies, some boxes are not properly labelled in English. Google Translate can be used to translate the text of boxes. To check a specific product, use one of the various search engines on this [Health Canada website](#).

### **How can I verify that the ventilation in my classroom is adequate, given the growing evidence that COVID can be transmitted through air?**

Proper ventilation can optimize air quality. Report any health and safety concern to the principal and request this information. Any reports related to health and safety should be provided to Joint Health and Safety Representatives so they can provide assistance in obtaining and interpreting the information. As part of the [joint affiliate complaint](#) to the

Ontario Labour Relations Board, ETFO has advocated that school boards adhere to the [American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers guideline](#).

The Ministry of Education has also provided school boards with [best practices](#).

**Can I be expected to pay for materials to assist in making my classroom safer from COVID-19 for my students? I see members purchasing bins, plexiglass, disinfectant, cleaning supplies etc.**

Any equipment and cleaning supplies required to keep safe at school is to be provided by the school board. If there is not adequate PPE or access to what is required, speak to the principal. Before purchasing any bins or large structures, please be sure to follow Public Health, Ministry of Education and school board direction. Note that school boards have strict protocols around what types of cleaning products can be used in schools as some cleaning supplies may be hazardous or harmful if accidentally mixed with other industrial cleaning supplies used by board custodial staff.

**How can I determine if the hand sanitizers and disinfectants being used are strong enough to kill the virus but not toxic for humans?**

The employer must provide all employees with WHMIS training, a Safety Data Sheet (or equivalent) for each product, and each container must be labelled with the hazards. Use Health Canada's website to [investigate individual products](#).

For more information, refer to the Workers' Health and Safety Centre's [factsheet](#).

**As a French teacher, I'm in contact with over 150 students in a week in various classrooms. What are my responsibilities for contact tracing if an outbreak occurs?**

The provincial guideline for schools limits students to 50 direct and indirect contacts over a one- to- two week period but health authorities have since clarified that this number does not apply to adults. If a student is in a different cohort for their bus, their classroom and/or their after school childcare, and/or they have teachers and education workers in their classroom that also work with other classes, the maximum number of direct and indirect contacts will be exceeded if adults are included.

The principal is required to regularly maintain lists for contact tracing so you should ensure they are informed of all of your contacts. If there is a positive case of COVID-19 in a member's school, they may be contacted by the public health unit to provide more information about their contacts. It is our responsibility as citizens to be cooperative in the efforts to track this disease to prevent further spread.

Members can assist in ETFO's efforts to address the concern that there is no limit for adult contacts by sharing specific details about the implementation of the COVID-19

reopening plans with their supervisor, their local and their Joint Health and Safety Committee.

**The child care staff at my school are taking the children's temperature. Can I purchase a thermometer and check the students in my class?**

Child care settings in Ontario have different regulations that must be followed. ETFO members are required to follow protocols and guidelines set out by school boards. They are not expected to take temperatures of students in their class.

**I am being asked to disinfect the high touch surfaces in my classroom as well as clean the washroom after the children use it. Am I expected to do this?**

ETFO members should not be expected to clean the washrooms in their classrooms or high touch areas as this is the work of another bargaining unit. If there is an issue with the cleaning protocols, members should speak to their principal, ETFO local and their Health and Safety representative.

**Why do I need to clean and disinfect manipulatives between each use if the students in K-3 are not wearing masks and physical distancing cannot be maintained? Won't the virus spread despite our efforts?**

It is important to follow the advice and directives of the provincial guideline, local public health and the school board. Members can raise concerns and ask questions, but they need to follow the rules in place unless they are changed. Failure to follow the direction of the principal and the public health guidelines may result in possible discipline.

**We are being told that we can't use microwaves in the school. How do I heat student lunches?**

Heating children's lunches is not something members should be doing. At this time, families need to be encouraged to send student lunches in a thermos or other containers that keep liquids and food hot or cold. Parents should also ensure that the student is able to open the container themselves.

**I am not sure how to program for the children in my Kindergarten classroom.**

ETFO members will consider the fundamental aspects of the *Kindergarten Program (2016)* and *How Does Learning Happen* while adhering to their school board's advice and the health and safety protocols set out by public health in their area. Many school boards have created guidance documents, PowerPoints and webinars to support Kindergarten teachers and DECEs that provide considerations about planning and programming for students and how to remain within health and safety protocols.

Pedagogically, be aware that members are the first point of contact for many parents within the education system. Create a safe and inclusive learning environment by

ensuring classroom resources, books and references are not only diverse but also culturally responsive. Continue collaborating with the school or board's equity facilitators or inclusive curriculum consultants. Issues of discrimination and isolation have been on the rise since the pandemic. It is more important than ever that educators pay particular attention to supporting students and communities and continue building inclusive classroom spaces.

For those new to teaching Kindergarten, there also may be an Early Years Consultant who can be an excellent resource with whom to connect. Reach out to other educators and the administrator to explore other resources and supports that may be available. It is important to follow guidance and advice provided the school board as it will be informed by the local public health department and will follow the collective agreements of the teacher, occasional teacher and DECE locals, which are different across the province.

**Our board has asked us to divide our Kindergarten class into cohorts and we are being asked to work in separate spaces. Is this allowed?**

The Kindergarten Program is based on a team approach with a teacher and Designated Early Childhood Educator working together. Within the program there are opportunities for small group activities throughout the day. If members are asked to divide their class into cohorts and work in separate spaces in order to reduce the class size numbers of students, they should call their local or ETFO Provincial office.

**How do we support Kindergarten students who are struggling with the transition and at the same time maintain appropriate distance? What if a child does not want to come in and is upset? Can we hold their hand?**

For some children, the transition from home to Kindergarten can be stressful. During this pandemic, stress behaviours for children and parents may be heightened. According to Ministry of Education, public health and school board guidelines, members are to maintain physical distancing with students. Physical contact should be avoided. Any kind of physical contact can potentially raise boundary issues and result in allegations of professional misconduct. Support an upset student in a positive and constructive way using calming and comforting words.

**What if a Kindergarten student needs support that requires me to be closer than one or two metres such as help with dressing, toileting/diapers and lunches? Do my partner or I get appropriate PPE or what direction is provided?**

Members supporting students in close proximity should speak with their administrators to determine what PPE is being provided and how to access this in the school. In some settings, educators are being provided with a PPE kit to keep in the Kindergarten classroom for emergencies. Others have been provided with their own PPE based on student needs. Have a discussion with your administrator. If a member feels they

require PPE that is not being provided, they should contact their local and notify their Health and Safety Representative for assistance. The same is true for any health and safety concerns about cleaning and disinfection, physical distancing, cohorts/contacts, PPE, etc.

ETFO's Health and Safety tip sheet, *Your Rights and Your Employer's Duties*, can be found [here](#). Other ETFO Health and Safety resources can be accessed at <http://etfohealthandsafety.ca>.

**For other information, please check ETFO's dedicated webpage at [etfo.ca/link/covid19](http://etfo.ca/link/covid19).**