

COVID-19 FAQ #23 Responding to COVID-19

In FAQ #23, you will find information on: health and safety; asymptomatic testing; impacts on marginalized communities; mental health classroom resources; and March Break.

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

[View a version of COVID-19 FAQ #22.](#)

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

Frequently Asked Questions

I am sometimes required to work closer than six feet from students, e.g., when I am doing assessments, and some of my students have medical exemptions to wearing masks. A request for a plexiglass barrier was denied. What other options are there for staying safe?

When health and safety concerns are raised by workers and suggestions are made by Joint Health and Safety Committees, employers must give them due consideration.

A recent decision by the Ontario Labour Relations Board makes it clear that just because protections like plexiglass barriers are explicitly recommended in the guidelines for some environments (e.g., the main office), this doesn't mean that they can't also be considered in other areas of the workplace. If impermeable barriers like plexiglass are made available, plans need to be made for cleaning and disinfection, and the placement of the barrier cannot restrict airflow.

Workplace hazards are addressed by eliminating them or putting protections between the hazard and the worker. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is the last line of defense when hazards exist in the workplace and it isn't possible to keep the hazard away from workers. Ideally, there should be **layers** of health and safety protections to stay as safe as possible so if one of the layers fails or isn't possible, workers are still protected. This is why distancing **and** masks **and** face shields/googles are recommended.

You may be in an environment where some layers are consistently difficult to achieve, e.g., if students have medical exemptions to masking or the nature of the work requires you to be closer than six feet. In cases like these, consider speaking to your supervisor

or health and safety representative about your concerns, and other possible layers of protection, such as enhanced ventilation or impermeable barriers. The Workers Health and Safety Centre [has created a list of possible protections](#) to consider in workplaces.

I keep hearing how COVID-19 is spread by aerosol, and it might be worse for new variants. What does “aerosol” really mean, and should I be worried about it in my classroom?

Initially, COVID-19 was thought to be spread mostly by droplets from the nose or mouth. That is why masks have been a big part of the defense against the virus. Since droplets can only go so far before they fall to the ground, distancing has also helped. But evidence has been mounting that it is also spread by aerosol, i.e., droplets so small that they can be suspended in air, which means they stay around much longer.

Unions, scientists and health care professionals have been advocating for precautions from the start of the pandemic, based on SARS Commission recommendations. Although the provincial government has been reluctant to acknowledge aerosol spread, others, like the federal government, now say that it is a mode of transmission, and that the new variants may be more likely to spread by aerosol.

Distancing, masks (with a close fit), face shields/goggles, and good ventilation all continue to be excellent recommendations, whether you are concerned about droplets or aerosol. Some activities are likely to produce aerosols, e.g., singing, yelling, and spitting. Some students with medical needs may need suctioning over the course of their day, a procedure that can create aerosols. If an unmasked student yells or spits regularly or if medical procedures like suctioning are being carried out in your work environment, a risk assessment should be done to determine if more precautions are required. Speak to your administrator and get the support of your local ETFO office and/or health and safety representative.

Asymptomatic testing is supposed to be one of the new safety measures, but I haven't heard anything about it in my school board. Who can get tested and where?

Asymptomatic testing was promised by the government to help halt the spread of COVID-19 in schools and communities. Unfortunately, it was announced before capacity was completely in place. Public Health Units (PHU) are responsible for administering testing. They were given this role, but they didn't know it was coming and weren't ready to start as schools reopened.

How and when it is done will be up to the local PHU. Ideally, asymptomatic testing can help identify outbreaks in schools before they are out of control, but the funding provided will not facilitate broad-based random testing.

It's important to remember that these tests will not be mandatory. They will be available for those who want them – staff, students, and families of both, likely in high-risk

communities. Check with your PHU to get more information, and if you don't get a satisfactory answer, consider reaching out to your Member of Provincial Parliament.

How does COVID-19 continue to disproportionately affect marginalized communities?

While disaggregated race-based data on those who have COVID-19 isn't available provincially, early studies in areas that collect this information reveal how racial identity largely affects the ways the pandemic affects you. [This graphic](#) illustrates how race determines who is impacted by COVID-19. Within the Greater Toronto Area, nearly 80 per cent¹ of all COVID-19 cases in November 2020 alone were racialized people with almost all racial groups being significantly overrepresented. Individuals dealing with the impact of the pandemic at remarkably disproportionate rates are ETFO members, students and community members.

In addition, the federal government's recent announcement to ban travel to Mexico and the Caribbean once again reinforces how this pandemic is not affecting all of us equally. The ban, which is largely based on trying to prevent vacationers, points to other issues of how countries are viewed.

At the time of writing, the Caribbean has had 367,904 cases total while Florida alone has had 1,783,720 cases. The ban, which did not include Florida where studies show 94 per cent of snowbirds are white, highlights a colonial mindset that reduces a region of the world to simply being a fun destination for the enjoyment of outsiders.

Also, many migrant workers from the same regions of the world that are now banned make up large portions of seasonal workers that faced extremely disturbing living conditions this past summer.²

The ban further reinforces how class impacts the pandemic because while Canadians can travel to the Caribbean through the United States, it increases exposure, adds cost and send more capital away from Canadian airlines and into the USA. What one person views as a vacation destination is another's home, place of business or where family resides.

Are there mental health resources that I can use in the classroom?

School Mental Health Ontario has released a [Student Mental Health Action Kit](#) for educators. In the kit, you will find classroom-ready resources, lesson plans, messaging to use with students about mental health and well-being, and more.

¹ <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/nearly-80-of-covid-19-cases-in-toronto-were-among-racialized-groups-in-november-1.5276918>

² <https://www.ctvnews.ca/w5/pandemic-in-the-fields-the-harsh-realities-temporary-foreign-workers-face-in-canada-1.5120806>

The lessons were developed in partnership with the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA), and are organized by early years, grades 1 to 3, 4 to 6, 7 to 8, and 9 to 12 to support the development of stress management and healthy coping skills. Each lesson has three parts: a minds-on activity; a pre-recorded virtual field trip session that introduces breathing strategies; and a consolidation activity. These lessons are suitable for virtual or in-person learning.

How can the Minister arbitrarily change the school year calendar and move March Break?

On February 11, 2021, Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced his intention to postpone March Break to the week of April 12th.

Under the *Education Act*, the Minister of Education can make regulations governing the school year, school terms, school holidays, instructional days, and professional activity days. The *Education Act* also allows the Minister to create regulations that change school calendar dates.

While he may have the authority to postpone March Break, ETFO and many other education organizations have made it clear that the decision made by Minister Lecce is not in the best interest of educators, students and families. In a [joint media release](#), ETFO, AEFO, OECTA and OSSTF indicated they “strongly oppose the government’s plan to postpone March Break” and that “these are unprecedented times, and this is a much-needed break for students, teachers, education workers, and families who have been under tremendous pressure throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The government’s decision to postpone March Break does not take into consideration the mental health and well-being of those involved.”

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