

COVID-19 FAQ #24 Responding to COVID-19

In FAQ #24, you will find information on: the COVID-19 vaccine; asymptomatic testing; mask exemptions; Personal Protective Equipment (PPE); physical distancing; March Break; and anti-Asian racism.

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[View a version of COVID-19 FAQ #23.](#)

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Frequently Asked Questions

Is the COVID-19 vaccine mandatory?

The government has said that the COVID-19 vaccine is voluntary.

I've heard that asymptomatic testing is starting in schools. How can I get tested if I want to? Is testing mandatory?

Testing is not mandatory. Many people want access to asymptomatic testing and experts have repeatedly said that it is key to controlling COVID-19 and stopping outbreaks before they get out of control. Unfortunately, the availability of asymptomatic testing is not as widespread as promised or as hoped.

School boards, in partnership with Public Health Units (PHUs), community partners or selected vendors, are organizing this testing in response to regional needs. If your school community is having testing done, you should be notified of the option to be tested.

In some regions, testing will be available in specific pharmacies. Visit [this website](#) to find out if testing is available at a location near you and confirm they are testing education workers. PHUs will update information as more testing is organized, so please check again.

Students in my school are exempt from wearing masks, and I can't see any medical reason for it. Can families just decide that their children don't have to wear masks?

In a Feb. 23 Ministry of Education memo to school boards, it was made clear that exemptions should be for medical reasons and should be rare. Boards were asked to review their policies about exemptions.

Although your school administrator may be able to tell you generally about their decision-making when it comes to mask exemptions, they cannot share the medical circumstances of any individual student.

Students' needs could be accommodated through partial mask wearing (e.g., frequent breaks and half days) or alternate PPE (e.g., face shields). When masking is not possible, an extra layer of protection (e.g., distancing and impermeable barriers) can also be put in place. Principals should also consider whether the student could be accommodated through virtual learning.

Please note that the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) has indicated that it doesn't consider not believing in masking to constitute a "creed," and, therefore, an exemption should not be granted on these grounds. You can review the OHRC's FAQs [here](#).

If you feel that families are putting their own children at risk, you should consider your duty to report under the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act*.

My principal says we have to wear PPE as instructed, and that we are not allowed to "double-mask." What should I do?

A study, released by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, demonstrates the virus-blocking capabilities of a cloth mask layered over a medical grade mask. It seems that the cloth mask fits more closely and helps prevent the flow of air that can happen around the edges of a medical mask that doesn't fit as well.

At this time, there is no current recommendation to follow this practice in Ontario, but neither is there any data to demonstrate that a cloth mask over a medical mask will interfere with the effectiveness of the PPE. While you must use the PPE provided by your employer, you should be able to wear something that you believe makes you safer, unless it can be demonstrated that it interferes with the functioning of the required PPE.

If you choose to wear a cloth mask over your provided medical mask and are told that you cannot, contact your local ETFO office for support.

In my Education Support Personnel (ESP) role, I support students all over the school. I'm worried about the potential for increased exposure to COVID-19 as I'm not part of a cohort. How can I stay safe at work?

Although the provincial guideline does not limit the number of contacts for adults, it is a reasonable precaution and some boards have adjusted schedules to limit exposure. All education workers are entitled to a safe work environment. The precautions put in place should be appropriate to your job, and must include PPE. At minimum, medical masks and face shields must be provided.

Depending on the nature of your work, you may also need access to gowns or gloves, a workspace that is distanced from students and other workers, and signage or barriers that allow you to interact with others without taking unnecessary risks (e.g., floor markers for lining up and plexiglass partitions).

If you feel that the protections in place are inadequate, ask your principal for a risk assessment that considers the unique nature of your job and the students you work with. Also, speak to your Joint Health and Safety Committee worker representative. If your work differs significantly from the majority of the workers they represent, they need to hear your concerns so that they can advocate for you.

What can I do if a student in my class ignores physical distancing guidelines?

Teaching students about the importance of physical distancing requires education and continued reinforcement. Whole class and whole school discussions about protocols are good ways to keep the matter fresh in students' minds without singling anyone out.

If a student continually ignores physical distancing guidelines, you may consider having a private conversation with the student and following up with their caregiver(s). Administrators are empowered to use progressive discipline for students who are refusing to mask appropriately, and behaviour that compromises the safety of others should be reported on Safe Schools Incident Reports.

With the move of March Break to April, what are my options if I had already booked a commitment that is not possible to move to another time?

Depending on the reason for the commitment, you may have a collective agreement option for an approved leave. For example, some collective agreements provide for travel to attend a family member's wedding or moving to another home.

Generally, school boards consider the following when assessing the granting of leaves:

- Are the plans of an urgent nature;
- Did the employee have any control over the timing of the event;
- Can the event be rescheduled; and
- How many days are required for the event?

While every board assesses leaves slightly differently, it is important to get any leave approved prior to being absent from work. Failure to do so could result in disciplinary action against the employee.

Please note that, given the current public health advice, it is unlikely that a school board would approve a leave for a pleasure trip. Please consult with your local regarding the leave provisions in your collective agreement.

How can I, as an educator and community member, address the resurgence of anti-Asian racism that has occurred during the pandemic?

Since the announced second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a resurgence of anti-Asian racism across the globe. This situation is particularly troubling on the west coast, where the most recent statistics show a 717 per cent increase in anti-Asian racist incidents in [Vancouver](#) and a 97 per cent increase in hate crimes. Ontario is not immune, particularly in the urban and racially diverse spaces of Toronto, Ottawa, and other cities with shifting racial demographics.

Anti-Asian discrimination can occur in overt ways as exemplified through the racist, systemic rhetoric of politicians naming COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus” or “China virus”, as well as the recent physical violence towards Chinese community members in Vancouver. It also includes more covert forms of micro-aggressions, racial slurs, and bystander actions. These manifestations of racism are not new.

What is particularly significant is the misunderstanding that the discrimination currently experienced in Asian communities is situational and does not have a historical and institutional context. For example, although attacks have been mainly targeted at Chinese Canadian communities, because of the sweeping generalizations of East Asians and Asians as monolithic, many groups who identify as Asians are being impacted with a very broad brush stroke. This is just one example of the systemic racism Asians experience.

What can ETFO members do to become more informed of the racism that impacts Asian communities, and how can they support colleagues, students and communities who are impacted by it?

We can learn about the historical and current context of anti-Asian racism. Different racialized groups experience racism in unique ways that are informed by systemic legacies. Understanding these diverse lived experiences and structural barriers can help us to understand how all types of racism work within white supremacist, colonial, capitalist systems.

The recent release of [Addressing Anti-Asian Racism: A Resource for Educators](#), developed in partnership between ETFO and the Toronto District School Board, provides historical/current information and context to the issues related to anti-Asian racism. It also centres Black and Indigenous identities as necessary in the anti-racist movement, and offers strategies and tools to dismantle individual behaviours and systemic forms of racism to support classrooms and schools.

What should I do if I experience or witness racism during the pandemic?

If you experience or witness racism during the pandemic, report it at [Fight COVID Racism 698](#). This platform tracks anti-Asian racism and xenophobia in Canada with the aim of validating experiences and using the data to inform efforts to dismantle

anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. You can also find resources and supports on this website.

Support and advocate for colleagues, students and community members who may be experiencing anti-Asian racism by:

- Challenging and calling out micro-aggressions, verbal discrimination, implicit biases and stereotyping when we witness or hear them. The [myth of the model minority](#) is real and when left unchecked, acts as a weapon of white supremacy;
- Checking in on others' mental health and wellness;
- Researching community/local organizations that may offer support;
- Learning about the histories and issues that Asians in Canada experience, especially during the pandemic; and
- Embedding the issues and topics that impact Asian communities during and beyond the pandemic into the curriculum for a more critical understanding of Canadian and global societies, whether or not there is an Asian population within the school community you work in.

Additional informational resources:

- [Toronto launches new campaign in response to anti-Asian racism spurred by COVID-19](#)
- [COVID-19 has put a harsh spotlight on the anti-Asian racism that has always existed in Canada](#)
- [Chinese Canadian National Council Social Justice #FaceRace campaign](#)
- [On Anti-Asian Hate Crimes: Who is the Real Enemy?](#)

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