

COVID-19 Pandemic Information Update

Extended Closure of Schools

The Minister of Education has announced that the closure of Ontario's elementary and secondary schools will extend until at least May 1 for education staff and May 4 for students. In light of that decision, the Ministry is rolling out the second phase of the Learn at Home program, which will establish a teacher-led program that will allow students to continue learning at home. The program will also re-connect students with other school staff, including mental health workers. The full announcement from the Ministry of Education can be read [here](#).

In response to the Minister's announcement, OSSTF/FEESO President Harvey Bischof issued a statement, which can be read [here](#).

OSSTF/FEESO has also created a Distance-Learning Advisory Expert Work Group, made up of front-line educators. This Work Group will be providing advice around best practices and professional development related to curriculum delivery while schools are closed.

Union/Government Education Worker Work Groups

In addition to the Ministry/Affiliate 2020 Continuous Learning Workgroup, which was established last week and comprises representatives from the government and the teachers' federations including OSSTF/FEESO, three additional work groups have been established for specific groups of education workers. These are the Information Technology/Library/Clerical Work Group, the Custodian Work Group, and the In-Class Workers Work Group. Again OSSTF/FEESO will participate in these workgroups and advocate on behalf of our members.

... 2

Ministry of Colleges and Universities Announcement

The Minister of Colleges and Universities has announced that the government has entered into an agreement with eCampusOntario, a government-funded not-for-profit corporation, to make digital learning supports available to postsecondary institutions. This move is intended to ensure that students are able to complete the academic year. The Minister also announced a six-month interest-free moratorium on the repayment of student loans.

The full announcement from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities can be read [here](#).

The Federation will continue to monitor developments in the post-secondary sector that may impact members of District 35, Universities.

Professional Standards Surrounding Continuity of Learning during School Closure

Just as electronic communication grows and evolves over time, so too has advice for OSSTF/FEESO members regarding communicating with parents and students through electronic means. Years ago, common advice was to avoid communicating with students through electronic channels altogether, but education and communication have increasingly turned to the digital realm. The range of platforms used to communicate electronically has also expanded beyond email to include websites, apps, video chat software, texting, blogging, social media, and other platforms such as Google Classroom. In addition, with new provisional learning methods being used during the COVID-19 crisis, many OSSTF/FEESO members are placed in a position where they must, by necessity, communicate regularly with students and parents in unprecedented ways using technology.

As always, electronic communication with parents or students should be limited to curricular or extracurricular information, ideally on employer-provided hardware and through employer

... 3

servers, during a regular workday. However, during the current school closure period, members may not be able to establish their practice while staying with these ideals. In these extraordinary circumstances, the key becomes being able to facilitate a continuity of learning while taking the variety of issues raised into account. Many of the “dos and don’ts” that apply to electronic communication in a classroom-based learning environment will need to have reasonable flexibility applied to them during this exceptional time..

As the continuity of learning arrangements may differ from one school board to another, it is difficult to give detailed advice to members. Rather, bargaining unit representatives will be discussing the issues with employers in order to determine how to best facilitate provisional distance instruction while taking the issues that arise into account.

Privacy Issues

Issues of the privacy of both students and educators arise when using electronic communication.

- Members who are using their own cell phones should take steps to protect the privacy of their phone numbers by making use of the Caller ID Blocking feature (*67).
- Members should only use their employer-provided email account when communicating with parents and students. If that account is not accessible, members should establish an email account that is used solely for their employment-related activities.
- Members should be aware that using video conferencing software to facilitate working with groups of students raises the issue of the privacy of students and educators in their homes. In addition, some software mines data from participating computers, further endangering the privacy of participants. Bargaining unit leaders will be working with employers to ensure school boards put protocols in place to protect the privacy of participants if the use of video conferencing software is being contemplated.

... 4

Other Issues to Consider

The use of electronic communication devices and platforms for the continuity of learning brings with it the feeling of familiarity that comes with the use of social media. It is important that educators ensure that their expectations of respectful and professional behaviour are met.

- When sending emails, use a signature that includes your name, assignment title, and workplace.
- Be sure that everyone, including educators, parents and students, continue to use a respectful tone when engaged in electronic communication.

Equity of access for students will be an issue, as many students do not have reliable access to the internet, or to electronic devices in general.

- Bargaining units should work with employers to establish protocols to enable students without reliable remote access to take meaningful part in the continuity of learning.
- Any such protocols should take into account issues of privacy and safety, both for students and educators.

Members are not expected to incur any personal costs in order to deliver distance education. If the protocols in the Board will result in additional costs, contact your supervisor to discuss preapproval and reimbursement.

In addition, educators, and particularly teachers, should be aware of the Ontario College of Teachers' advisory on the use of electronic communication and social media, as members of the College may be disciplined for violations of the advisory. The advisory can be found at [Professional Advisory on the use of Electronic Communication and Social Media](#).

... 5

Bargaining Unit leaders will be working with employers to facilitate the continuity of learning in a way that ensures that these concerns, along with any others that are identified, are properly addressed.

As the COVID-19 pandemic crisis continues to unfold, OSSTF/FEESO will be issuing frequent updates to provide members with as much pertinent information as possible.

Please frequently check the *myOSSTF* section of the OSSTF/FEESO website for updated information.