

## **Memo #20**

Date: February 8, 2021

To: Simcoe Muskoka Catholic Elementary Teachers

Re: **Return to In-Person Teaching**

I would be remiss if I did not mention the incredible work of all teachers during this school year. The constant changes and adjustments, along with the pressure to be able to take our training and experience of teaching in front of students and adapt to teaching virtually. All while living during a pandemic (and trying to do the impossible in balancing your professional and family/personal responsibilities). Teachers are sacrificing their own wellbeing in order to care and nurture their students during these challenging times. The Minister of Education won't acknowledge your efforts, but it is clear that teachers in Simcoe Muskoka Elementary are demonstrating that you embody the words professionalism.

### **Returning to In-Person Teaching**

Most teachers will be returning to in-person teaching (joining St. Peter the Apostle) or teaching in the VSE while working from their home school during some very uncertain and challenging times. While most of us are much more comfortable teaching face-to-face, the issues of doing so during a pandemic and with the existence of the new COVID variants in our communities makes the return much less welcoming.

### **Teacher Self-Screening**

Part of the Government's "enhanced" safety protocols was to have Board's create a validation that each staff member or visitor to the school has taken, and passed, the COVID self-screening.

The Board has sent out direction on how this will occur:

Before attending work each day, all employees must complete the [Staff Daily COVID-19 Self Screening](#) and follow the instructions provided by the tool. This exercise mirrors the SMDHU pdf sheet previously used. Staff will be required to confirm that they have self-screened on a daily basis.

1. Every SMCDSB employee will receive an auto generated email (to their Gmail account) each morning.
2. The email will contain a link.
3. Employees will click on the link and it will direct them to complete the self-screening.
4. Once the self-screening has been completed, the tool will provide direction to go to work or stay home.

Unfortunately, the Government did not require elementary parents to provide proof of the self-screening of their children.

Teachers who are working in school buildings (including teachers working in the VSE, but teaching at their home school) need to remember the following:

If a student is displaying COVID-like symptoms teachers should be sending the student to the isolation room.

If the administration at your school is not dealing with the seriousness of the issue, please contact the Unit Office as soon as possible.

## **VSE Teachers Working at Their Home School**

We have heard from a number of VSE teachers that are working in their home school. The reality is they are still required to provide supervision, and be potentially exposed to COVID, all the while not having any students in their classroom. One would think the Board would simply allow the VSE teachers working at their home school to continue to work from home. Thus, limiting exposure for all.

Our Board has stated that if teachers had a medical concern that put them at risk if they caught COVID they were to submit information in September and a decision would be made to potentially place them in the VSE for safety reasons, and the ability to work from home. The teachers submitted such medical were granted that accommodation.

Other teachers may live with others that have medical concerns, and as such they could apply for an Emergency Family Accommodation. Again, the teachers that applied were granted the ability to work from home in the VSE.

The remaining teachers chosen in the VSE were done through seniority or self-declaration. The Board indicated those teachers would work out of their home school, because they did not require an accommodation to work at home.

In Simcoe Muskoka, we having ongoing discussions with the Board - especially since most of our Board moved to remote learning in January - and with the increased cases and new variants it may be best served to have the VSE teachers in each school, work from home.

Unfortunately, we have been unsuccessful in convincing the Board that the prudent and safest decision would be to have VSE teachers that are working from their home school, to remain at home to teach.

## **Health and Safety**

The Government and the SMDHU feel that returning to in-person teaching is safe despite the number of daily COVID cases and the existence of the new COVID variants in our area.

We must remember to wear Government/Board issued face masks, and to change as often as necessary. As well, we need to be wearing the face shield/visor or goggles, and if necessary disposable gowns and/or gloves. Furthermore, it is important to maintain hand hygiene to reduce the risk of contracting COVID.

A reminder: a face mask protects others from your droplets, while a face shield/visor or goggles protects you from others' droplets.

When outside staff and students need to continue to wear a mask (and possibly a face shield) if social distancing cannot be maintained.

One of the most challenging health and safety situations revolves around students eating. They will need to remove their masks in order to eat and drink. Taking off one's mask then puts others at risk. The Government and SMDHU state that if staff and students have taken and passed the self-screening the risks are reduced. Furthermore, staff would be wearing a mask (and possibly a face shield) to protect themselves and others.

We cannot bring in our own face masks, face shield/visor or goggles, unless they have been approved by the Board, through the Disability Management Office – Gord van Clieaf.

## **Work Refusal**

As stated in a previous message, and also sent out by OECTA Provincial, teachers do have a limited ability to file for a Work Refusal, based on unsafe working conditions.

However, despite what we all believe are unsafe conditions: having 25+ students crammed into a class; the inability to maintain 2m (or in some cases 1m) social distance between students; having students take

their masks off during lunch/breaks; teaching in multiple rooms over the course of the day etc. they are not considered unsafe working conditions by the Ministry of Labour.

Furthermore, wearing the Government/Board issued face mask cannot be considered unsafe. Yes, they could/should be issuing a better mask but:

**The Ministry of Labour has stated that they consider all masks to be effective PPE for COVID-19, including the new variant strains.**

Therefore, situations such as a school not having any masks, or hand soap or hand sanitizer for their safe would be considered an unsafe working condition.

If you or others feel you would like to file a work refusal, we suggest you contact the Unit Office to discuss your situation and to receive direction.

## **Union Reaction**

We have been hearing a lot about the lack of response from OECTA on the current situation to return to in-person teaching, and the lack of true Health and Safety measures.

OECTA has been requesting since March 2020 to be part of the discussion and planning for the return to school in September. The government has, and continues to, refused to meet or discuss anything with the education affiliates – the true education experts. OECTA continues to demand that class sizes be capped at 15 to ensure proper social distancing, along with proper ventilation supports and true “enhanced” safety measures in all schools.

However, it is a challenge to try and work with a government that doesn't want to meet or discuss anything with education stakeholders and continues to rely on statements such as: we are using the advice of our pandemic experts or relying on direction from our medical specialists. We have seen on social media that a number of the experts that the government relied upon, have spoken out against their pandemic plan and have either been released from their role on the panel, or targeted on social media.

There have been questions why we are not going on strike to protest our working conditions. Since we are not in an official bargaining situation, such action would be considered an illegal strike action. I am sure a number of educators would state they don't care – this is that important! Locally we cannot take such an action, as those decisions are determined at the provincial level. However, those discussions have occurred between OECTA and their legal team to determine the ramifications. Some teachers will remember 1997 and the two-week provincial walkout, and that was a positive experience, but Mike Harris and his PC government still pushed through their educational changes. The possibility of sending such a message has been shared with OECTA Provincial.

We are dealing with a government that has yet to sufficiently deal with the COVID outbreak in many Long-Term Care homes, and continually try to balance the economy and safety.

Despite the lack of results with our current provincial government, this will not deter our actions to continue to pursue every possibility either locally or provincially to ensure the safety of the staff and students of Ontario are the utmost priority.

**If you have any concerns, please contact the Unit office at 705-733-9625 or 1 800 558 4815**