



# October 2020 Newsletter

Dear Members,

As I write this newsletter, I admit that my anxiety is running high. I know we are all feeling this way. I have never seen our working conditions worse than they are today in the almost 30 years since I entered teaching. The combination of changing and inconsistent information and direction, inadequate safety measures, a shortage of Education-sector workers, frequent loss of preparation time, being asked to do extra supervision duty, confusing health authority directions that differ from region to region even within the same school board, a general state of fear and discomfort, and unreasonable expectations on every stakeholder in the public Education system is untenable. We need some good news soon. We need positivity and joy to return. But those essential life qualities are in such short supply these days.

Members are receiving ETFO Provincial updates on the issues that our entire membership is facing. If you are not receiving that communication, please provide your personal email to ETFO. My focus is more on local issues in this newsletter.

Thank you for all you're doing under the most difficult of circumstances. Please take care of yourself and others. I keep telling members to do what's possible. Attempting to maintain a standard that you find overly challenging will likely lead to mental and physical fatigue and illness. Pace each day

and offer what you can, within your limits that the day brings.

Many of the working conditions we face are not clearly defined in our Collective Agreement. Our Agreement was never written or negotiated for pandemic conditions. We rely on relationships and on leaders using a common sense approach to problem solving. We are all in this together. That's why working together and caring for one another is how we're getting through and will continue to serve as we venture down an unknown path.

I'll close by saying that I've heard some comment that your Local isn't communicating often enough. I understand that sentiment. One of the challenges leaders face is to not overwhelm with information that is in constant flux. This only adds to stress and confusion. There is a balance of when and how much information to share. So please know that information you receive can change at any time.

Your Local works every day to solve issues and stop likely problems before they take hold. Call upon us as often as you need.

## **Requirements for Remote Learning (Policy/Program Memorandum 164)**

The Ontario government issued PPM164 on August 13th. This document provides directions to school boards for remote learning practices. The Board established a Virtual Academy for students who are not

attending in-person. The Virtual Academy allows for required medical accommodations for vulnerable members and avoids the issues of every member providing both distance and in-person teaching simultaneously.

For members teaching in-person, the PPM states, 'during remote learning where students are at home for more than three days in a given week, boards must ensure students are provided with synchronous learning'. This expectation is highly problematic. The PPM states that it 'must be implemented in alignment with collective agreements' and 'where there is conflict between the memorandum and a collective agreement, the collective agreement must prevail'.

Locally at this time, we have agreement with the Board that it is not reasonable or expected that in-class teachers provide the required number of synchronous minutes of learning to absent students outlined in PPM 164 while teaching in class.

At this time, members teaching in-person should provide learning opportunities for absent students. This could include the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (i.e. Brightspace) or other ways that the teacher can work out with parents. The intent of using a VLE with in-class students is to allow for an easy 'pivot' to distance learning for students who are absent three days or more in a week. Ideally, absent students would continue using the VLE that is already in use.

Please use your professional judgement when deciding how you would provide learning opportunities for students who are absent for three or more days in a week. How this is done depends to a great extent on your class routines, your availability and

use of technology, and balancing the needs of in-person with absent students. A common sense and reasonable approach is needed to ensure a balanced workload. Placing too many expectations on yourself will only result in additional stress, more system no-fills, and ultimately less learning for students.

### **Overall Staffing Shortages**

School boards across Ontario are facing unprecedented staffing shortages. Because of the lack of available occasional teachers, members are facing frequent loss of preparation time and it's extremely difficult to get prep paid back.

Our Collective Agreement states that missed prep time should be paid back as soon as administratively feasible, but no later than three months after the loss. I strongly recommend that you keep track of your missed prep time so your principal can repay it. The updated COVID screening checklist includes symptoms that are seen with the common cold, flu or allergies. When members take their own children to the doctor, they are often being told to self-isolate as well. This dynamic is exacerbating the number of no-fills. The Ministry recognized this impact on staffing and student attendance, so they released an updated screening tool on October 1<sup>st</sup>.

The Board did hire more occasional teachers, but those new hires were assigned to teach in the Virtual Academy to fill the remaining teaching positions.

Inadequate staffing is very serious. Missing EAs create safety and workload issues. Daily loss of prep time makes for a long day and only adds to workload and stress. Teaching

under these conditions while wearing PPE and worrying about infection is taking its toll. Current conditions are unacceptable and the issues we face are common throughout Ontario. The government ultimately has to take action to solve these blaringly obvious shortfalls and dangers.

### **Update on Local Elections**

Thank you for your participation in our Local elections. The normal election process was delayed from May until now due to COVID. Your newly elected Executive Committee will begin their 2-year term on October 5<sup>th</sup>.

### **Local Committee Opportunities**

Despite current conditions, it is our intention to establish this year's local committees. Members can participate virtually in meetings. As we see how things play out, we will adapt committee work to our circumstances. We offer many options and a wide variety of opportunities. Please email [jeannette.dodds@granderie.ca](mailto:jeannette.dodds@granderie.ca) if you would like to join our committees.

### **Quick Update on Local Bargaining**

The local bargaining process continues. Your local Collective Bargaining Committee has met with the Board on several occasions and more meetings are scheduled. Due to the confidential nature of bargaining I cannot provide details, but I do want you to know that the process is continuing. We know you need improvements to language and your increase in salary.

Once a local Collective Agreement has been ratified by the local membership, the pay increases take place. A 1% salary increase each year over three years was negotiated through Central bargaining. The salary

increase is retroactive to September 1, 2019. An additional 1% takes effect September 1, 2020. And another 1% is applied on September 1, 2021.

### **Staffing and School Reorganizations**

Even as we are still working out the staffing issues caused by fluctuating student enrollment since re-opening, our next challenge is approaching. More and more students are going to the Virtual Academy or home schooling. Parents must indicate their intention soon to either keep their children at school or enter the Virtual Academy or do home schooling. Principals will provide updated enrollment data in mid-October then the Board may reorganize schools based on enrollment. More members will be reassigned temporarily to the Virtual Academy which may result in a reorganization of in-person teachers as well. More of our members could experience yet another change in teaching assignment this year. School reorganizations will certainly impact a system already under pressure.

Thank you for all your hard work, flexibility, support for colleagues and endurance. Call on your Federation as often as needed. We are here for you.

-Shawn Martin, GEETF President

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.