

A Healthy Workplace for Teachers



**BACKGROUND PAPER
AND PROPOSED POLICY**

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1. Introduction

At Council 1994, the following Resolution was passed:

BE IT RESOLVED that the STF develop and promote a policy on a healthy workplace.

During the 1994-95 and the 1995-96 years, the Teacher Welfare Advisory Committee (TWAC) undertook to review the conditions under which teachers teach as part of its priorities for those two years. During this time, the Committee was instrumental in promoting the study on Teacher Workload and Worklife but also was concerned with the physical conditions under which teachers teach and children learn. During the 1994-95 year, the Committee studied occupational health and safety. In 1995-96, the Committee members gathered policies concerning the workplace from their school divisions and shared information and issues concerning a healthy workplace.

2. Background

As TWAC determined, there are many issues involved in maintaining a healthy workplace. A healthy workplace must include respect for those working there, including freedom from physical and mental harassment or injury, as well as the maintenance of a physical plant that is not only safe but encourages safety.

In 1988, the STF Council had passed two resolutions which reflected the health and safety hazards to students and staff alike when renovations and construction is not scheduled in a manner which least affects the occupants of the site:

BE IT RESOLVED that the STF urge Saskatchewan Education to allocate funds earlier so that renovations and construction hazardous to health and safety do not place staff and students at risk.

BE IT RESOLVED that the STF urge boards of education to ensure that renovations and construction hazardous to health and safety be carried out at a time of year when staff and students are not at risk.

Recognition of other hazards to workplace health has led the STF to develop policy in the following areas: Teacher Protection Against Physical, Verbal and Emotional Abuse (1993), Harassment and Sexual Harassment (1985) and Violence in Schools (1996). Other policies have aspects relevant to healthy and safe schools (see Appendix A). This paper will, therefore, largely concentrate on safety and health issues more related to a healthy and safe physical environment.

3. Legislation

Provincial legislation in the form of *The Occupational Health and Safety Act* (and the Regulations) specifies the responsibilities of both employers and employees with respect to maintaining a healthy workplace. This current legislation has taken a broad view of occupational health and safety defining it as:

- (i) the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers;
- (ii) the prevention among workers of ill health caused by their working conditions;
- (iii) the protection of workers in their employment from factors adverse to their health;
- (iv) the placing and maintenance of workers in working environments that are adapted to their individual physiological and psychological conditions; and
- (v) the promotion and maintenance of a working environment that is free of harassment.

The legislation confers two rights which are very important to the healthy and safe functioning of schools. The first is that “at every place of employment where 10 or more workers of one employer work” an Occupational Health and Safety Committee must be established and that committee shall be comprised of at least half non-management representatives. In the educational context, such a workplace would be a school. The second important consideration is that employees have the right to refuse to perform work in conditions dangerous to their health and/or safety, and the employer may not take steps against such an employee when the employee exercises rights under the legislation. The employer also may not discriminate against an employee who has assisted in an investigation related to health and safety in the workplace, as stipulated in the Act.

The Education Act specifies the duties of school boards, administrators, teachers and students. These duties must be meshed with the duties spelled out in *The Occupational Health and Safety Act* for employers and employees. It is clear from that Act that every employee in a workplace is responsible for health and safety. It is equally clear that Occupational Health and Safety Committees in the workplace are intended to be real forces for monitoring, discussing and reporting. They are not intended to be puppet committees to assist the employer to appear to comply with legislation. In the school context, their function is so crucial that every school, regardless of size, should have an active committee.

The Regulations to *The Occupational Health and Safety Act* stipulate new employees should be given an orientation to provide the employee with occupational health and safety instruction. They also expand on the Act in declaring that employees have a duty to assist employers in carrying out their responsibilities.

4. Existing Contract Clauses and Policies

Contract clauses from other provinces have a variety of topics concerning the health and safety of teachers. These clauses range from those which stipulate in some detail items such as room temperature, the conditions of bathrooms, etc. to those which give more general statements (e.g., "Specific problems which endanger the health and safety of individual employees or pupils must be eliminated.") or specify the role of occupational health and safety committees.

Saskatchewan teacher contracts do not currently address health and safety issues. Board policy is a more likely vehicle for the pronouncement of how health and safety is to be addressed in a school division. Boards have policies on such items as Harassment, AIDS, Employee Assistance Programs, Communicable Diseases, Fire Drills, Smoking and Substance Abuse.

5. Implementation in Schools

In schools, the scenario is somewhat different from a typical workplace because the first and foremost concern for safety is for the students. A school which adequately addresses the safety concerns for students also provides, in most respects, a healthy workplace for teachers and other employees as well. Of course as employees, teachers have additional concerns related to their occupational health, e.g. stress related issues, handling and storage of substances not directly available to students, etc. Therefore, school Occupational Health and Safety Committees could have the dual responsibilities of ensuring that legislative requirements are met and establishing guidelines consistent with board policies to ensure student safety and health.

In terms of the Occupational Health and Safety Committees, two portions of the Regulations to the Act are particularly pertinent to school committees. The first is that the employer must give a representative on a committee reasonable time off during working hours (with no deduction in salary or benefits) to receive, investigate and inform others of *The Occupational Health and Safety Act*. In addition, with reasonable notice, the employer must give educational leave for up to five days for training related to occupational health and safety training.

When policy guidelines for school divisions for health and safety were developed in 1985 by the educational partners, the general statements contained in *The Education Act* were translated into specific responsibilities for health and safety at each administrative level.^[1]

^[1] Saskatchewan Education, the School Trustees' Association and the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, *Health and Safety, Policy Guidelines for School Divisions*, 1985.

6. Recommendations from TWAC

In 1995, the Teacher Welfare Advisory Committee recommended to the Executive that “the Federation engage in a public awareness thrust with respect to Health and Safety issues in schools.” The Committee had expressed concerns that standards set for school are different from those set in offices, and are often lower. This was despite the fact that children and teachers live in schools for at least as much of the day as an office worker and may have more chemicals in the environment (e.g. from science labs and art classes). In addition, it was commonly known that some schools had experienced continuing problems which affected the health of students and staff alike, yet resolution of the problems often seemed slow in coming. The Committee felt that the state of finances of a particular school board, or even of the province, should never jeopardize the health of children, teachers or other staff.

Health and safety committees were recognized as an important ingredient in every school in ensuring that the safest possible environment was maintained. The Committee felt that it was imperative that everyone, staff and public alike, know and understand the role and legislated responsibilities of such committees.

In April, 1996 the Teacher Welfare Advisory Committee formulated a second recommendation to the Executive:

It is recommended that the Executive encourage the Department of Occupational Health and Safety to develop a one day in-service specific to the school setting.

The Committee felt that the “generic” training available from the Department of Labour was good but it would be very useful to have training which addressed conditions and issues specific to schools. Not only is the organization of the workplace somewhat different from an office or industrial workplace, but it may be more difficult for teachers to take additional time from the classroom to attend two days for level one and an additional two days for level two, let alone the maximum of five days stipulated in the Regulations.

7. Proposed Policy

7.1 Beliefs

- (i) Every person has the right to work in a safe and healthy workplace.
- (ii) Occupational health and safety is the shared responsibility of the employer and its employees.
- (iii) The health and safety of students, teachers and other school employees are of primary concern to the teaching profession.
- (iv) Attention to occupational health and safety prevents conditions resulting in ill health caused by working conditions and protects workers from factors adverse to their health.

7.2 Principles

- (i) Every school division should have a policy on occupational health and safety.
- (ii) Occupational health and safety should not be compromised by expediency or short term cost saving.
- (iii) Every school should have an Occupational Health and Safety Committee which meets at least four times per year.

8. Questions for Discussion

- (i) What health and safety concerns are there in schools in general which are not found in other places of employment? Are there any specific concerns in your school? How are they being handled?
- (ii) What impediments are there to having an active Occupational Health and Safety Committee in your school? How can these be addressed?
- (iii) Do you agree with the division of responsibilities as defined in Appendix A?
- (iv) Should students (at an appropriate age/grade level) be part of school Occupational Health and Safety Committees?
- (v) How can teachers support one another (same school/another school/another division) when there are serious environmental conditions which are not being addressed?

Appendix A - Responsibilities

Responsibilities of School Boards

- a) formulate safety policies in conjunction with appropriate educational professionals,
- b) adopt safety policy statements consistent with regulations and codes,
- c) facilitate the implementation of safety policies,
- d) request and/or direct health and safety investigations,
- e) administer and provide for adequate funding for the provision of a safe, healthy environment,
- f) ensure that the requirements of various agencies and commissions are carried out, e.g. occupational health and safety, fire commissioner, etc.
- g) provide appropriate materials and equipment to maintain adequate standards of health and safety,
- h) establish procedures to monitor health and safety policies and direct investigations as required.

Responsibilities of Directors of Education

- a) offer leadership in the formulation of school health and safety policies and facilitate their implementation,
- b) communicate school board policies and standards to staff, students, parents and the general public,
- c) establish a system to monitor the effectiveness of safety policies and practices in schools,
- d) initiate and facilitate corrective action to quickly remedy unsafe conditions or actions,
- e) ensure that teachers in potentially hazardous areas (e.g. physical education, industrial arts, science) are qualified in the activities undertaken and arrange for in-service training where required,
- f) facilitate in-service activities to encourage that one or more staff members have appropriate first aid and Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation training,
- g) cooperate with other government agencies in maintaining standards established by their various acts and regulations.

Responsibilities of School Administrators

- a) provide for educational programs and resources which assist in the development of good safety practices and attitudes,
- b) take leadership in establishing a school health and safety committee and represent the board on that committee,
- c) conduct and/or facilitate regular safety inspections,
- d) establish procedures for reporting and/or responding to school accidents and ensure that staff members are familiar with them,
- e) identify potentially dangerous situations or conditions and ensure that safe practices and procedures are in place to correct them,
- f) make teachers aware of personnel in each school who have first aid and/or Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation training,
- g) ensure adequate, qualified supervision of students at all times,
- h) ensure appropriate class sizes for the class and/or activity undertaken.

Responsibilities of Teachers

- a) exemplify safe behaviour in teaching practices and procedures,
- b) instruct students in general and specific safety precautions and ensure the use of personal protection equipment where it is required,
- c) implement documented safety education programs in accordance with school board policies and the regulations and standards of other regulatory bodies,
- d) monitor student behaviour and initiate corrective action as required,
- e) identify unsafe equipment or environmental conditions and report these in writing with recommendations for corrective action,
- f) take training in current first aid and/or Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation courses where feasible,
- g) ensure that adequate first aid kits are available in appropriate locations,
- h) report any serious accidents to the administration indicating the cause and treatment given, together with corrective actions taken,
- i) ensure that combustible, poisonous or otherwise dangerous materials are stored in approved containers with appropriate labels.

Responsibilities of Students

- a) display conduct in accordance with established safety practices and rules,
- b) identify unsafe practices or environmental conditions and report these to the school staff,
- c) inform school staff of possible health concerns relevant to their personal safety and protection,
- d) report to the teacher at once any personal injury or the contact of corrosive liquid with skin or clothing,
- e) wear appropriate clothing and protective safety equipment where required for a specific activity,
- f) avoid handling tools, equipment and materials without previous instruction and authorization.

