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September 2, 2021

COVID vaccines and the return to class: a message for CUPE education workers

So here we are, less than a week from the beginning of classes for all students, and still no regulation from the provincial government on vaccination and mandatory disclosure for school boards. Still no answers to our questions on testing or about the education programs for people who don't want to disclose their vaccination status.

In the absence of direction and leadership from the Ministry of Education, it's no surprise that we're seeing school boards issuing their own policies, some containing veiled (or not-so-veiled) threats about sending workers home without pay if they fail to comply.

No one wants to hear how many times the OSBCU has challenged the Ministry of Education on its plans for testing, paid time for testing, or privacy issues. (Believe us, it's been a lot.) But it may be useful for CUPE education workers to know OSBCU's take on some details around the issues.

School board policies on mandatory vaccination and disclosure

Employers have the right to make their own policies; in the municipal, health, long-term care, social services and airlines sectors, employers have created policies on mandatory vaccination, and they didn't need permission from government to do it.

In this case, boards are responding to a primary safety issue in schools and in the workplace; they have a duty to protect vulnerable and younger students who can't be vaccinated by making sure the adults around them are vaccinated.

The right to refuse vaccination and the right not to disclose

If members don't want to sign an attestation about their vaccination status, they and their local can request alternatives: to be sent home with pay, to be granted accommodations, to work from home, etc. Each case and circumstance will be different and will be dealt with individually. But ultimately, your employer can treat failure to comply as insubordination and discipline accordingly.

OSBCU and members' rights

OSBCU will always stand with CUPE members. We are as concerned as ever about our members' rights, but we must also take into consideration that, when it comes to COVID in schools, it is education workers who are at greatest risk and therefore we will support all measures that protect them. Reasonableness and respect will always be tests for what our members are asked to do, but ultimately, we have to stand up for all our members, their health, safety and well being.

Provincial or local issues

We will continue to advocate for our members with the Ministry of Education, but each CUPE school board local will decide whether or not to file individual grievances over the way the employer is implementing its own policy.

Issues for OSBCU

We are asking for information about testing: how reliable it is, who will do the testing, and whether it will be carried out on employers' time? We want confirmation that employers will pay for members' exemption notes from their doctors. We want to review the education program that members who refuse to be vaccinated or to disclose their status will be required to take. We want reassurances about testing privacy. We want to know the whereabouts of the public health nurses that were promised in schools.

And as always, we will continue to fight for measures on a range of other issues that will make our schools safe: smaller class sizes, better ventilation, a provincial cleaning standard, more physical distancing, masking, and cohorts that include workers.

Refer to OSBCU's FAQ

Last week OSBCU issued an FAQ on the government's vaccination program for the child care and education sectors and its disclosure program for everyone in schools. If you haven't seen it, ask your local president for a copy.