

Breathing Easy?

Dust and fumes

BY VALENCE YOUNG

There was an emergency evacuation at an Ontario school last October. Over a period of three days, staff had reported headaches and difficulty breathing. By the time the school was evacuated, some staff required medical help.

During those three days, a contractor was replacing the school's metal roof. A generator released exhaust fumes laden with carbon monoxide and diesel. As the metal grinder cut into the old roof, zinc oxide fumes and coal tar fumes were released. These fumes were sucked into the school through a faulty ventilation system. The staff and students were being poisoned.

In another location, ETFO members worked throughout the construction of a new addition at their school. They were exposed to silica dust as the exterior wall was demolished. They found it hard to teach above the noise of heavy equipment and the presence of workmen with power tools. Some staff started their Christmas holidays with new prescriptions for the respira-

tory problems they developed. The Ministry of Labour investigated both of these occurrences and issued orders to the school boards under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*.

We wouldn't dream of putting a classroom on a construction site. Yet some schools boards routinely schedule construction, renovation, and maintenance projects during the school day. Dust and fumes released during these projects are a leading cause of indoor air quality problems in our schools.

The dust and fumes released during construction may contain hazardous materials such as silica, asbestos, lead, petrochemicals, adhesives, and carbon monoxide. These airborne particles are easily absorbed into the body, through the skin, eyes, and mouth. Allergic reactions, respiratory illness, headaches, and stress symptoms are typical responses. People leave work feeling exhausted, sick, and anxious about their health.

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act* protects ETFO members with three essential rights.

1. **The right to know** the hazards in your job. Your school board or principal must tell you about anything in your job that can harm you. Your school board must make sure you are provided with the information you need so that you can work safely.
2. **The right to participate** in keeping your school healthy and safe. You can be part of the health and safety committee or be a health and safety representative. You also have the right to participate in training and information sessions to help you work safely.
3. **The right to refuse unsafe work.** You have an obligation to report an unsafe situation to your principal. If it is not corrected and you still feel endangered, you have the right to refuse to work. Before refusing unsafe work, you must ensure that your students are safe. Get advice and support from your ETFO local about this kind of situation.

may harm your health

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Exposure to dust and fumes during the school day increases health risks to those with asthma and heart disease. Pregnant women worry about the effect of exposure on the fetus. ETFO members who have never been diagnosed with asthma may find themselves using a puffer.

ETFO members genuinely care about the health and safety of the students in our schools. In every incident involving an ETFO member's health being compromised by exposure to dust and fumes, students have been exposed too.

Here are five steps you should take if you believe that dust and fumes are a hazard in your school.

1. Report your concerns

Report your concerns right away to your principal. As with any other health and safety concern, put it in writing. It is your principal's duty to investigate and deal with health and safety concerns. If your principal has been trained to recognize and respond to workplace hazards, then he or she will stop the dust and fume exposure at the source. However, your principal may be reluctant to deal directly with your concern because of pressure from the school board to keep the project on schedule.

2. Tap into the health and safety network

If you believe your concerns about dust and fumes are not being dealt with fairly, then do not hesitate to contact your ETFO steward and your ETFO health and safety representative for support. Contact your local president for advice. Your local president can also contact ETFO provincial office for expert health and safety support. A concern can be reported to Ministry of Labour.

School boards are required to have joint health and safety committees with both workers and management members. The JHSC can make recommendations for con-

struction protocols that protect indoor air quality. It can also recommend that non-emergency work take place on school holidays.

3. Don't wait

A hazardous exposure to dust and fumes could happen within minutes, so you must act quickly. Recently an occasional teacher evacuated her classroom as a plume of dust and debris poured through a floor vent. A contractor was using a high-pressure vacuum system to clean old duct work. The principal helped the teacher relocate to another classroom.

You shouldn't have to sacrifice personal health while a school is being improved. We tend to hope that things will get better or that the construction project will end soon. If you wait until the next day or the next several days to seek advice and support from ETFO's health and safety network, you are more likely to get sick and stay sick longer.

4. Tell your doctor it happened at work

If you see your doctor about an illness or injury that happened at work, make sure that he or she records that the source of your health condition is work-related. Speak to your ETFO local, your doctor and your school board about the process for completing Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) forms for illness, injury, and exposure because you may qualify for compensation.

5. Consider collective agreement language

School boards need to separate the work of teaching from the work of construction. Collective agreement language could ensure that non-emergency construction projects are scheduled for school holidays, and that the tender requirements include strict measures for dust and fume control.

Breathing easy during the school day helps us to work at our professional best and be at our personal best when we go home. Speaking up about workplace hazards helps to ensure that the school community is healthy and safe for everyone. Tap into ETFO's health and safety network to get the support you need for breathing easy at work.