



Ontario  
College of  
Teachers

Ordre des enseignantes  
et des enseignants  
de l'Ontario

# Professional Advisory

**on Student Physical Safety  
in Learning Environments**



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## About this Advisory

**What does safety mean in your learning environment? How do you understand your role in contributing to a culture of safety, preventing harm and reporting concerns?**

This *Professional Advisory on Student Physical Safety in Learning Environments* applies to all Ontario Certified Teachers (OCTs) who hold a Certificate of Qualification and Registration issued by the Ontario College of Teachers (the College), whether or not they work directly with students, including teachers, consultants, vice-principals, principals, supervisory officers, directors of education and those working in private or independent schools.

“**Learning environments**” refers to any space or setting, within or beyond the school facilities, where OCTs share responsibility for student safety and well-being. This includes school-based locations such as classrooms, hallways, gyms, science labs, technological education facilities, swimming pools and outdoor areas on school grounds. It also includes supervised contexts, such as virtual learning at home, school buses, excursions, off-site facilities and worksites, extracurricular programs, sporting events, Land-based learning<sup>1</sup> settings, outdoor education and other experiential learning<sup>2</sup> opportunities.

The term “**parent**” is used throughout this advisory to refer to a parent, guardian, and/or caregiver.

OCTs are encouraged to consider [professional advisories](#) collectively to support consistent, informed practice and strengthen their professional knowledge through ongoing learning. Together with the resources referenced here, and other related policies, procedures, professional development, and training aligned with this advisory's

purpose and offered by employers, the Ministry of Education, federations or professional associations, these advisories help OCTs build awareness and understanding of their professional, ethical and legal obligations to foster safe learning environments.

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### **Content warning**

This advisory includes references to child protection, harm prevention and professional misconduct, which some readers may find sensitive.

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# Introduction

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Safety is an ongoing priority in education, across school facilities, off-site settings and digital spaces. In learning environments, safety goes beyond the absence of harm — it includes trust, predictability and respect, ensuring students feel physically and emotionally secure.<sup>3</sup>

Safety is a broad concept that encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, digital, identity-affirming<sup>4</sup> and cultural factors. While this advisory focuses specifically on student physical safety, it recognizes the interconnected nature of these factors in learning environments.

This advisory emphasizes evidence-informed approaches to preventing and responding to safety risks and incidents, while acknowledging that students', families' and communities' past experiences shape how safety measures are understood and experienced.

## **Safety for educators**

The College is grateful to the OCTs who contributed to this professional advisory by providing us with insight and practical expertise, whether that be as participants in focus groups, critical readers, or direct feedback through other channels. Throughout this engagement, OCTs made it clear to us that educator and student safety are inextricably linked.

Our mandate is to regulate the teaching profession to protect students, so this professional advisory appropriately focuses on their safety.

## **Advice to OCTs**

Safety includes recognizing hazards, responding to risks and incidents, reporting promptly and accurately and reflecting on practice. Whether allocating resources, addressing potential hazards or adapting activities to be age-appropriate and accessible, OCTs' professional judgement and preventive practices help build safe, inclusive learning environments that acknowledge and respect the diverse needs and lived experiences of students.

Students may experience and perceive physical safety in different ways. Trauma, exceptionalities, medical conditions, visible and invisible disabilities, mobility needs and other determinants of health influence how learners engage with their environment.<sup>5</sup> Fostering safe and supportive learning spaces means recognizing and responding with compassion and flexibility to these diverse needs.<sup>6</sup>

Physical safety is also shaped by societal and systemic factors. Intersectional experiences of race, gender identity, disability, sexual orientation and other protected grounds under the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) shape how safety concerns are recognized, prevented and addressed.

Discrimination and hate can escalate into harm and violence, while personal bias or systemic barriers embedded in policies and practices may affect equitable responses. Upholding the dignity and worth of every student and actively challenging discrimination are responsibilities for all OCTs.<sup>7</sup> See the [Professional Advisory Addressing Hate and Discrimination](#).

The guidance below is organized using the *4Rs for Safety Framework*:

- **Recognize** safety concerns and professional responsibilities.
- **Respond** to safety risks and incidents.
- **Report** accurately and promptly.
- **Reflect** to strengthen future practice.

The 4Rs are interconnected elements of professional practice and may not always occur in a fixed order. Depending on the situation, OCTs may move between them or take action in more than one area at the same time, using their professional judgement.

## **Recognize**

Safety incidents can occur unexpectedly. Being prepared means identifying potential risks, understanding policies and responsibilities, anticipating eventualities, planning for student-specific needs and preparing safety measures to help mitigate risks before activities begin.

## **Know and apply policies, procedures, protocols and legislation**

- Refer to and apply employer policies. This may include codes of conduct, attendance procedures, violence response, excursion and field trip policies, water safety, duty to report, lockdown and fire drills, supervision requirements, safe school procedures, food safety, laboratory safety guidelines and health and safety procedures for

broad-based technology programs and cooperative education (co-op).

- Integrate relevant legislation and government *Policy and Program Memoranda* (PPMs) into practice. This may include supervising co-op placements, concussion prevention under the *Ontario Physical Activity Safety Standards in Education*, requirements related to prevalent medical conditions and expectations for preventing and responding to violent incidents and serious student incidents, through early and ongoing interventions, supports and required reporting.<sup>8</sup>
- Engage in ongoing professional learning to stay informed of updated policies, advisories and emerging safety issues. This includes:
  - Maintaining health and safety awareness of the knowledge, skills and training specific to your program or subject area.
  - Identifying and completing specialized training or certifications (for example wilderness first aid) that may be necessary for certain activities, such as multi-day

outdoor education trips or open water canoeing.

### **Anticipate and minimize risks**

- Assess activities for suitability. This includes considering the number of students, age, abilities, prior experiences, exceptionalities, language needs, developmental needs and the physical and environmental context (for example facilities, layout, equipment, terrain, weather).
- Arrange additional supervision as needed, and in accordance with employer policies (for example other staff, coaches, trained volunteers), especially during excursions, interschool and intramural activities or other off-site events.
- Apply research-informed strategies, such as flexible groupings, rotating through learning centres or stations, sequencing tasks and alternating hands-on and lower-risk activities, to maintain safety and active supervision throughout activities of varying risk.
- Ensure appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) is available and consistently used, as required (for example safety goggles, footwear, respirators, helmets, personal flotation devices).
- Take reasonable steps, within your role, to confirm that areas containing safety materials or equipment are clearly labeled, accessible and properly stocked (for example safety-related binders, [Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System](#) labels, fire extinguishers, eye wash stations, defibrillators, first aid kits).
- Store, handle and dispose of subject-specific materials and equipment safely, where appropriate within your role (for example art supplies, chemical substances, physical education equipment, technology tools, specimens, compressed gases).
- Rehearse emergency procedures, including first aid, evacuation and medical emergencies.
- Identify and assess workplace safety risks in co-op placements before a student begins a placement, even if a community placement has been assessed in the past.

## **Address student-specific safety needs**

- Review and follow all student-specific plans, which may include [Individual Education Plans \(IEPs\)](#), [Behaviour Support Plans](#), [Safety Plans](#), [Transition Plans](#) and [Plans of Care](#).
- Confirm parental consents are in place and share clear information about the activity (for example use of tools, materials, physical activity, including aquatic and outdoor education activities).
- Arrange additional support as needed and follow established safety plans for students who may leave a supervised area unnoticed or without authorization (for example school yard, auditorium, excursion site).
- Adapt activities to support the participation of all students, including those with special education needs, consistent with accommodations or modifications outlined in IEPs.
- Take reasonable steps, within your role, to help keep evacuation routes clear and accessible for all students, including those using wheelchairs or mobility supports.

## **Communicate safety information effectively**

- Communicate activity-specific safety information and procedures with relevant staff, occasional teachers, volunteers, students, parents and visitors.
- Take reasonable steps, within your role, to support and implement clear guidance for responding to individual needs (for example medical conditions, behaviours affecting safety), ensuring safety protocols are accessible and understandable to all involved.
- Share essential student-specific safety information, within your role, with supervising adults, consistent with confidentiality requirements and employer protocols.
- Ensure, as school administrator or system leader, that staff know who is trained in first aid and where safety equipment and medical supplies are located (for example EpiPens, inhalers, diabetes or epilepsy medications).

## Respond

When a safety concern or incident occurs, take immediate steps to protect those involved while maintaining active supervision. Address urgent hazards, follow up on non-urgent concerns, adjust activities and support students with professional care. You should also seek support as needed and follow up promptly on professional, ethical and legal responsibilities.

### Respond to emerging safety concerns

- Remain attentive and responsive to emerging safety concerns, including changes in behaviour, environment or equipment.
- Pause or modify activities that could become unsafe (for example faulty or insufficient PPE, improper use of equipment or materials, or situations where adequate supervision cannot be maintained).
- Prioritize immediate safety by following relevant plans (for example emergency protocols, student-specific safety plans) and seeking support as needed.
- Follow your employer's policies,

procedures and protocols if you become aware of students engaging in online or technology-related behaviours that could result in physical harm including cyberbullying, encouraging risky stunts or grooming.

- Address hazards where it is safe to do so, without placing yourself or others at risk, and seek support as appropriate (for example supervisors, system leaders).
- Secure the area, provide or access first aid, and activate emergency protocols as needed (for example using a spill kit, handling broken glass safely or using a fire extinguisher or blanket).
- Remain calm and model reassurance for students and others.
- Maintain clear, appropriate professional boundaries with students at all times when addressing safety concerns. See the College's [Professional Advisory on Professional Boundaries](#).

### Maintain active supervision

- Supervise all students at all times. When leaving the learning environment, even briefly (for example to take a washroom

break), ensure another educator is present to actively supervise.

- Monitor students' equipment use and guide safe practice according to operational procedures.
- In specialized program areas (for example science, technological education), ensure students participate safely, following industry-specific safety standards and competency requirements.

### **Support with professional care**

- Prioritize student safety and well-being, using corrective strategies and supportive learning opportunities that are developmentally and socio-emotionally appropriate to reinforce positive behaviour.<sup>9</sup>
- Address safety concerns and student conduct with dignity and respect for all involved, especially when there is disagreement or difference.<sup>10</sup>
- Conduct investigations and disciplinary conversations with sensitivity and a trauma-informed approach.<sup>11</sup>
  - Consider offering students the option of including a trusted

adult or support person during discussions or investigations.

- Apply progressive discipline approaches informed by an understanding of the student's individual circumstances, strengths, needs and the context of the behaviour.
  - Ensure, as school administrator or system leader, that mitigating and other factors<sup>12</sup> are considered, including the nature and severity of the incident.<sup>13</sup>
- Provide timely support, within your role, to all students impacted, consistent with school and employer processes.

### **Model and teach safe, inclusive participation**

- Build authentic, trusting relationships grounded in professional care by understanding students' strengths, lived experiences and safety needs, and collaborating with them and their communities to identify and remove barriers that impact safety.<sup>14</sup>
- Model, discuss and reinforce safe participation strategies regularly with students (for example demonstrate

proper use of equipment and PPE, practise safe movement in shared spaces) and co-construct safety norms with them.

- Provide developmentally appropriate opportunities to practise responsible decision-making and risk awareness.
- Model and teach practical strategies for respectful, culturally responsive<sup>15</sup> communication, non-violent conflict resolution and healthy relationships. Integrate bullying prevention across the curriculum and refer to the College's [\*Professional Advisory Addressing Hate and Discrimination\*](#) and the [\*Professional Advisory on Responding to Bullying of Students\*](#) for guidance.
- Provide opportunities for students to learn and apply social-emotional skills such as managing emotions, coping with challenges, communicating effectively and building positive relationships.<sup>16</sup> [\*School Mental Health Ontario\*](#) has resources to support the development of social-emotional learning in Ontario schools.

## **Report**

Accurate and timely reporting strengthens safety, supports accountability and reduces the risk of future harm. See the College's [\*Professional Advisory on Professional Boundaries\*](#).

### **Report safety concerns promptly and accurately**

- Know emergency contacts and procedures that support timely reporting and response (for example where to go for help during off-site activities).
- Follow police and employer protocols for emergencies, including violence-related threats or incidents.
- Report any safety concerns or deficiencies in equipment or facilities promptly to your immediate supervisor or system leader, as appropriate to your role.
- Report identified safety concerns promptly, following employer policies and procedures, and complete any mandatory reports.
- Fulfill legal duties to report concerns or suspicions of abuse or neglect to relevant authorities, including

observations made during virtual learning. See the College's [\*Professional Advisory on the Duty to Report\*](#).

- Access guidance and support from federations or professional associations, as appropriate, to help understand and navigate applicable reporting requirements and protocols related to hazards, incidents, injuries and serious student incidents.
- Communicate with parents promptly in accordance with Ministry of Education [\*Policy/Program Memorandum 145\*](#), and do not disclose confidential information about other students (for example regarding personal information or behavioural history).
- Ensure, as school leader or system leader, that parents of students harmed by or involved in serious student incidents are informed of the incident and steps taken to support safety and well-being.<sup>17</sup>

### **Document objectively and factually**

- Clearly record who, what, when, where, actions taken, witnesses, preceding events and other relevant details, while avoiding personal opinions.

- Preserve and secure relevant evidence in accordance with employer policies (for example equipment, photos, digital logs).
- Consider keeping informal notes even if formal reporting is not required.
- Handle student information with care to protect privacy and confidentiality, sharing information only with those who need it to carry out their professional responsibilities.

### **Reflect**

Reflection strengthens professional practice and safety planning. Use reflection to identify what worked, what could improve and how decisions and collaboration could inform future planning.

### **Reflect to strengthen professional practice**

- Reflect on safety risks and incidents to inform future planning, prevention and professional judgement, and to update safety-related plans, enhance procedures and strengthen future safety practices.
- Examine critically how identity, power, privilege and personal biases may

influence decisions and practices for preventing and addressing safety issues.<sup>18</sup>

### **Contribute to a collaborative safety culture**

- Contribute to a collaborative, whole-school approach to safety awareness, prevention and response. This could include Elders, teachers, administrators, system leaders, families, Safe and Accepting Schools Team members, health and safety committees, community partners and relevant school board departments (for example health and safety, risk management).
- Engage community partners and external supports to strengthen safety practices, including experiential learning providers and industry partners (for example employers and sector organizations involved in co-op and technological education).
- Reflect on and share effective strategies at school and system levels to improve safety measures (for example identifying hazards, assessing risks, taking action).

### **Responsibilities of an OCT**

Holding the OCT professional designation means belonging to a community of regulated, certified professionals, grounded in reflection, ongoing learning and accountability. As trusted role models and leaders, OCTs influence students, colleagues, parents and the broader community through professionalism, empathy and respect.

The College's [professional standards](#) provide the foundation for professional conduct and accountability. They reflect the principles of care, respect, trust, integrity and fair-mindedness that guide OCTs in their interactions with students and the broader education community. OCTs are expected to stay current in their professional knowledge, engage in ongoing learning and integrate these standards across diverse educational contexts.

OCTs must act in a position of professional care and are responsible for student safety within their role and capacity. Collaboration with colleagues, parents

and community partners strengthens safe environments.

Guided by relevant legislation, including the *Education Act* and its regulations, as well as employer policies, OCTs foster and maintain safe, healthy, supportive and inclusive learning environments that protect students' physical, emotional and social well-being.<sup>19</sup> All OCTs share responsibility for student safety, whether working directly with students or in supervisory and system leadership roles. OCTs fulfill these responsibilities in ways that include:

- Classroom educators foster inclusive, accessible learning environments through reflective practices, active supervision and collaboration with colleagues, families and community partners.
- Principals and vice-principals support school-wide safety by implementing policies and procedures, guiding Safe and Accepting Schools Teams,<sup>20</sup> and helping to ensure staff have access to and understand, relevant legislation, regulations and policies related to safety.

- Supervisory officers and directors of education strengthen system-wide safety culture by allocating resources, establishing structures and processes that support staff access to and understanding of relevant legislation and policies, supporting implementation, reviewing progress and prioritizing professional learning.
- Consultants and instructional coaches model, mentor and support educators in integrating safe and inclusive practices into daily instruction and school culture.

## **Professional and legislative foundations**

The guidance in this advisory is grounded in Ontario's legislative and policy frameworks that shape expectations for student safety and well-being in learning environments. Together with the College's professional standards, these frameworks support OCTs in understanding and upholding their professional, ethical and legal responsibilities.

### **Legislative and policy context**

Ontario's legislation outlines OCTs'

responsibilities for supporting student safety and well-being. Relevant laws include the *Education Act, Ontario College of Teachers Act (OCTA), Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, Child, Youth and Family Services Act, Sabrina's Law, Ryan's Law* and *Rowan's Law*.

Occupational health and safety legislation, including the [Occupational Health and Safety Act](#) (OHSA), applies in school settings and sets out expectations for educators and other workers. While OHSA is intended to protect workers, strong workplace safety practices also contribute to safer learning environments for students. Although students' learning environments are also educators' workplaces, the rights and responsibilities that apply to each are different.

Occupational health and safety matters are addressed through applicable legislation, employer policies and established workplace processes.

In addition to legislation, the Ministry of Education's PPMs provide guidance on implementing safe and inclusive practices.<sup>21</sup> These policies address areas such as:

- implementing equitable and inclusive education
- promoting positive student behaviour through progressive discipline
- supporting students with prevalent medical conditions (for example anaphylaxis, asthma, diabetes, epilepsy)
- supporting learners with special education needs
- reporting violent incidents.

Relevant legislation and regulations can also be found on the College's website at [oct.ca](http://oct.ca) and on the Ontario government's website at [ontario.ca/page/ministry-education](http://ontario.ca/page/ministry-education) and [ontario.ca/laws](http://ontario.ca/laws). As legislation, regulations and policies change over time, it is important for OCTs to remain informed about updates and employer-specific protocols to support consistent and safe practice.

## **Professional conduct and disciplinary implications**

OCTs are encouraged to review [Ontario Regulation 437/97: Professional Misconduct](#),<sup>22</sup> made under the OCTA, which outlines acts and omissions that can constitute professional misconduct, including:

- inadequate supervision
- failure to comply with the duty to report under child protection laws
- any form of student abuse (verbal, physical, psychological, emotional or sexual).

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## Conclusion

All OCTs hold individual and collective responsibility for student safety and well-being. This responsibility is reflected in everyday professional practice, such as:

- maintaining a thoughtful and reflective approach to safety
- attending to the diverse needs and lived experiences of students
- anticipating, identifying and addressing hazards
- responding to safety concerns with care and professional judgement
- reporting accurately and promptly
- working collaboratively to strengthen safety culture and practice
- drawing on experience to inform professional practice.

Together, these practices help OCTs foster learning environments that are safe, equitable, supportive and respectful, where all students can participate fully.

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## Endnotes

1. [ophea.net/beyond-walls-activities-outdoors/getting-started/outdoor-physical-activity-environment](https://ophea.net/beyond-walls-activities-outdoors/getting-started/outdoor-physical-activity-environment)
2. [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/experiential-learning](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/experiential-learning)
3. Bath, H. (2008). The three pillars of trauma-informed care. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 17(3), 17–21.  
National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Schools Committee. (2017). *Creating, supporting, and sustaining trauma-informed schools: A system framework*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach* (HHS Publication No. SMA 14-4884). Rockville, MD: Author.
4. [smho-smso.ca/about-us/identity-affirming](https://smho-smso.ca/about-us/identity-affirming)
5. [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/student-well-being-and-mental-health](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/student-well-being-and-mental-health)
6. [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/instructional-approaches](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/instructional-approaches)
7. [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/human-rights-equity-and-inclusive-education](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/human-rights-equity-and-inclusive-education)

8. [ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-145](https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-145)
9. [ibid.](#)
10. [ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-128](https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-128)
11. [alberta.ca/trauma-informed-practice](https://www.alberta.ca/trauma-informed-practice)
12. [ontario.ca/laws/regulation/070472](https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/070472)
13. [ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-145](https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-145)
14. [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/human-rights-equity-and-inclusive-education](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/human-rights-equity-and-inclusive-education)
15. [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/assessment-evaluation/crrp-ae](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/assessment-evaluation/crrp-ae)
16. [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/cross-curricular-and-integrated-learning/social-emotional-learning-skills](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/cross-curricular-and-integrated-learning/social-emotional-learning-skills)
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19. [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/student-well-being-and-mental-health](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/student-well-being-and-mental-health)
20. [ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-144#section-6](https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-144#section-6)
21. [ontario.ca/page/creating-safe-and-accepting-schools-resources-schools-and-school-boards#section-1](https://www.ontario.ca/page/creating-safe-and-accepting-schools-resources-schools-and-school-boards#section-1)
22. [ontario.ca/laws/regulation/970437](https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/970437)





# The College's role and the advice provided

The Ontario College of Teachers serves the public interest by regulating the teaching profession to protect students. Educators working in Ontario's publicly funded elementary and secondary schools are members of the College, whose authority and responsibilities are set out in the *Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996*.

This professional advisory is produced as part of the College's role in supporting OCTs to uphold their professional, ethical and legal responsibilities related to student safety. It offers practical guidance to identify risks, take preventive measures and respond effectively to safety concerns across diverse learning environments.



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Cette publication est également disponible en français sous le titre *Recommandation professionnelle sur la sécurité physique des élèves dans les milieux d'apprentissage*.

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