



OVERNIGHT SCHOOL TRIPS - ADVICE TO MEMBERS

Every year, overnight school trips are organized at schools across Ontario. These school trips, which can be very beneficial for students, can also pose significant professional risks for the teachers who volunteer to accompany and supervise the trip. The purpose of this volume of PRS Matters is to provide general advice and suggestions for dealing with some of the issues which may arise during these trips.

Who's the Teacher?

Teachers remain teachers throughout the entire trip and should behave accordingly. Overnight school trips often foster a less formal teaching environment than that which occurs in a classroom. However, that should not result in a less formal teacher-student relationship.

Teachers are advised to treat these overnight trips as work and should behave accordingly. It is the teacher who is ultimately responsible for the health, safety, and well-being of the students while on the trip, notwithstanding the possible involvement of parent-helpers, or staff at the locations which are being visited.

Your conduct with students should take place within the same boundaries that you observe in the classroom. This includes fun and social activities. Fundamentally, if you would not say or do it in the classroom, don't do it on a school trip.

Before Departing

Meeting with the Administration:

There are a number of steps which can be taken prior to leaving on an overnight school trip which may reduce the risk of something going wrong for you. Teachers should ensure that they have met with the school administration to go over every aspect of the trip including the following: ensuring the consents and waivers have been signed and returned to the school; discussing plans for traveling to and from the destination; reviewing the accommodations planned for the students and teachers; reviewing the various day and night time activities which have been planned; understanding expectations for "free" time; ensuring that there are a sufficient number of adults accompanying the students so that the trip can be carried out safely while also ensuring that adults can take needed breaks; reviewing whether any of the students have health, religious, or other needs that require special accommodation; and ensuring that there is a plan in place to address any health or safety concerns, or any unforeseen circumstances which may arise. Be sure to also develop a plan to deal with students who need to return mid trip due to behavioural issues or medical emergencies. Teachers should know before departure how to reach a school administrator at any time during the trip, during and outside school hours.

Planning for Contingencies:

As noted above, it is important to plan for unforeseen contingencies. Administrators should take the lead in planning for these and approve such plans. In the event of bad weather, the possibility of having to spend an extra night at a destination or of making alternate travel plans should be anticipated and contingency plans should be in place. These contingencies should be discussed with the school administration as well as the parents of the students prior to departing.

Reviewing these and other issues with the administration prior to departing, and ensuring that a plan is in place that addresses these concerns will go a considerable way in minimizing the risks faced by teachers who volunteer to accompany students on overnight trips.

On the Trip

Supervision:

In the classroom setting, teachers are expected to maintain constant supervision over students.



School boards discipline teachers for leaving their classrooms unsupervised, even if only for a short period of time. Supervision on overnight school trips provides its own unique set of challenges. As noted above, teachers should ensure that there are a sufficient number of adults on the trip to properly assist and a sufficient number of teaching staff to adequately supervise the students while also allowing for each adult to take breaks and personal time where they are not expected to supervise students.

When deciding on the various activities that the students will participate in during the trip, student supervision and adequate staffing have to be part of the discussion. Certain activities, such as taking students out on cross-country ski trails, or on a hike, may present particular supervisory challenges which should be considered and accounted for prior to leaving for the trip. If in doubt, make sure the situation has been fully explained to the school administrators and obtain their direction.

Teachers' supervisory duties extend throughout the entire trip. They do not stop at night and they cannot be delegated to parent-helpers or staff at the sites being visited.

Accommodations:

One of the most important issues to be aware of when preparing for, and accompanying a class on a school trip is the type of accommodations that will be available for students and teachers. Teachers need to be aware of the nature of the accommodations including whether students will be provided with individual rooms or cabins or whether they will be accommodated in a dormitory style room, as each type of accommodation will present its own supervisory challenges.

Teachers should be aware that their responsibility for the students on the trip does not end at night. It is not sufficient for teachers to have a plan for supervising the students during the day. There must also be a plan in place for supervising the students at night.

The type of accommodations offered can result in professional risks for teachers. Teachers should insist that they be provided with private accommodation on all overnight school trips. We would advise members not to agree to go on any trip where private accommodation is not being offered. Staying in a room with students may expose teachers to risks of allegations of misconduct even if other adults are present, and should therefore be avoided.

Privacy and Professional Conduct

A key reason why the accommodation on overnight school trips is so fraught with risk is that it can raise a number of privacy concerns, both for the teacher and the student. The most obvious concerns with respect to privacy issues would involve the potential use of a shared bathroom, including showers. Teachers should confirm, in advance of any overnight trip, that they will be provided with private facilities and that they will not be expected to share a washing or changing area with students. In addition, there are other, less obvious, privacy concerns which can arise during overnight school trips as a result of the type of accommodation available. These concerns include providing a private area for students to get dressed in or where medical or religious needs can be accommodated. Teachers should ensure that students who require privacy to follow religious or medical protocols will be accommodated.

While you need to ensure you have private space, you need to remember that you are expected to behave professionally throughout the trip and to model appropriate behaviour. We recommend against the consumption of alcohol entirely. We also recommend caution around departing from the group even during "private" time - this can be a significant professional pitfall. If you expect to be away from the group at any time, you should notify your school administrators before departure to ensure that it is part of the planning.

Overnight school trips, if done appropriately, provide a valuable opportunity to offer a unique learning environment for students. They can also be rewarding for teachers. However, if they are undertaken without the proper planning and without adequate safeguards in place, they can pose significant professional risks to teachers.

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