

Voluntary Extra Curricular Activities: How Much Is Enough?

One of the first activities administrators undertake in a new school year is the posting of a list of clubs, committees, sports activities, etc. that they would like to see occur during the upcoming school year. Elementary teachers often feel obligated to sign up for these activities. It is important to remember that the majority of these activities are voluntary and that individual teachers cannot be forced to undertake them.

The *Education Act* sets out in detail what the duties of a teacher are. Nowhere does it include coaching basketball or fundraising amongst this list. Because the *Act* sets out the core legal requirements of the role of a teacher, these activities should be the focus of our job. Voluntary extra-curricular activities should never become the sole focus of our job.

It is wise to be mindful of the fact that we have a defined job and that the demands of this job are increasing. Teachers should also be mindful that they are workers who have lives of their own. At times, electing to undertake voluntary activities can result in less of a focus being paid on a teacher's core classroom responsibilities or in fact on their personal lives. This can be the source of considerable stress.

ETFO has made the recognition that such activities are voluntary and an important bargaining priority. Many collective agreements contain recognition that these activities are voluntary. For some, where there is no collective agreement language, there is an informal recognition that these activities are voluntary and that teachers cannot be required to undertake them. Teachers who do feel pressured to participate in voluntary extra-curricular activities should contact their local ETFO office immediately!

There was a time when there were few limits on a teacher's work day/week. As a union, ETFO has worked to ensure that there are limits enshrined in collective agreements on the length of the instructional day, instructional week, and the school year. The Federation recognized that without these limits employers were likely to extend the job well beyond what is reasonable. ETFO recognizes that voluntary extra-curricular activities are beneficial for students, but we also know that we are dealing with an increasing number of members who are burned out and no longer able to cope with the demands of the job.

A study of the ETFO membership conducted by ComQuest Research indicated that, on average, elementary teachers spend 2.7 hours per week participating in extra-curricular activities. This means that elementary teachers, in the collective, are working 135,000 hours per week on top of their teaching responsibilities, or 19,000 additional working days per week. This unpaid work greatly extends the regular work week.

In a presentation to the Ontario Medical Association Annual Meeting on April 30, 2004, Bill Wilkerson, a respected researcher in the field of mental health, examined the impact of stress on the teaching profession. Much of his analysis was based upon data provided by OTIP, the largest LTD insurer for Ontario's teachers. He noted that:

“The school teachers in Ontario face a public health crisis. Depression is the principal source of disability leave and the principal reason for prescription drug use among school teachers in Ontario The LTD claims processed by OTIP have doubled since 1993.”

(Wilkerson, 2004)

He identified the source of this mental and nervous illness, as being the fact that a teacher's work week seems to be relentless.

Clearly, it is time for teachers to make careful decisions about voluntary extra-curricular activities. When presented with the September sign-up for activities, teachers should carefully weigh the following considerations in order to make healthy choices about where their professional priorities ought to lie:

- Voluntary extra-curricular activities are exactly that, voluntary. Teachers should make decisions about participation based upon their individual professional and personal situations. If teachers feel pressured, they should contact their local president immediately.
- Teachers should be careful when assuming voluntary extra-curricular activities because doing so can set a precedent. What is an extra activity planned for one year can become an expectation for the next year and is further built upon over time.
- Teachers should not be critical of other colleagues who choose to focus on their classroom and personal obligations and decide not to participate in voluntary extra-curricular activities.
- Teachers who decide to participate in voluntary extra-curricular activities should not receive special considerations for doing so, especially if these special considerations result in an increased workload for others.
- Teachers who elect to not participate in voluntary extra-curricular activities should not be penalized for making that decision. For example, they should not be negatively affected in their performance appraisal for deciding not to coach basketball or run the skipping club.

For further information, contact your local ETFO president or Professional Relations staff in PRS at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836

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