MEMORANDUM TO: Directors of Education

FROM: Kevin Costante
Deputy Minister

DATE: January 9, 2012

SUBJECT: Student and Staff Safety

In September, I informed you that the Ministry of Labour’s occupational health and safety inspectors would be conducting targeted inspections within elementary and secondary schools. These inspections are continuing and are focused on the Internal Responsibility System, which outlines how workplace parties’ understand their roles and responsibilities under the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), as well as specific hazards found in school science laboratory and technological education classrooms.

As you know, the OHSA complements the Education Act by requiring boards to provide a safe and productive learning and work environment for both students and employees.

There are a number of resources available to support occupational health and safety in schools. We have compiled some of those resources in one place on our website to make it easier for you to access them. The information includes resources from the Ministry of Labour and Ontario’s occupational health and safety system partners, as well as curriculum policy information.

I would also encourage you to seek out the assistance of the Public Services Health and Safety Association. The Ministry of Labour will work with the association and school boards to provide webinars on technological education classrooms and science laboratory hazards, as well as best practices. Boards can also meet with Ministry of Labour staff to discuss health and safety matters.

Meanwhile, I would encourage you to carefully examine the steps you have taken to ensure the health and safety of workers and students in these learning environments.
Several specific areas require your attention. Technological education or science laboratory equipment needs to be inspected before being installed in a school, and maintained to be kept in compliance with all applicable standards. This is key to ensuring student and school staff safety.

Furthermore, all teachers who work with Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) controlled products must be regularly trained. School boards must ensure all WHMIS products are labelled and that Material Safety Data Sheets are available. When properly trained, teachers can ensure the safety of their students and themselves.

Other areas to review include housekeeping (for example, keeping work areas clean and free of tripping hazards), the availability of eye wash stations, familiarity through training of safe chemical handling and storage, and the creation and regular functioning of a Joint Health and Safety Committee in monitoring health and safety issues in schools.

I also encourage principals, teachers and subject leads in schools and boards to refer to the Health and Safety section in the revised curriculum policy documents for guidance on safety considerations particular to program planning in each subject.

The Ministry of Labour’s occupational health and safety inspectors will continue their inspections of elementary and secondary schools with technological education classrooms and science labs. The Ministry of Labour’s goal is to inspect every school with a technological education or science laboratory classroom by the end of this school year.

If parents seek to learn more about the inspections, I ask that you be prepared to answer their questions. A good practice would be to centrally collect the information regarding the inspections and the steps your board has taken in order to ensure health and safety of students and teachers.

I also encourage you to share this information with your principals and Joint Health and Safety Committees to ensure that they take appropriate steps to make our schools as safe as possible.

An important part of supporting student achievement and inspiring confidence in publicly funded education is ensuring that our schools and classrooms are safe, healthy and well-maintained. I know you are committed to delivering the best for your staff and students.

Thank you for your attention to this very important matter, and for your ongoing co-operation with the Ministry of Labour.

Kevin Costante