Introduction

The Education Act states that the Minister of Education may “establish policies and guidelines respecting criteria and topics for the professional activity days that are required by regulation and require boards to comply with the policies and guidelines”.1

Regulation 304, “School Year Calendar, Professional Activity Days”,2 made under the Education Act, sets out the conditions governing the establishment of school year calendars. The regulation states that school boards3 must designate three professional activity (PA) days and may designate up to four additional PA days per school year.4 Half a school day may be designated for instructional programming and the other half for professional learning activities, but such a day constitutes a half-day in determining the number of instructional days in the school year.5

The requirements for the professional activities for the three mandatory PA days – already implemented before the start of the 2020–21 school year – are set out in this memorandum. The Ministry of Education reviews these requirements regularly to ensure that they reflect the provincial education priorities established by the Minister. If the requirements change as a result of such a review, this memorandum will be updated.

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1. Education Act, subsection 8(1), paragraph 28.
3. In this memorandum, school board(s) and board(s) refer to district school boards, school authorities, and the Centre Jules-Léger Consortium.
4. Regulation 304, subsection 2(3.1), paragraphs 1 and 2.
5. Regulation 304, subsection 1(2).
Context

The ministry recognizes the importance of professional learning that enhances educators’ knowledge and skills so that they can provide effective support to all students. As per the memo on PA days sent to Directors of Education and to School Authorities on August 12, 2020, the ministry recognizes that the three mandatory PA days for the 2020–21 school year have already been implemented and that they specifically addressed topics for restarting the school year, ensuring the safety of staff, students, and the broader community, and delivering high-quality education for all learners.

The scheduling of mandatory PA days prior to the start of the 2020–21 school year was done to provide support for school re-entry and to set the stage for professional learning that will continue throughout the school year in response to local context and needs.

While the PA days have already been implemented, this memorandum has been revised for the 2020–21 school year to confirm the topics of the three mandatory PA days, and to provide additional considerations and resources pertaining to education priorities and the remaining discretionary PA days in the 2020–21 school year. Mandatory PA day topics will be reviewed in conjunction with the current health context to determine if they will continue for the following year.

All school and school board staff have an important role to play in supporting the success, safety, and mental health and well-being of all students in Ontario’s publicly funded education system. Their participation is also crucial in working toward equitable learning outcomes for all students. As such, building capacity at all levels of the education system and supporting a culture of professional learning for all is critical to the success of all students. This must be done with health and safety as the fundamental principle.

6. In this memorandum, unless otherwise stated, student(s) includes children in Kindergarten and students in Grades 1 to 12.
Requirements for School Boards

School boards must prepare their school year calendars in accordance with the requirements set out in Regulation 304. Boards are also required to submit their proposed school year calendars to the Minister of Education according to the dates specified in the regulation.\(^7\)

Professional activities on the three mandatory PA days must meet the requirements set out in the section that follows. If boards designate additional PA days (up to four may be designated per school year), the professional activities on all such PA days must be consistent with the definition of “professional activity” in the regulation.\(^8\)

When submitting their school year calendars, boards are required to include a general outline of the topics for each of the PA days identified in the calendar. Each board’s general outline will be reviewed by the ministry to ensure that it is aligned with the requirements of this memorandum.

For each mandatory PA day, the regulation also requires that boards prepare an agenda that specifies the date, location, and timing of the activities; the school(s) participating; and the program and scheduled professional activities. At least ten school days before a scheduled PA day, the board must make the agenda available by:

- posting it on the board website and the website of each participating school;
- posting it in the main office of the board and of each participating school;
- distributing it to the school council chair of each participating school;
- using any other means the board considers appropriate to make the agenda accessible to all participants.

Each school year, boards are required to complete an evaluation of the activities conducted on all PA days held during that year. They are also required to retain these evaluations.

\(^7\) Regulation 304 requires that boards submit their proposed regular school year calendars for the next school year to the Minister of Education by May 1 of each year. In certain circumstances, school boards may submit a modified school year calendar. As stated in Regulation 304, a board’s proposed modified school year calendar must be submitted to the Minister by March 1 of each year. With the Minister’s approval, it may be implemented. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a regulatory amendment was enacted in 2020 that allows for revised timelines to be implemented for the submission of 2020-21 school year calendars.

\(^8\) As stated in section 1(1) of Regulation 304, “‘professional activity’ includes evaluation of the progress of pupils, consultation with parents, the counselling of pupils, curriculum and program evaluation and development, professional development of teachers and attendance at educational conferences, but does not include preparation by teachers for classes or instruction.”
Requirements for the Three Mandatory Professional Activity Days

Professional activities for the three mandatory PA days must focus on teachers’ professional learning and align with provincial education priorities. These priorities are the criteria that determine the focus and scope of the professional activities for the three mandatory PA days.

The ministry recognizes that school boards have completed the three mandatory PA days for the 2020–21 school year, and that they were focused on school re-entry and devoted to the following topics:

- health and safety protocols in response to COVID-19 (full day): all school-based staff, including supply/occasional teachers and occasional staff, were required to participate in the one-day health and safety training prior to the opening of schools;
- student mental health, well-being, and anti-bullying;
- remote and online learning strategies and tools;
- an introduction to anti-racism and anti-discrimination training that will continue throughout the 2020–21 school year;
- an introduction to the new elementary math curriculum and fundamental math concepts/skills.

In addition, all professional learning activities focused on supporting students with special education needs. For example, when discussing health and safety protocols, educators reflected on how students’ Individual Education Plans (IEPs), including their transition plans, might need to be updated. To support the successful transition to school for students with special education needs, educators worked with parents and local health units to make the necessary updates to students’ plans.

When planning professional activities for PA days, school boards also considered:

- advice from local health units within the context of the current provincial health guidelines;
- ways to confront racism and intersecting forms of discrimination that negatively affect student learning, achievement, and well-being, with the goal of eliminating disparities in outcomes for all students, including Black, Indigenous, and other racialized students. This included developing practices that promote and uphold human rights and that help create welcoming and inclusive school environments;

9. In this memorandum, parent(s) refers to parent(s) and guardian(s).
equity and inclusive education policies, with areas of focus supported by PPM No. 119, “Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools”, April 22, 2013;

ways to develop knowledge of the impact of the Indian Act on Indigenous peoples in Canada, the residential school system, treaties and systemic racism, as well as understanding of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit perspectives, cultures, histories, contributions, and the contemporary realities of Indigenous students;

tools and strategies to help deliver safe and meaningful remote learning, while providing differentiated instruction and support to all students and taking into account teacher responsibilities for remote and synchronous instruction, as outlined in PPM No. 164 “Requirements for Remote Learning”, August 13, 2020;

strategies to support the mental health and well-being of all students, with a strong focus on building students’ social-emotional learning skills during school re-entry and throughout the school year;

approaches that help educators foster a welcoming, inclusive, and safe return to school that supports equity, helps prevent bullying and cyber-bullying, and promotes positive student behaviour;

ways to provide equitable learning opportunities to support students who have special education needs and who experience intersecting systemic barriers through a teaching and learning approach that recognizes individual strengths and needs.

Resources for School Boards

With the help of experts in identified topics, the ministry has developed customizable materials to support school boards in delivering professional learning to teachers. School boards are encouraged to adapt these materials for specific audiences and purposes, depending on the local context. These materials, as well as resources such as School Mental Health Ontario’s Mentally Healthy Return to School Toolkit, are available in the ministry’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).
Additional Requirements and Considerations

In the most recent round of central collective bargaining, most teacher federations and education worker unions negotiated that one half of a discretionary PA day focus on violence prevention training and that this training be delivered prior to December 31 of each year of the agreement.\(^{10}\)

While the three mandatory PA days are focused on professional learning for teachers, school boards may include other educators on these three PA days. For example, educational assistants and early childhood educators in Kindergarten classrooms may also benefit from participating in these or other professional learning opportunities, depending on the local context.

In response to local needs, school boards may also wish to provide ongoing professional learning connected to the topics of the three mandatory PA days, using established board or school professional learning opportunities.

The ministry will continue to work with school boards and education partners, including School Mental Health Ontario, to provide ongoing learning opportunities and resources throughout the school year in order to respond to needs that may arise during the school year.

\(^{10}\) The central terms for the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA) do not include the half-day of a discretionary PA day on violence prevention training, and the central terms for l’Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO) do not require that the training be completed prior to December 31 of each school year.