
NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
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Aug. 24, 2021

Ministry of Education

Health, safety remain focus for new school year

VICTORIA – B.C. students will return to school next month and can look forward to full-time, in-person learning and resuming sports, music and other extracurricular activities, while mask requirements and other health and safety measures remain in place to keep schools safe.

“We know how excited students and families are about being back in school with extracurricular and sports programs and how important it is for children to be connected to their teachers and friends on a full-time basis,” said Jennifer Whiteside, Minister of Education. “We also know we can do this safely, even as the pandemic continues to present challenges. B.C. was one of the few jurisdictions in Canada to keep schools open and safe last year thanks to the monumental efforts of everyone in the education system. The precautions we are announcing today allow students to continue learning in school with safeguards in place, so they have every opportunity to achieve their best.”

Research by the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) last year noted a significant impact on students from remote learning, including interrupted learning, increased child stress, decreased connection, increased loneliness and mental and emotional health effects. Studies by the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and Fraser Health Authority showed that after a resumption of in-class learning, schools were not significant sources of COVID-19 transmission.

In addition to the continuation of indoor mask requirements for all K-12 staff, visitors and students in grades 4 to 12, changes to the health and safety measures also include the ability for health authorities to introduce additional regional measures specific to individual schools or school districts in instances where community transmission rates are higher.

There will be greater opportunities for school sports and extracurricular activities, continued increased ventilation and improvements in schools, and daily cleaning and disinfecting protocols, along with a continued focus on hand hygiene. Students will continue to be required to complete daily health checks and stay home when feeling sick. Rapid response teams will continue to operate throughout B.C., working with health authorities and school districts to provide support and review school communicable disease plans to keep schools safe.

“We know last school year was challenging in many different ways for B.C. students, but they persevered and finished the school year strong,” said Dr. Bonnie Henry, provincial health officer. “While we are encouraged to see rising vaccination rates in most parts of the province, we need every eligible British Columbian, including children and youth aged 12 to 19, to receive vaccinations as they begin the new school year.”

School districts will continue to ensure all mechanical heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems are designed, operated and maintained to their standards and specifications so

they continue to work properly. All school HVAC systems will continue to be regularly inspected and, moving forward, provincial funding will continue to be made available to upgrade or replace HVAC systems through routine capital programs.

A total of \$87.5 million has been used to improve school ventilation in B.C. schools, including \$77.5 million through provincial routine capital funding specifically for HVAC system upgrades or replacements in 2020-21 and 2021-22. The projects supported through this funding include full boiler and air-handling system replacements, larger ductwork, updating occupancy sensors and direct digital control units for building automation controlling air-flow rates and portable HEPA filtration units in classrooms. Plus, in the 2020-21 school year, school districts used \$10 million in federal pandemic-specific funding to upgrade more than 45,000 ventilation filters in B.C. schools.

The updated provincial K-12 communicable disease guidelines were developed in collaboration with the BCCDC, Office of the Provincial Health Officer and K-12 Education Steering Committee, which includes rightsholders and education partners.

The public health guidance for child care settings remain in effect.

The best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is for all British Columbians who are eligible to get vaccinated. Health authorities will target students, teachers and school staff in vaccination campaigns over the coming weeks.

“As part of your back-to-school preparations, we encourage youth to walk in now to get vaccinated at one of B.C.’s vaccination clinics, or go to a pop-up or mobile or community vaccine event around the province,” said Dr. Penny Ballem, executive lead of B.C.’s immunization effort. “As students, parents and families prepare and plan for back to school, they can take advantage of the many locations and opportunities to receive a first or second dose. It’s more convenient than ever to get a COVID-19 vaccine.”

The return to school is being supported with additional resources.

In June, the Ministry of Education announced \$43.6 million in COVID-19 relief funding for the 2021-22 school year. This included \$25.6 million in new one-time funding to support health and safety measures, First Nations and Métis students, mental health services and independent schools. The remaining \$18 million was allocated for school districts to address learning loss due to the pandemic.

Quick Facts:

- There are approximately 1,900 K-12 schools in B.C. In the 2020-21 school year, 40 schools closed temporarily for a short period of time due to COVID-19.
- Two studies conducted by health authorities during the 2020-21 school year found:
 - in Vancouver Coastal Health, 92% of school-associated cases of COVID-19 were acquired from outside of the school environment; and
 - in Fraser Health, 87% of school-associated cases were acquired through community/household transmission, not from the school setting.
- The COVID-19 Immunity Task Force released a report in June that found there was no greater risk to school staff acquiring COVID-19 in a school setting compared to their community.

Learn More:

For information about getting a vaccination, go to the Vax for BC website:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/vaccine/vaxforbc>

For a Fraser Health study on school-aged children from Aug. 24,

2021: <https://www.fraserhealth.ca/health-topics-a-to-z/coronavirus/keeping-our-community-safe/schools/data#.YSUOEvpKjIX>

B.C. COVID-19 safe schools website:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/covid-19-safe-schools>

BCCDC's updated health and safety guidelines for K-12 schools:

http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/COVID_public_guidance/Guidance-k-12-schools.pdf

BCCDC's public health guidance for child care settings:

http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/COVID_public_guidance/Guidance-k-12-schools.pdf

A backgrounder follows.

Contact:

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BACKGROUND

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Updated COVID-19 guidelines for K-12 schools

The updated provincial COVID-19 communicable disease guidelines for K-12 schools in the 2021-22 school year include, but are not limited to, the following changes:

- The mask mandate in place at the end of the 2020-21 school year will stay in place to start this school year. All K-12 staff visitors, and students in grades 4 to 12 will be required to wear non-medical masks in all indoor areas of the school and on school buses. Students in Kindergarten to Grade 3 will be strongly encouraged to wear masks.
- The mask guidance will also be supported by a provincial health order on mask wearing.
- Cohorts, also known as learning groups, are no longer recommended by public health as a COVID-19 mitigation measure and will not be used.
- Local public health orders may be put in place for entire regions or communities, including schools. For schools, the local medical health officer may issue a recommendation for an individual school, a grouping of schools, a school district, all schools within the health authority region or some combination thereof, to implement specific additional health and safety measures during times of elevated risk.
- Any additional regional measures put in place by local medical health officers are likely to be similar to those in place during the 2020-21 school year, and may include:
 - limits on gatherings and events;
 - changing room arrangements or incorporating more activities that maximize space between people and reduce face-to-face contact; and
 - limiting visitors.
- The following cleaning frequency guidelines must be adhered to when cleaning and disinfecting schools:
 - General cleaning of the premises, and cleaning and disinfecting of frequently touched surfaces, at least once in a 24-hour period and when visibly dirty.
- Extracurricular activities are allowed, in line with any local, regional, provincial or federal health orders in the community.
- Although physical distancing of two metres is no longer a recommended public health measure for the K-12 setting, there are strategies that schools can continue to use to create space between people and to support students and staff going back to school. Examples include:
 - reminding students and staff about respecting others personal space, and using visual supports, signage, prompts, video modelling, etc. as necessary;
 - using available space to spread people out where possible for gatherings and events;
 - taking students outside more often, where and when possible; and
 - managing flow of people in common areas, including hallways and around lockers, to minimize crowding and allow for ease of people passing through.

- Food programs (e.g., meal programs, cafeterias and fundraisers) can proceed under normal and regular operation.
- Water fountain use will no longer be restricted.
- Outdoor classes will still be encouraged, based on their health and learning benefits.

Public health continues to support the BC Centre for Disease Control's current health and safety guidelines for child care settings.

- The child care guidance recommends staff should wear non-medical masks when interacting with adults in indoor areas where physical distancing cannot be maintained.
- Children may wear a mask based on personal or family choice. However, infants under two years old should not wear masks, as it may make it difficult for them to breathe.

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