

Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools



August 25, 2022

Introduction

This document provides guidance for educators, administrators, and support staff (hereafter referred to as staff) at public, independent, and First Nations Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) schools of what communicable disease prevention measures should be implemented to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, including COVID-19.

COVID-19 will continue to circulate in our population and, as long as cases occur within our communities, K-12 students and staff members will continue to be affected. However, transmission within K-12 school settings accounts for a minority of COVID-19 cases even amongst students and staff¹. Moreover, with high immunization rates in BC and treatment options for people at higher risk of serious disease, COVID-19 can be managed as other respiratory infections in the community. Public health continues to monitor COVID-19 and review emerging evidence to modify guidance if needed.

The Ministry of Health and BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) fully respect the authority of individual First Nations to make decisions about the operation of First Nations schools in the best interests of their students, schools, and communities. This includes their authority to decide if and how to use this guidance to inform planning and if and how to reopen their schools. The Ministry of Education and Child Care works with Indigenous rights holders and K-12 education and health partners to build on public health guidance to establish the [Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines for K-12 School Settings](#). These Ministry of Education and Child Care guidelines build on public health guidance to provide operational considerations and implementation guidance for schools and school districts. BCCDC is the primary source of information about COVID-19 in B.C. Resources on the [BCCDC website](#) can be used to support learning and to respond to questions from school communities.

¹ [Campeau et al., 2022](#); [Bark et al., 2021](#); [Goldfarb et al., 2022](#); [Choi et al., 2022](#)

Recommendations for Individuals

Vaccines

Vaccines are important tools to protect against many serious communicable diseases. Vaccination protects from serious illness due to COVID-19 and is the most effective way to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on our communities. All COVID-19 vaccines approved for use in Canada protect against serious complications, including from the omicron variant. It is important to get all recommended vaccine doses to get the most effective protection against serious cases of COVID-19. People 6 months and older are eligible for COVID-19 vaccines. More information about COVID-19 vaccines is available from the [BCCDC website](#). Students and staff are also encouraged to ensure they are up to date on [all recommended vaccines for other communicable diseases, including COVID-19 vaccines](#).

Schools are encouraged to share evidence-based information and promote opportunities to be vaccinated in partnership with public health and the local medical health officer. More information on COVID-19 vaccination and the workplace is available on the [Work Safe B.C. website](#). Evidence-based immunization information and tools for B.C. residents are available from [BCCDC](#) and [ImmunizeBC](#) websites.

Health Awareness

School administrators should ensure that staff, other adults entering the school, parents, caregivers, and students are aware that they should not come to school if they are sick and unable to participate fully in routine activities. School administrators can support this practice by communicating the importance of everyone doing a health check.

A health check means a person regularly checking to ensure they (or their child) are not experiencing symptoms of illness (including but not limited to [COVID-19 symptoms](#)) that would limit their ability to participate fully in regular activities before coming to school to prevent spread of communicable diseases, such as COVID-19, within the school settings. Schools do not need to monitor students or staff for symptoms of illness.

What To Do When Sick

Staff, students, or other persons in the school setting who are exhibiting symptoms of illness, such as [COVID-19 or gastrointestinal illness](#), should stay home until they are well enough to participate in regular activities. Staff, children, or other persons can attend school if their symptoms are consistent with a previously diagnosed health condition (e.g., seasonal allergies) or symptoms have improved enough to where you feel well enough to return to regular activities and any fever has resolved without the use of fever-reducing medication (e.g. acetaminophen, ibuprofen). The [When to Get Tested for COVID-19 resource](#) or the [B.C. Self-Assessment Tool](#) provides more information on whether you should get a test for COVID-19. If you are unsure or concerned about your symptoms, connect with your health care provider or call 8-1-1.

Staff, children, or other persons in the school setting who test positive for COVID-19 should follow the guidance on the [BCCDC website](#) as to how long they should self-isolate. They can return to school when they no longer need to self-isolate as long as symptoms have improved and they are well enough to participate in regular activities. Schools should not require a health care provider note (i.e. a doctor's note) to confirm the health status of any individual, beyond those required to support medical accommodation as per usual practice.

If a staff member, student, or other person develops symptoms of illness at school and is unable to participate in regular activities, they should be supported to go home until their symptoms have improved. Appropriate infection control precautions should be taken while the person is preparing to leave the school premises, including use of appropriate hand hygiene and cleaning/disinfection of surfaces soiled with bodily fluids. They may use a mask if they are experiencing respiratory symptoms.

Hand hygiene

Rigorous hand washing with plain soap and water or using an [effective hand sanitizer](#) reduces the spread of illness. Everyone should practice diligent hand hygiene and schools should facilitate regular opportunities for students and staff to wash their hands. To learn about how to perform hand hygiene, please refer to the BCCDC's [hand hygiene poster](#).

Respiratory Etiquette

Parents and staff can teach and reinforce good respiratory etiquette practices among students, including:

- Cough or sneeze into their elbow or a tissue. Throw away used tissues and immediately perform hand hygiene.
- Refrain from touching their eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Refrain from sharing any food, drinks, unwashed utensils, cigarettes, or vaping devices.

Non-Medical Masks and Face Coverings

The decision to wear a mask beyond when it is required by public health is a personal one, based on individual preference. Some students and staff may choose to continue to wear a non-medical mask or face covering throughout the day or for certain activities. The choice of staff and students to choose whether they practice additional personal prevention measures should be respected. Information on non-medical masks is available from [BCCDC](#).

PPE When Providing Student Services

Staff and those providing services to children with medical complexity, immune suppression, receiving direct or delegated care, or with disabilities and diverse abilities who are in close proximity to a child should follow routine infection control practices and care plans for the child, if applicable.

[Recommendations for School Settings](#)

Ventilation and Air Exchange

Continue to ensure all mechanical heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems are designed, operated, and maintained as per standards and specifications for ongoing comfort of workers ([Part 4 of OHS Regulation](#)), and that they are working properly. Open windows when the weather permits if it doesn't impact the functioning of ventilation systems. Taking students outside more often is no longer necessary for communicable disease prevention.

Cleaning and Disinfection

Regular cleaning and disinfection can help prevent the spread of communicable diseases. Cleaning of frequently touched surfaces should occur in line with regular practices and when visibly dirty.

Gatherings & Events

School extracurricular and social gatherings and events (including those occurring within and between schools), regardless of location, can occur in line with the guidance in this document, as well as any applicable local, regional, or provincial public health recommendations and Orders.

Space Arrangement

In learning environments, schools can use classroom and learning environment configurations and activities that best meet learner needs and preferred educational approaches.

Transportation

For school buses, schools can follow normal seating and onloading/offloading practices.

Visitors and Community Use of Schools

Schools can follow normal practices for welcoming visitors and the community use of schools.

Communicable Disease Management

Most communicable diseases experienced by students and staff within school settings can be managed by the individual/family and through routine preventive measures, such as staying home from school until well enough to participate in regular activities. Resources are available to support management of routine communicable diseases, including [HealthLinkBC](#), the [BCCDC Guide to Common Childhood Diseases](#), the [Sneezes and Diseases](#) website, and other school health resources hosted on health authority webpages ([Vancouver Coastal Health](#); [Fraser Health](#); [Interior Health](#); [Island Health](#); [Northern Health](#)).

Public health continues to work closely with educational partners to support the health and wellbeing of students and staff in school settings. Public health may become directly involved if

certain reportable diseases, such as measles, are identified where there are effective interventions available to prevent further spread and protect against severe disease. Additional time-limited public health measures may also be implemented at the discretion of the Medical Health Officer or Provincial Health Officer in response to broader risk of communicable disease transmission in the community. School or district administrators can contact public health if they have concerns about communicable disease transmission within the school setting and require additional support.