

# Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools

September 13, 2023

## Introduction

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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 and influenza.

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. 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 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 communicable diseases in B.C. Resources on the [BCCDC website](#) can be used to support learning and to respond to questions from school communities.

## Recommendations for Individuals

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### *Vaccines*

Vaccines are important tools to protect against serious outcomes of many communicable diseases, such as COVID-19 and influenza. Students and staff are encouraged to ensure they are up to date on [all recommended vaccines for communicable diseases](#).

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. For

administrators and staff, more information on vaccination and communicable disease prevention in 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 not attending school if sick and unable to participate fully in routine activities.

A health check means a person regularly checking to ensure they (or their child) are not experiencing symptoms of illness that would limit their ability to participate fully in regular activities before coming to school to prevent spread of communicable diseases 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 respiratory illness, should stay home until they are well enough to participate in regular activities or otherwise advised by a healthcare provider. Those experiencing certain illnesses, such as gastrointestinal illness caused by norovirus, may be advised to stay home for longer. 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, and they feel well enough to return to regular activities or otherwise advised by a healthcare provider. If you are unsure or concerned about your symptoms, connect with your health care provider or call 8-1-1.

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 or otherwise advised by a healthcare provider. 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.

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.

### *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 [How to clean your hands 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 is a personal one, based on individual preference. Some students and staff may choose 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

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### *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. Windows may be opened when the weather permits if it does not impact the functioning of ventilation systems.

### *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.

### *Food Safety*

Schools that provide food services regulated under the [Food Premises Regulation](#) should adhere to the required measures (e.g. a FOODSAFE trained staff member, a food safety plan, etc.). For special events or sites requiring food permits, please consult your local health authority environmental health officer.

Staff, students, or other persons in the school setting should also follow routine food safety practices, including diligent hand hygiene. More information may be found on the [BCCDC Food Safety webpage](#).

### *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.

### *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 should implement the prevention measures included in this guidance document, where applicable.

### *Visitors and Community Use of Schools*

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

## Communicable Disease Management

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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. Information 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 works closely with education 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.