

2021-22 Health Guidelines for Schools

The information below highlights the key points from the following Government of Alberta Documents:

- [2021-22 School Year Plan](#)
- [Guidance for Respiratory Illness Prevention](#)
- [Parent Letter from Chief Medical Officer](#)
- [Parents' Guide 2021-22 School Year](#)
- [Public Health Management of Respiratory Illness in Schools: Questions and answers for school administrators](#)
- [Preparing for a new school year](#)

In-school learning will resume in September 2021 under normal conditions. Schools will not be expected to follow all the previous measures used during the 2020–2021 school year. When students return to school, they can look forward to their regular classes and activities such as performances, field trips, sport competitions and celebratory events.

The government made this decision based on the following evidence:

- Consideration of both COVID infection risks as well as the impacts that restrictions have had over the past 18 months on the mental health, learning and social interaction of our children.
- Studies have shown that some responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the closure of schools to in-person learning and cancellation of extra-curricular events, led to a deterioration in children and youth mental health. It is important to consider the negative impacts of measures when looking at a population that has shown to be at lower risk of severe outcomes. Any additional restrictions for children and youth should be proportionate to their overall risk level.
- The use of face masks in indoor settings is one intervention that can decrease the risk of transmission of all respiratory illnesses. On the other hand, it can interfere with communication and interpersonal interactions, and last year was not mandated provincially in kindergarten through grade 3 for that reason. While masks are no longer required across the province, it is an expectation that schools continue to support those students and staff who choose to continue wearing a mask.
- Vaccines are available for children 12 years of age and older. Vaccines have shown a significant level of protection against severe outcomes from COVID-19. Two doses of the COVID19 vaccine have been shown to be highly protective against infection.
- Children under 12 years of age have much lower rates of hospitalization, severe disease and death from COVID-19.
- Based on Alberta's experience in the 2020-2021 school year, schools were not the primary drivers of COVID-19 transmission during that time period.
- We may not be able to entirely eliminate COVID-19, but we can develop a sustainable approach that does not have disproportionate impacts on learning and development opportunities for our children while also preventing serious outcomes, hospitalizations and death due to the disease.
- This 2021-22 approach balances the many competing risks our children face, and moves to a sustainable framework that can also protect kids from other risks such as influenza

and other viruses. We cannot eliminate COVID-19, which means we must all learn to live with it, including in our schools.

Alberta is shifting from an emergency response for the COVID-19 pandemic to the everyday public health management used for other viruses, such as influenza. This has resulted in a shift from **mandatory health measures** to **recommended health best practices**. Schools will incorporate recommendations that support good public health practices into their normal operations for the 2021-2022 school year.

Discontinued Mandatory Health Measures

1. **Masking:** Students and staff don't have to wear a mask in the school, except for the following reasons:
 - School authorities may have their own rules for masks.
 - Masks may be recommended for a short period if there is a respiratory illness outbreak in a school.
 - Individuals should also assess their personal risk for COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses, and may choose to take additional precautions such as continuing to use a face mask. Schools must support students, staff and visitors in their choice to wear a mask.
 - **Masks remain mandatory** for students, teachers, staff members and visitors on school buses and publicly accessible transit, such as municipal buses, taxis and ride-shares.
2. **Physical Distancing:** Physical distancing or maintaining spacing is not required for the 2021–2022 school year. Some people may prefer to keep more space between themselves and others in certain situations and schools should support this, whenever possible.
3. **Cohorting:** Cohorting is not required for the 2021–2022 school year, although may be recommended for a short period if there is a respiratory illness outbreak in a school.
4. **Close Contact Identification:** AHS is no longer identifying or following up with individual close contacts, and quarantine for close contacts is no longer legally mandatory. All Albertans, including those who may be told that they are close contact, are asked to monitor for symptoms and stay home and get tested if they are feeling unwell.
5. **Restrictions on Activities:** Many routine school activities and services no longer have any restrictions or specific guidance. Schools may continue with these activities as they normally would. These include activities and services such as, but not limited to:
 - Field trips
 - Performance activities
 - Physical activities
 - Visitors to the schools

- Food services
 - Student transportation (with the exception of wearing masks)
 - Work experience
 - Ceremonies and celebratory events
 - International student programs
6. **COVID-19 Reporting:**
- AHS Public Health will not inform school authorities or administrators of individual cases of COVID-19 within their school setting, as notification to the school is not required for the individual's case management.
 - Individuals may but are not required to share their COVID-19 test results with school administration.
 - School administrators and/or school authorities are not required to contact AHS to report student or staff cases.

Recommended Health Best Practices

1. **Ventilation:** HVAC systems should be maintained in accordance with manufacturer operational guidelines. Open windows and doors where possible to increase air circulation and encourage outdoor activities, when weather permits.
2. **Cleaning & Disinfecting:** Schools should have procedures that outline routine cleaning requirements, including regular cleaning and disinfecting of high touch surfaces.
3. **Staying Home When Sick:**
 - Before leaving home, staff (including substitute teachers), students (or their caregivers) and visitors, should assess whether they feel well enough to attend school for any reason. Parents/guardians should assess their children daily for any new signs or symptoms of COVID-19 using the [Alberta Health Daily Checklist](#).
 - Anyone that reports COVID-19 symptoms must stay home and isolate for 10 days. They can return to school before 10 days if they have a negative COVID-19 test result.
 - Anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 should fill out the [AHS Online Self-Assessment tool](#) to determine if they should be tested and where to access testing.
 - Anyone testing positive for COVID-19 is legally required to isolate for at least 10 days from when their symptoms started, or until their symptoms have improved, whichever is longer.
4. **Hand Hygiene:** Consider ways to promote and facilitate frequent and proper hand hygiene for all students, staff and visitors, such as:
 - Providing soap and running water or hand sanitizer.

- Placing hand sanitizer in convenient locations throughout the school where soap and water may not be available or nearby, such as in entrances, exits and near high touch surfaces.
 - Promoting hand hygiene before/after activities (e.g., entering/leaving school or classroom, boarding/exiting the bus, changing activities, before and after using shared equipment, before and after eating or serving food, after using washrooms, before and after having physical contact with other staff or students, etc.).
 - Giving verbal reminders for hand hygiene and posting signs. Schools can download posters at [alberta.ca/returntoschool](https://www.alberta.ca/returntoschool)
 - If parents have questions about their child using alcohol-based hand sanitizer they should contact their school administration to discuss potential alternatives.
5. **Respiratory Etiquette:** Encourage students, staff and visitors to use proper respiratory etiquette (e.g., sneezing into the elbow or a tissue, discarding tissues immediately into a lined bin, performing hand hygiene).
6. **Symptomatic Students and Staff while at School:** Schools are encouraged to have a plan in place if a student or staff member develops any symptoms of illness while at school. This can include:
- Sending home students or staff who are sick, where possible.
 - Having a separate area for students and staff who are sick.
 - A staff member caring for an ill student should consider wearing a mask.
 - If a student or staff member begins developing new symptoms of respiratory illness (e.g., cough, fever, sore throat, runny nose, loss of taste or smell, etc.), they should be provided with a mask to wear while waiting to go home.
 - Proof of a negative COVID-19 test result is not necessary for a student or staff member to return to school.
 - Individuals should not return to the school for 10 days or until they are feeling well, whichever is longer.
7. **Reporting High Absenteeism Rates:**
- School administrators should monitor their school population for respiratory cases (e.g. an individual voluntarily shares they are positive for COVID or they start to experience COVID-19 symptoms while at the school) and/or absenteeism due to illness.
 - If there is a school-wide absence rate of 10% or greater due to illness OR there are an unusual amount of individuals with similar symptoms, report to AHS Coordinated Early Identification Response (CEIR) team at 1-844-343-0971. The purpose of this reporting is to continue to monitor for clusters of respiratory or gastrointestinal illness and alert AHS to potential disease outbreaks.
 - Where absenteeism of 10% or greater has been identified by AHS due to illness, AHS may declare an outbreak at that school.
8. **Vaccination:**

- All eligible staff and students should be encouraged to be fully vaccinated for respiratory illnesses, where applicable, such as COVID-19 and influenza. Currently, Albertans born in 2009 or before are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine (turning 12+).
 - As children born in 2010 or later (11 and under) are currently not eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, it is important that those around them, including parents/guardians, older students and school staff, receive the vaccine in order to reduce community transmission and protect this age group.
 - COVID-19 immunization clinics are being planned for grades 7 through 12 schools across the province. Students under 18 will not be vaccinated in schools without parent or guardian consent. Providing immunizations in school ensures we will be able to reach all eligible students in the province.
9. **Additional Health Measures:** Additional health measures may be considered, recommended or required if a school experiences a COVID-19 outbreak. Additional measures may include:
- Active health screening with questionnaires
 - Increasing frequency of cleaning and disinfection
 - Maintaining classroom cohorts
 - Mask recommendations, and/or
 - Limiting group/extra-curricular activities
 - Localized rapid testing may be available for emergent situations that arise

Recognizing the dynamic nature of COVID-19, the Government has developed two contingency plans in the event that they may be needed. For further details of these contingency plans see page 14 of [2021-22 School Year Plan](#).

Alberta will be watching for increases in hospitalizations and severe outcomes. Alberta also has programs to monitor wastewater for COVID-19. Alberta will review new evidence and research across Canada and around the world. If severe illness from COVID-19 is putting pressure on the health care system, public health measures may be needed again. Alberta will keep watching closely and take whatever actions are needed to manage any high-risk outbreaks, as we do with any communicable disease.

School authorities continue to have the ability and corresponding accountability to put in place local measures, such as physical distancing, cohorting and masking requirements that may exceed provincial guidance. Local policy on measures in schools needs to be informed by local perspectives and context. School boards have the ability to implement additional measures where they deem it appropriate.