

# Deputy Minister's Bulletin

## – Independent Schools

Ministry of Education



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs): Back to School in September 2020

July 29, 2020

### What is the plan for back to school in September?

- On July 29, B.C. announced that K-12 schools are scheduled to begin the 2020/21 school year under Stage 2 of the province's K-12 Education Restart Plan.
- The [BC Centre for Disease Control \(BCCDC\) public health guidelines](#) have been updated to support the return to the classroom for K-12 students. This includes introducing the concept of cohorts, also known as learning groups, at all grade levels.
- Students in all grades will return to full-time, in-class instruction with the maximum amount possible under new public health measures.
  - Elementary and middle school students can expect full-time, in-class instruction
  - Secondary students may have full-time, in-class instruction or a combination of in-class, self-directed, and remote instruction, depending on the size of their school.
- School districts and independent schools will determine local schedules to maximize in-class learning while adhering to the learning group size limits in place for elementary, middle and secondary school students.
- The plan for September has been developed based on the advice and recommendations from the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) to ensure health and safety measures are in place to protect students and school staff.

### When can parents expect to receive more information regarding what September will look like?

- A steering committee, that includes voices of parents (through BCCPAC), teachers, support staff, trustees, school leaders, Indigenous rightsholders and public health officials has been established to look at best practices and find solutions to potential issues to ensure we have the best start to September as possible.
- School districts will be asked to prepare a Stage 2 plan and submit it to the Ministry by August 21. This plan will outline how each school district is implementing the new public health guidelines and how they approach creating learning groups at the elementary, middle and secondary school level.
- School districts and independent school authorities will communicate final information to parents and guardians by e-mail along with updates on school and school district websites by August 26.

### What is a cohort, also known as a learning group?

- To get the most students back in full-time in-class instruction in September, the Office of the Provincial Health Officer created cohorts (learning groups) to reduce the number of close, in-person interactions.
- Learning groups are groups of students and staff who remain together throughout the school year and who primarily interact with each other.
- Within a learning group, minimized physical contact is still encouraged, but physical distancing does not need to be maintained. Outside of a learning group, physical distancing of 2 metres remains the expectation for middle and secondary school students, and for all K-12 staff.
- Learning groups reduce the number of in-person, close interactions a person has in school without requiring physical distancing to consistently be practiced.
- Learning groups can include up to 60 people in elementary and middle schools, and 120 people in secondary schools.

# Deputy Minister's Bulletin

## – Independent Schools

Ministry of Education



- The BCCDC's public health guidance for K-12 schools recommends a number of strategies to support physical distancing for students and staff in schools:
  - Consideration for different classroom and learning environment configurations to allow distance between students and adults (e.g. different desk and table formations)
  - Stagger pick-up and drop-off times to prevent crowding
  - Stagger recess/snack, lunch and class transition times to provide a greater amount of space for everyone
  - More outside time for students
  - Incorporate more individual activities or activities that encourage more space between students and staff
    - For elementary students, adapt group activities to minimize physical contact and reduce shared items
    - For middle and secondary students, minimize group activities and avoid activities that require physical contact

### Is it safe to send students back into the classrooms in the fall?

- Yes, based on current public health advice and the health and safety plans put into place by all school districts and independent school associations in B.C., K-12 schools are safe to re-open in Stage 2 in September. This means that most students will have access to full in-class instruction.
- As we have done since the beginning of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education will continue to make fact-based decisions, while following the direction of the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) to ensure the safety of students and staff remains paramount.
- Information from the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) tells us the COVID-19 virus has a very low infection rate in children. As well, children are not the primary drivers of the COVID-19 spread in child care facilities, schools or in community settings.
- The Ministry of Education has developed a [five-stage approach](#) supported by public health guidelines from the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) which allows in-class instruction to be increased or decreased depending on the risk of transmission.
- The June school re-start in B.C. saw nearly 200,000 students, representing about 30 per cent of the student population, safely move to Stage 3, giving students a chance to acclimatize to new safety protocols. This also allowed the Ministry of Education to capture important information in June to safely plan for the 2020/21 school year.

### Are students required to attend school in-person in September?

- Based on current public health advice and the health and safety plans to be put into place by all school districts and independent school associations in B.C., K-12 schools are safe to re-open in Stage 2 in September. This means that most students will have access to full in-class instruction and schools will be ready to welcome them back.
- Parents of children with complex medical conditions or underlying risk factors should consult with their health care provider to determine their child's level of risk regarding returning to school. They should also reach out to their current school to discuss available options and support.
- According to the Provincial Health Officer and the BCCDC, most children with immune compromise can return to school when safety measures are in place. Protective self-isolation is only recommended for children with severe immune compromise, on a case-by-case basis.
- For more information, see BCCDC's [guidance for families of immunocompromised children in school and group gatherings](#), and their [Frequently Asked Questions regarding COVID-19 and children with immune suppression](#).

# Deputy Minister's Bulletin

## – Independent Schools

Ministry of Education



- Regardless of which stage we find ourselves in, parents will continue to have choices regarding their child's educational program. Parents who do not want to their child to attend in-person classes at a public or independent school have the option to register their child for [online/distributed learning](#) or [home-schooling](#).

### **What about First Nations communities who are currently closed because of health and safety concerns? Will their children's return to school be mandated?**

- The Province fully respects the jurisdiction of First Nations and their right to make their own determination about the re-opening of First Nations schools.
- The Province also acknowledges the historical impacts of pandemics on First Nations and Indigenous communities and the concerns raised by some First Nations about sending their children back to school in September.
- School districts have been asked to engage with First Nations and Indigenous peoples on the September restart and incorporate how they will support Indigenous community/parent choices in their Stage 2 plans.
- We also expect school districts and independent school authorities to be guided by their Local Education Agreements with First Nations, if they have them in place.
- We have appointed a steering committee that the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and Metis Nation are a part of, that also includes parents, CUPE, principals and vice-principals, school boards and trustees, and public health representatives to learn from best practices, and provide input into plans being developed for September.
- This will help us ensure we have a model in place for September that works for Indigenous communities throughout B.C.

### **Will there be health and safety guidelines for schools to follow in the fall?**

- All boards of education and independent school authorities will continue to be required to implement strict [public health measures set by the BC Centre for Disease Control \(BCCDC\)](#) to reduce the risk COVID-19 transmission.
- These health and safety guidelines were in place in June for the part time return to in-class instruction at the end of the 2019/20 school year and have been recently updated to take this next step in accommodating more kids back into the classroom in the fall.

### **Will the government provide additional health and safety funding for back to school?**

- To support health and safety measures in public and independent K-12 schools for the 2020/21 school year, the Ministry of Education is providing a one-time \$45.6 million investment to address the pandemic.
- The funding includes \$23 million for more staff and staff time for cleaning schools, \$9.2 million for improving and increasing access to hand hygiene, \$5.1 million for cleaning supplies and \$2.2 million to ensure re-useable face masks are available for staff if they choose to wear one, and for all students who need to travel on school buses or public transportation outside of their cohort (learning group).

### **Do schools need to have a health and safety plan? What is included in the updated health and safety guidelines for schools?**

- By August 21, all school districts and independent school associations will submit updated health and safety plans for review by the Ministry of Education. Health and safety plans were previously submitted in May for operations of K-12 schools in June.

# Deputy Minister's Bulletin

## – Independent Schools

Ministry of Education



- The updated health and safety guidelines to safely accommodate students in the classroom also include the following:
  - Increased cleaning of high-contact surfaces like doorknobs, toilet seats, keyboards and desks and increased hand hygiene with everyone on school property required to clean their hands before boarding school buses, entering school buildings, before and after eating, using the washroom or playground equipment.
  - School districts may also need to install plexiglass barriers for people who have more contacts with others, such as front desk staff, bus drivers or food services staff, when appropriate.
  - Reduced traffic flow in hallways and common spaces with staggered drop-off and break times and continued physical distancing of two metres will be practiced by staff and older students outside of their learning groups, while younger students will be encouraged to minimize physical contact.
  - Non-medical masks or face coverings can be used when physical distancing cannot be consistently maintained, and the person is interacting with people outside of their cohort (learning group). Wearing a non-medical mask or face covering in schools is a personal choice that will be respected. Masks will be made available upon request.
  - Extracurricular activities in middle and secondary schools including sports, arts or special interest clubs can occur if physical distance can be maintained between members of different cohorts and reduced physical contact can be practiced by those within the same cohort.
  - Elementary students will sit with family members or designated classmates on buses, and middle- and secondary-students will be encouraged to wear masks on buses.
  - All students who have travelled outside of Canada are required to self-isolate for 14 days under both provincial and federal orders. This includes students who are attending school from abroad.

### **Will there be Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for students and staff? Will students and staff be encouraged to wear masks?**

- For all students and staff, non-medical masks will be available for use in situations where the person is interacting outside of their cohort (learning group) and cannot maintain physical distance for an extended period of time. This includes riding the bus to school where a student may be sitting next to a person outside of their household or cohort.
- As part of the \$45.6 million investment, the provincial government is providing \$2.2 million that will go towards PPE, including reusable, non-medical masks.
- According to the PHO and BCCDC, wearing a non-medical mask or face covering at all times is not recommended in schools for children or adults.
- The PHO and BCCDC also advise that masks are not recommended for use by young children. In young children, masks can be irritating and may lead to increased touching of the face and eyes.
- However, wearing a mask is a personal choice that will be respected.

### **What will schools do or how will they create physical distancing between students and staff?**

- Reducing the number of close, in-person interactions continues to be a key component of B.C.'s strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- The updated public health guidelines focus on encouraging younger students to minimize physical contact and continued physical distancing of two metres for school staff and older students when they are not with their learning group.
- Learning Groups and physical distancing are part of a comprehensive suite of measures being implemented in B.C. schools to keep students and staff safe.

# Deputy Minister's Bulletin

## – Independent Schools

Ministry of Education



### **Why are safety measures in K-12 schools regarding physical distancing and masks different from what is being recommended to the general public?**

- Compared to some other community settings, schools have a comprehensive set of safety measures in place to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. These include enhanced cleaning and disinfecting protocols, frequent hand washing/sanitizing, and policies that require students and staff to stay home if they are ill.
- Schools also have a relatively consistent set of people accessing the building and the majority of those people are children, who are at lower risk of COVID-19 infection.
- By introducing learning groups this school year, schools can further reduce the number of interactions between different students and staff.
- Because many other public settings do not have these features and measures in place, more stringent requirements regarding physical distancing and masks are required for those settings.

### **What will happen if someone tests positive in school? Will that individual school suspend in-class learning immediately?**

- The BCCDC guidelines for schools are firm, in that if any student or staff member has even mild symptoms, the person(s) are not to attend school.
- If a student or staff member develops symptoms at school, protocols are in place for the person to be isolated and returned home as soon as possible.
- Custodial staff would then clean and disinfect the area where the person had been isolated and any areas used by them. Public health would be notified immediately of a potential case.
- If anyone at school contracts COVID-19, provincial measures are in place for public health to work with school administration on contact tracing.
- The use of learning groups supports rapid contact tracing by allowing public health to focus on a smaller group of people.
- Public health officials will also work with school administration to determine what actions should be taken and if suspending in-class learning is necessary.
- If any staff or student has been in contact with a COVID-positive person, they will be notified by public health officials and must self-isolate.

### **What about students and staff who are immune-compromised or who have other underlying medical conditions?**

- Parents of students with immune compromise or underlying medical conditions are encouraged to consult with their health care provider to determine their child's level of risk, and to contact their child's school to discuss available options and supports.
- According to the Provincial Health Officer and the BCCDC, most children with immune compromise can return to school when safety measures are in place. Protective self-isolation is only recommended for children with severe immune compromise, on a case-by-case basis.
- For more information, see [BCCDC's guidance for families of immunocompromised children in school and group gatherings](#), and their [Frequently Asked Questions regarding COVID-19 and children with immune suppression](#).
- School staff who are immune compromised or have underlying medical conditions are also encouraged to consult with their health care provider and discuss available options and supports with their school or school district administrator.

# Deputy Minister's Bulletin

## – Independent Schools

Ministry of Education



### What supports will be put in place for students with disabilities and diverse abilities?

- School districts and independent school authorities will be expected to identify students with additional support needs through a needs assessment to allow for proactive planning to ensure supports and services are in place at the start of the school year.
- When school resumes in September, all students with disabilities or those who need extra support in school will continue to have full-time access to in-class instruction and the supports and services they are eligible to receive.

### What if there is an outbreak or a second wave? What are your contingency plans?

- The Ministry has developed a [five-stage approach](#) supported by strict public health guidelines from the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) which allow in-class instruction to be increased or decreased depending on the risk of transmission.
- In the case of a local outbreak, public health officials will work with school administration to determine what actions should be taken and if suspending in-class learning is necessary. If any staff or student has been in contact with a COVID-positive person, they will be notified by public health officials and must self-isolate.
- If there is a large-scale outbreak or second wave, the Ministry will continue to work with the Provincial Health Officer, school districts and independent school associations to review and revise health and safety measures in schools based on updated public health guidance.

### How is this going to work on school buses?

- The new public health guidelines from BCCDC include the following recommendations for student transportation on school buses:
  - Buses should be cleaned and disinfected in accordance with [BCCDC guidelines](#).
  - Buses should be loaded from back to front and offloaded from front to back.
  - If space is available, each student should have their own seat unless sharing with a member of their household.
  - Middle and secondary school students should wear non-medical masks if seated near students outside of their learning group or household.
  - Schools and school districts can consider a transparent barrier to separate the driver from the students.
  - Schools and school districts should use consistent and assigned seating where possible, and keep up to date passenger lists to share with public health if contact tracing needs to occur.

### Will international students have to self-isolate when they arrive in B.C. before attending school?

- According to Government of Canada regulations, in addition to health screening protocols before travel, all individuals entering from abroad must isolate for 14 days upon their arrival in Canada.
- More information about measures to support international students during the COVID-19 pandemic is available on the Government of Canada's [website](#), and also on the EDUCanada [website](#).
- In March 2020, the [Government of Canada announced exemptions](#) to the air travel restrictions that will apply to foreign nationals who have already committed to working, studying or making Canada their home.

### For September, will there be child care options during Stage 2?

- The Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) continues to work closely with the child care sector to provide resources and information for [childcare providers](#), [parents](#) and [early childhood educators](#).
- Child care centres have been operating safely during the pandemic and were not mandated to close.

# Deputy Minister's Bulletin

## – Independent Schools

Ministry of Education



- The available childcare options for school-aged children will depend on the decisions made by local childcare providers and those school districts that choose to offer licensed childcare programs.
- Parents and caregivers should reach out to their regular child care provider for information about options available for September.
- If parents need help finding child care, they should use the child care matching service or contact their local [Child Care Resource and Referral Centre Office](#) and find out more about the matching program and their options.

### **Will my child be able to participate in music and choir classes, as well as sports, in the fall?**

- The public health and safety guidelines say that extracurricular activities in middle and secondary schools including sports, arts (including band and choir) or special interest clubs can occur if physical distance can be maintained between members of different cohorts and reduced physical contact is practiced by those within the same cohort.
- Health and safety plans developed by school districts and independent school associations will determine how music, choir and school sports will be implemented at schools.
- Inter-school events (including competitions, tournaments and festivals) should not occur at this time. This will be re-evaluated in mid-fall.
- BC School Sports' executive director has provided [a letter](#) to member school administrators and athletic directors about school sports in the fall.

### **Will there still be technology support for families if their kids are learning remotely at any point for the 2020/21 school year? Will families need to return their loaned computers or devices back to schools?**

- As part of the provincial governments one-time \$45.6 million investment to support health and safety measures in K-12 schools for the 2020/21 school year, \$3 million will be made available to enhance remote learning with technology loans and software to support students with disabilities.
- Schools and school districts will continue to work with families to ensure that students have access to the technology or supplies (e.g. printed learning packages) required for any remote instruction being offered under Stage 2 of the Restart Plan.
- Many school districts loaned out laptops, tablets and other devices to students last year, and provided tech support to families who were struggling with technology required for online learning.
- Many school districts have also been working with internet service providers and community partners to ensure families have access to low-cost internet, unlimited cell phone data plans or free wi-fi.
- Most school districts requested that families return any loaned computers or devices to their schools at the end of June, for the summer break.

### **What is going to happen with work placements or apprenticeships for students?**

- School districts, independent school authorities and schools will assess and determine if it is safe for their students to remain on work placements and apprenticeships, based on the BCCDC health and safety guidelines.
- For work placements that cannot continue in person, school districts and schools will determine if alternate methods to continue learning or accumulate volunteer hours for work placements, are possible.
- Students should talk to their teachers about work placements and apprenticeships.

### **Will meal programs continue to support families who are sending kids to school part-time or if there is an outbreak and a community needs to self-isolate?**

# Deputy Minister's Bulletin

## – Independent Schools

Ministry of Education



- School districts with existing meal programs will continue to work with community partners to provide meal support to families in need, in alignment with current public health guidance.
- Between April to June, school districts and community partners implemented several innovative solutions to support families including delivery or pick-up arrangements and distributing vouchers or gift cards for local grocery stores.