

September 14, 2020

To: Superintendents of Public Schools and Independent School Authorities

Re: Supports provided to schools by Northern Health

Schools and the health system have a shared interest in helping students stay safe and healthy. In this letter, we outline the supports that Northern Health (NH) provides to schools in Northern BC. Please distribute to all schools under your authority as appropriate.

School Settings: COVID-19 Infection Control Responsibilities

Providing students, families and school staff with safe and healthy school environments will help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC)'s [COVID-19 Public Health Guidance for K-12 School Settings](#) outlines the importance of schools implementing as many infection prevention and exposure control measures as reasonably possible in the school setting to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. Note that the guidance document was **recently updated** on September 11, 2020, and will continue to be revised as Public Health learns more.

On page 3, the “Hierarchy for Infection Prevention and Exposure Control Measures for Communicable Disease” shows the most effective to the least effective measures:

1. Public health measures (most effective): emphasize the expectation for students and staff to stay home if they have new and unexplained symptoms, and seek health assessment if they have fever, multiple symptoms, or symptoms persisting beyond 24 hours. If a person tests positive, public health staff will provide recommendations to the person, to their close contacts, and to school administrators.
2. Environmental measures: changes to the schools' physical environment that reduce the risk of exposure, such as being in outdoor spaces, maintaining physical distance or directing traffic flow in hallways, creating physical barriers where appropriate, and ensuring frequent cleaning and disinfecting of schools.
3. Administrative measures: develop policies and procedures, and provide orientation, education and training, to help reduce the risk of exposure.
4. Personal measures: measures individuals take to protect themselves and others, such as maintaining physical distance, hand washing and coughing into the elbow.
5. Personal protective equipment (least effective): wearing masks or other personal protective equipment. Masks are not effective as a stand-alone measure.

For additional information on these measures, please see [Frequently Asked Questions on the BCCDC COVID-19 web page for schools](#).

Any students or staff who develop new COVID-10-like symptoms while at school should be promptly isolated and sent home. Students and staff with symptoms are recommended to stay home for at least 24 hours, and seek health assessment if they have fever, have multiple symptoms, or if symptoms persist beyond 24 hours. Health assessment may mean consulting their Primary Care Provider, 8-1-1, or Northern Health's COVID-19 Online Clinic and Information Line for Northern BC residents (1-844-645-7811). This assessment will identify whether testing is needed. [Consult BCCDC guidance for details](#), such as the most up-to-date list of symptoms to watch for, when to seek health assessment, and when return to school should be allowed.

NH follows up directly with all confirmed cases of COVID-19 to identify and notify their close contacts, and advise these close contacts of the precautions they should take. When a case is identified that may have exposed others in a school setting, NH will work with school administrators to ensure the individuals that may have been exposed are made aware and receive appropriate advice, and to coordinate any necessary communication with students, families, staff, or the community. Schools should not provide notification to staff or students' families if a staff member or student becomes ill at home or at school, including if they display symptoms of COVID-19, unless directed to by NH. Notifications will only be provided when a case of COVID-19 has been confirmed by laboratory testing, and must be carried out in a way that protects confidentiality to the maximum possible extent.

Public health guidance no longer requires routine reporting of absenteeism rates to public health. In the absence of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases, all regular recommendations for health and safety in schools still apply, and no unique measures are necessary in response to absenteeism by itself. Schools should be prepared for the possibility of individuals developing COVID-19-like symptoms, as discussed in [the BCCDC guidance](#). However, if a school is concerned about any situation where COVID-19 is suspected but not yet confirmed, or large numbers of students or staff are absent with apparently infectious symptoms, and the school requires advice or assistance with their response, we are always available for consultation.

The COVID-19 pandemic can make people feel worried or anxious during this unprecedented time. This is a normal response when so many changes are taking place to help keep people safe. It is vital to promote and protect the mental wellbeing of students and school staff ([see the attached Appendix for COVID-19 resources that support schools and mental health](#)).

Prevention and management of other infectious diseases

Other infectious diseases, such as common colds, influenza, and gastrointestinal illnesses ("stomach flu"), can also occur in school settings. For information on how to respond to common childhood illnesses, see the [BCCDC - A Quick Guide to Common Childhood Diseases](#).

For practical tools to help reduce the transmission of infectious diseases in general, see **Ways to Prevent and Manage Communicable Diseases in Schools** on our website at <http://bit.ly/ways-prevent-manage-cd-schools>. The infection control strategies discussed in this document are generally sufficient to manage most situations. However, should you require our assistance with these infection control strategies, contact us at your convenience.

The public health follow-up process is the same for any potentially urgent infectious disease (COVID-19, measles, meningococcal disease, pertussis, etc.). Public Health will contact the school if there are any close contacts there who need to be notified, or any special measures that the school should take.

If you become concerned about a serious or urgent situation involving an infectious disease other than COVID-19 (i.e. for which there is not already a comprehensive plan in place), please contact us immediately. Early communication about a potentially urgent situation involving an infectious disease will ensure:

- Staff, students, and families can receive timely and accurate health information;
- Inaccurate rumours can be promptly dispelled;
- Any necessary infection control measures can be implemented promptly; and,
- NH can take additional action in the broader community, if required.

School Health Supports

Fostering healthy schools involves ongoing support and open, two-way communication between the school and dedicated health professionals throughout the school year. To facilitate this, each school is attached to one of NH's local **Primary and Community Care Teams**. Schools can expect a member from this team to be in contact with them at the beginning of the school year to plan for school health services such as:

- Routine grade 6 and 9 immunizations;
- Catching up students who missed immunizations due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Kindergarten health events (immunizations, vision screening, hearing testing, dental screening, and health promotion resources);
- Providing annual education and consultation for school staff around potentially life threatening illnesses such as epilepsy, anaphylaxis and diabetes (including glucagon administration when requested by a parent)

Environmental Health teams can provide guidance in regards to food safety, water, sanitation, and air quality. They also complete physical environment inspections of schools every three years. They can advise on a range of topics including communicable disease prevention and emergency preparedness. Contact the Primary and Community Care team member assigned to your school for further information.

Mandatory reporting of immunizations

BC's [Vaccination Status Reporting Regulation](#) (VSRR) came into effect on July 1, 2019. It supports a priority initiative by the Ministry of Health and the regional health authorities to document the vaccination status of school age children and encourage catch-up of missed immunizations.

Mandatory reporting is part of an ongoing plan to increase immunization rates for all vaccine-preventable diseases. Reporting provides health authorities with up to date records and improves the response to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.

Information about implementation of the VSRR, and associated responsibilities of schools, will be forthcoming later in the school year.

When and how to get in touch with Northern Health

Schools are encouraged to contact NH in the following situations:

Situation	Contact
Individual(s) in need of immediate medical care	Call 9-1-1.
<p>Urgent questions or concerns about infectious diseases among students or staff, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urgent COVID-19 related questions • large clusters or outbreaks of common illnesses, such as gastrointestinal illness or influenza-like illness • cases of uncommon infectious diseases, such as measles, mumps, or pertussis (whooping cough) <p style="text-align: center;"><i>or</i></p> <p>Routine local planning related to non-urgent health issues (immunizations, education, health promotion, overdose prevention, injury prevention, mental health and wellness, etc.)</p>	<p>Urgently or routinely, contact the Primary and Community Care Team member assigned to your school.</p> <p>This team will be reaching out to school principals early in the school year to provide specific contact information.</p>
Assistance with health and safety planning relating to COVID-19	<p>Consult first with your School District, who should be able to answer most questions.</p> <p>Superintendents will bring any questions they are not able to answer to Northern Health's Regional Nursing Lead for Healthy Schools and Youth.</p>
To learn more about Comprehensive School Health (CSH), or to discuss district priorities regarding health promotion in schools	Contact the Regional Nursing Lead for Healthy Schools and Youth, via email at healthyschools@northernhealth.ca .


To review our previous communications to schools on topics such as COVID-19, immunization reporting, vaping, and others, please visit Northern Health's [School and Youth Health](#) webpage, and select Communications to Schools from Medical Health Officers.

Thank you for your attention to this information. We look forward to working together to ensure a safe and healthy school year.

Yours truly,



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Appendix: COVID-19 resources that support schools and mental health

BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) [COVID-19 Public Health Guidance for K-12 School Settings](#) provides guidance for educators, administrators and support staff at public, independent and First Nations K-12 schools to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 and maintain a safe and healthy environment for students, families and staff

BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) [Schools](#) website provides information and FAQs on how to keep the risk low for COVID-19 in schools and childcare settings

BC Ministry of Education's [Safe & Healthy Schools](#) provides information on restarting BC's schools, education resources for parents and health and safety measures

Northern BC residents can call to speak to a nurse, physician, or nurse practitioner for information, health advice, or virtual screenings and assessments by contacting Northern Health's [Covid-19 Online Clinic](#) and Information Line: 1-844-645-7811

Work Safe BC has developed protocols for K-12 education providers that include guidance for school administrators, teachers, bus drivers, and others that support the school community: [Education \(K-12\): Protocols for returning to operation](#)

BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) [Mental Wellbeing during COVID-19](#) offers tips for supporting mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are tips for children, youth, parents and other mental health and wellbeing resources

Child Health BC has a list of [COVID-19-Mental Health Resources](#)

GF Strong School Program has a tip sheet [Home Learning During the Pandemic for Students with Concussions](#) to help students learn from home and manage common concussion symptoms

For help with mental health and anxiety support, visit: www.bouncebackbc.ca
or: www.anxietycanada.com

The [Stigma Free Toolkit](#) is a COVID-19 based Online Wellness Program to support youth mental health at home

The [NH Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Resources for Families](#) provides a list of contacts in the north to support children and youth

[Resources for Families and Support Teams of Children and Youth with Neurodevelopmental Diagnoses \(e.g., Autism, FASD\) during COVID-19](#)