

September 15, 2023

To: Superintendents of Public Schools and Principals of Independent Schools
Re: Supports Provided to Schools by Northern Health
From: Population and Public Health (PPH)

Northern BC. Schools and Northern Health (NH) have a common interest and responsibility in helping students stay safe and healthy. In this letter, we have outlined helpful supports, the NH Population and Public Health regional leads provide to schools in Northern BC. Please distribute to all school staff under your authority as appropriate.

Thank you for your partnership to help keep our children, youth, their family's, and communities healthy.

Updates from PPH for healthy schools, children, and youth:

[School Health and Wellness Supports](#)

[School Nutrition: Feed BC in K to12 Schools](#)

[School Environments: Heat Resources for School Settings](#)

[Physical Activity: PLAYBuilder Resource for Schools](#)

[Student Vision Eye Health Promotion](#)

[Harm Reduction, Youth and Toxic Drug Crisis](#)

[Communicable Disease Prevention and Management in School Settings](#)

[Child and Youth Immunization Strategy- HPV \(Human Papillomavirus\) Focus](#)

[Newsletters: Northern BC K to 12 School Newsletter / NH Community E- Brief](#)



School Health and Wellness 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 a local NH Primary and Community Care Team (PCC), also known as NH Interprofessional Teams (IPTs). Find your PCC team [here](#). Schools can expect a member from this local team to be in contact with them at the beginning of the school year. The team will support them with priorities such as:

- Routine grade 6 and 9 immunizations
- Providing annual education and consultation for school staff around potentially life-threatening illnesses such as anaphylaxis and diabetes (including glucagon administration when requested by a parent)
- Urgent and routine communicable disease and infection control issues

Services may vary from community to community and school to school.

In addition to the PCC Teams:

The Regional Lead, Healthy Schools, follows a comprehensive school health approach to support schools and school districts across the north with health and wellness promotion initiatives and resources. This role, in partnership with the Regional Lead, Child and Youth Health and the Public Health Resource team, support the PCC Team and act as a liaison between schools and NH by coordinating the supports, resources, and programs that are available on various health topics related to:

- Child and Youth Health
- Communicable diseases
- Dental health
- Harm reduction
- Injury prevention
- Immunizations
- Nutrition
- Mental wellness
- Physical activity
- Sexual health
- Substance Use Prevention

For more information and resources visit NH's [School and youth health](#) webpage. You may also email: HealthySchools@northernhealth.ca.

Feed BC in K-12 Schools

The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is working with the Ministry of Education and Childcare to integrate Feed BC into Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools as part of the province's [Feeding Futures initiative](#) to build and expand school food programs across British Columbia.

By sourcing more B.C. food in school food programs, schools increase students access to quality, local, fresh food and, help B.C. farmers, food producers and processors thrive. Every



dollar spent on B.C. food in government institutions brings a two-fold impact to B.C.'s economy including new local jobs and GDP ([Feed BC B.C. Input-Output model \(BCIOM\) study](#) (PDF, 856 KB)).

Local food in schools builds student knowledge of community-based food systems and creates connections with farmers, fishers, traditional gatherers, and knowledge keepers.

In early 2020, the ministries of Agriculture and Food, Education and Childcare, and Health co-sponsored a BC Stats survey of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school food environment in school districts across the province. The purpose of this survey was to gain a better understanding of the food environments and local food procurement in B.C. public schools. [2020 K-12 Public School Food Survey- Final Report](#) (PDF, 585 KB).

Learn More:

For the funding allocation per school district, visit this [link](#) re: Operating Grants for BC School Districts and click on the Summary of Grants to Date, 2023-24:

The province has developed a new website, '[Build a School Food Program](#)', to provide guidance to school districts on creating new food programs in their schools.

Heat Resources for School Settings

Due to ongoing changes to our climate Health Canada alongside other organizations have developed resources for schools regarding hot weather and extreme heat.

Guidance developed in collaboration with Health Canada:

- [Video - Designing cool and comfortable playgrounds](#)
- [Report - Thermally comfortable playgrounds: a review of literature and survey of experts](#) (Recommended guidelines for developing thermally safe and comfortable playgrounds included in Appendix A)
- [Paper - Reimagining spaces where children play: developing guidance for thermally comfortable playgrounds in Canada](#)
- [Report - Mobilizing the recommendations in "Thermally Comfortable Playgrounds": engagement summary report](#)

Physical Activity; PLAYBuilder Resource for Educators

[PLAYBuilder](#) provides educators with over 1,000 engaging activities and lesson plans for Grades K-7, along with tools that let you plan an entire PHE term in just six clicks.

Create an [account](#) to revolutionize how you develop physical and health education.



Student Vision and Eye Health Promotion

Vision problems can affect a child's abilities, success, and confidence at school. Basic eye exams in BC – one per year- are free up to the age of 18, although some optometrists (eye doctor) may charge a user fee. More information is found here: [Young Children and their Vision](#), and [Elementary School Age Children and Their Vision](#).

Please encourage concerned parents/caregivers to contact an optometrist to book an eye exam appointment at [Find a BC Doctor of Optometry](#)

Harm Reduction, Youth and Toxic Drug Crisis Resources

Update on the toxic drug crisis.

The toxic drug crisis shows no signs of stopping. In fact, unregulated drug toxicity is the leading cause of death in British Columbia for persons aged 10 to 59^[1]. Avoiding substance use is always safest for teens, however, some youth will use substances.

These are statistics regarding youth substance use at 13-15 years of age as reported by the 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey in Northern Health: Northern Interior (NI), Northwest (NW), and Northeast (NE):

- NI 55%, NE 56%, NW 57% have consumed alcohol.
- NI 30%, NE 26%, NW 42% have tried cannabis (however this statistic was before legalization and will likely be higher now).
- NI 25%, NE 29%, NW 29% have smoked, vaped, and used tobacco.
- NI 19%, NE 18%, NW 21% have experimented with other substances^{[2][3][4]}

Preparing youth with knowledge of substances and ways to reduce the harm does not increase or promote use. Drug education should be honest, compassionate, non-stigmatizing and accurate.

Schools can support a harm reduction approach by:

- Using [iMinds](#) to teach about substance use.
- Preparing staff and students on how to detect and respond to a drug related opioid poisoning.
- Getting free naloxone training online at [Toward the Heart](#)
- Having naloxone available for trained responders.
 - Naloxone kits are available at community sites and pharmacies across the North to find a site near you see: [Find a harm Reduction Site | Toward the Heart](#)



For more information, contact: HealthySchools@northernhealth.ca

^[1] BC Gov News. Public Safety and Solicitor General: [Unregulated drug supply claims 184 British Columbians in June 2023](#)

^[2] McCreary Centre Society. 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey: [Balance and connection in the Northwest](#)

^[3] McCreary Centre Society. 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey: [Balance and connection in the Northeast](#)

^[4] McCreary Centre Society. 2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey: [Balance and connection in the Northern Interior](#)

ABCs of Youth Substance Use

The [ABCs of Youth Substance Use](#) is an initiative to promote evidence-based approaches to youth substance-use education in BC schools. **A**utonomy, **B**elonging and **C**ompetencies are important protective factors that promote youth wellbeing and prevent, delay, and reduce substance-related harms.

[Northern BC Child Youth Mental Health Resource Guide \(2021\)](#)

When a child or youth is struggling with their mental health or there are concerns about substance use, it is not always clear where to go for information or support.

NH has created this guide to help youth and families find information and supports, and to provide contact information for local and virtual counselling services.

Newsletters

Northern BC K to 12 School Health Newsletter is published twice per school year, expect the fall/winter edition soon. Find past issues on the NH's [School and youth health](#) webpage under tab 'Communications from Medical Health Officers'. FYI, [Spring 2023 Edition](#) [Fall 2022 Edition](#)

[Healthier Northern Communities E-Brief](#)" Subscribe to "to get monthly updates throughout the school year for granting opportunities, health promotion initiatives, training opportunities, and resources. To subscribe, send a blank email with "subscribe" in the subject line to healthycommunities@northernhealth.ca.

Communicable Disease Preventive Measures

According to the [BC Centre for Disease Control](#) (BCCDC), students, staff, and others can take preventive actions to reduce the risk of communicable diseases in Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) school settings. Staff can attend school safely when we work together and follow public health recommendations. These include:

- Everyone eligible gets all recommended doses of COVID-19 and influenza vaccine and other publicly funded routine vaccinations.



- Schools implement and update their communicable disease plans and post onto their school website.
- Staff, parents/caregivers, and students, follow school communicable disease plans.
- Northern Health provides additional guidance when there is greater risk in a community.

Together, these steps can help prevent the spread of communicable diseases like COVID-19 and other communicable diseases in school settings. ¹

For more information, see these communicable disease guidance documents:

- [Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools](#)
- [Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines for K to 12 Settings](#)
- [Quick Guide to Common Childhood Diseases](#)
- [Sneezes and Diseases](#) website and [Sneezes and Diseases](#) resource book

Absenteeism Reporting

As of the 2017-2018 school year, NH no longer requires schools to routinely report when absenteeism is greater than 10%. We do encourage schools to track absenteeism and reasons for absences to detect situations where increased attention to infection control may be necessary.

Should you require our assistance with infection control strategies or if you become concerned about a situation involving a more urgent infectious disease (e.g. measles, mumps, or pertussis), please contact us ([see contact information on page 5](#)).

Early communication will ensure:

- Schools, students, and their families receive timely and accurate health information.
- Any necessary infection control measures are implemented promptly.
- NH can take additional action in the broader community if required.

Child/ Youth Immunization Strategy - HPV (Human Papillomavirus) Focus

Context:

- Increasing youth HPV vaccination uptake is a provincial priority, per BC's 10-year Cancer Action Plan. Vaccinating youth, when their immune systems are most responsive to the vaccine and before they become sexually active, is one of the most effective ways to prevent HPV-related cancers.
- Provincial expectation is for Health Authorities to increase access and uptake of the HPV vaccine over the next three years, moving to the elimination of cervical cancer in BC over the next ten years (by 2033).

¹ BC Centre for Disease Control (April 2022) [School staff \(BCCDC\)](#)



What's different this year in the school setting:

- When NH nurses provide routine grade 6 immunizations, only a single vaccine will be offered, rather than three. This may result in slightly shorter appointments for each youth. Some NH nurses may also reach out to school administration and grade 6 teachers about offering a lesson to address needle phobia prior to upcoming immunization clinics.
- When NH nurses provide routine grade 9 immunizations, instead of only 2, up to 3 vaccines will be offered. This may result in slightly longer appointments for each youth, and NH nurses may schedule to come into the school setting more than one time in the school year (as one of the vaccines is a 2-dose series). If this is the case, they'll be in touch with school administration to sort out details.
- In a handful of northern communities (Fort St John, Prince George, Prince Rupert, Smithers), NH nurses plan to offer HPV vaccine catch up to students in grades additional to 6&9. Some may wish to do so in the school setting, likely at the same time as routine grade 6 or 9 immunizations are provided, and if so, they'll be in touch with school administration to sort out details.

Enrollment Information Gathering



What's different this year in the school setting related to how enrollment information is collected:

- NH nurses may reach out for kindergarten, grade 6 and 9 enrollment information from schools, but only if operationally necessary to enable timely clinic planning. If timing allows, NH nurses will aim to obtain this information from electronic records instead, updated via the Student Information eXchange system (STIX)
- Last year, for awareness, NH nurses reached out to most schools for enrollment information seeking K-12 class lists to enable implementation of the Vaccine Status Reporting Regulation.
- This year should be less volume of work for school administration.

When and how to get in touch with NH and BC Emergency Health Services:

Situation	Contact
Individual(s) in need of immediate medical care	Call 9-1-1.
Urgent questions or concerns about contagious diseases:	Contact the PCC member assigned to your school from your local health unit .



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large clusters or outbreaks of common illnesses, such as gastrointestinal illness, influenza-like illness, or pink eye (conjunctivitis) • Cases of uncommon contagious diseases, such as measles, mumps, or pertussis (whooping cough) <p>Routine local planning related to non-urgent health issues such as immunizations.</p>	<p>This team will be reaching out to school principals early in the school year to provide specific contact information.</p> 
<p>To learn more about Comprehensive School Health or to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District or school priorities regarding health concerns • Health promotion, resources, or strategies • Questions about other health concerns, such as mental wellness, body image, and nutrition 	<p>Contact the Regional Nursing Lead for Healthy Schools and Youth, via email at</p>  <p>healthyschools@northernhealth.ca,</p>

To review our previous communications on school health topics, please visit NH'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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