

## Q1: Why are you delaying the return to school by a full week?

- Return to school for students in K-12 will be phased in to provide public health and BC schools additional time to learn more about the potential impacts of the Omicron variant on communities and schools, and to implement enhanced safety plans to support the safe continuation of in-class learning.
- While students will return on January 10, staff will return on January 3 and 4. This additional time for assessment and planning will allow teachers, staff and administrators to implement the updated safety guidelines and plan for potential interruptions in learning, including functional school closures due to the spread of the Omicron variant in the community.

## Q2: How can schools support working parents who will need to find child care next week, including parents who are health care workers and other essential workers?

- We know that schools play an important role in supporting students and families. Districts have been asked to prioritize supports for children of health care workers, students with disabilities and diverse abilities, and the children of other essential workers, including teachers and school staff, as their capacity allows. Parents will hear directly from their school or school district about the details and the process to access this support in their area.
- The phased return to school will also allow districts time to complete an assessment of their workforce at this time as well. Districts are to support as many families in the first week as they can, while also ensuring that the critical preparation work can happen to support a safe return to school on January 10, 2022.
- While the PHO Order does not apply to child care centres, schools and districts that operate child care are encouraged to keep them operating to support families that need child care.
- Teachers and other K-12 education staff should make arrangements with their child's local school should they require support during the phase in period if needed.

## Q3: What are the types of school closures?

There are three types of school closures:

1. **Health closure** of a school, which is determined by the local health authority due to the COVID-19 case count in, or related to, a school.
2. **Functional closure** of a school, which is determined by the school or school district due to a lack of staff to provide the required level of teaching, supervision, support, and/or custodial to ensure the health and safety of students. This would likely be due to a high absenteeism of all staff or certain employees required for a school to function and the inability to replace those absences.
3. **Transportation Closure**, which is due to a lack of staff to be able to provide the required level of transportation services for students. This would likely be due the absenteeism of bus drivers and/or mechanics and the inability to replace those absences.

#### **Q4: What enhanced safety measures are schools expected to have in place for January?**

Among the enhanced safety measures, K-12 public and independent schools must:

- Implement strategies that prevent crowding during class transition times.
  - For example, stagger start/stop times and recess/lunch breaks.
- Hold school gatherings and events (e.g., assemblies, etc.) virtually.
- Hold staff-only gatherings (e.g., meetings, professional development activities) virtually.
- Limit visitors to those who are supporting activities that directly benefit student learning and well-being (e.g., teacher candidates, immunizers, meal program volunteers, etc.)
- Pause extracurricular sports tournaments (consistent with the December PHO Order).

K-12 schools must also reinforce existing safety measures, including:

- Using all available space to maximize space between people.
  - For example, different common space, classroom, and learning environment configurations (e.g., different desk and table formations).
- Everyone able to wear a mask.
- Doing daily health checks, and staying home when sick.

The guidelines build on existing protocols that have succeeded in minimizing the spread of the virus in schools such as:

- Everyone eligible getting fully vaccinated, doing a daily health check, and staying home when sick.
- Using available space to spread out, and to respect other's personal space.
- Wearing masks in accordance with the [Provincial Health Officer Order on Face Coverings](#).
- Cleaning hands regularly.
- Cleaning and disinfecting at least once a day.

#### **Q5: Will there be any change to public notifications of school exposures or outbreaks?**

- The Ministry of Education is actively working with the Ministry of Health, local medical health officers and BCCDC to determine the process needed to communicate exposure risk. The current procedures must be updated in response to the different characteristics of the Omicron variant. Updated information will be communicated to schools and districts in the coming weeks.

**Q6: At what point does learning need to transition to online because of COVID cases or absenteeism?**

- The phased restart of school will give schools the time to develop contingency plans, including continuity of learning, in the event of functional closures in schools.

**Q7: How will at-home rapid tests be administered in schools and to families?**

- The Provincial Health Officer is expecting supply of approximately 11 million rapid tests coming in mid to late January, and public health is expanding the rapid testing strategy to various targeted settings.
- Some of these tests will be used to support continuity of in-person learning for K-12 students and staff, with 500,000 set aside for K-12 education to be deployed as needed by Medical Health Officers.
- Timing and availability are dependent on the availability of rapid tests provided by the federal government.

**Q8: Will the ministry provide N95 masks for teachers/staff/students?**

- Mask wearing will continue to be required for everyone inside schools.
- Schools will continue to provide non-medical masks for those who don't have their own masks, as has been the case throughout the pandemic.
- Any changes in a mask policy will be communicated by the Ministry of Health and the Provincial Health Officer.

**Q9: What are districts doing to address concerns related to ventilation in schools?**

- All 60 school districts in BC are doing everything required to maintain, improve, and monitor school ventilation systems to ensure the air is safe for students and staff.
- The ministry is continuing to work closely with school districts, key sector partners such as the BCTF, and others to ensure schools are properly ventilated for students and staff.
- The Ministry has retained an HVAC expert and established a Ventilation Technical Advisory Panel to provide ongoing advice on ventilation in schools.

**Q10: Do the new rules prevent parents from entering schools?**

- Schools will be limiting visitors to those that are offering services that are of direct benefit to students, like those helping with meal programs or teacher candidates.

- Schools will work with their parent community to ensure activities like drop off and pick up continue to occur safely, and that virtual options are provided when parents need to connect with their child's school (like for parent-teacher interviews).