

May 26, 2020

Dear School Administrators, Teachers, Parents and Students,

RE: Safety of the School Environment in the Interior Health Region During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As part of B.C.'s Restart Plan, schools are expected to gradually resume regular operations and return to in-class instruction using a staged approach.

Compared to adults, children are less likely to become infected with COVID-19, less likely to develop severe illness as a result of infection and less likely to transmit the infection to others. In B.C., less than 1% of children and youth tested have been COVID-19 positive. Children who have developed COVID-19 have mostly acquired it from adults in the household setting.

Additionally, COVID-19 activity in the Interior Health region has decreased significantly and there is currently very little evidence of community transmission. As a result, Interior Health believes that the risk of COVID-19 in the school environment is low and that students and staff can safely return to in-class learning as per B.C.'s plan.

Most important measures to decrease the risk of COVID-19 at school:

1. Stay home when sick. Children and staff with any symptoms consistent with COVID-19 must not attend school and should be tested for COVID-19. Symptoms are similar to other respiratory illnesses and can include: fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, stuffy or runny nose, loss of sense of smell, headache, muscle aches, fatigue, or loss of appetite.

Those who test negative can attend school once their symptoms resolve. Those who test positive will be advised by public health to stay home for at least 10 days. Students and staff who have been in close contact with a COVID-19 case should follow directions from public health and self-isolate.

Public health has not placed restrictions on students or staff who have medical conditions, who are over age 65, or who live with a person who is elderly or has medical conditions. As always, individual students and staff should follow the advice of their physicians.

2. Wash your hands frequently and practice respiratory etiquette. Hand hygiene using soap and water or alcohol based hand sanitizer regularly through the day is recommended. Wearing of non-medical masks is not mandatory, but wearing a mask is a personal choice and should be permitted. Personal protective equipment such as medical masks and gloves are not recommended in the school environment unless they are part of the regular precautions staff use for their role.

3. Support physical distancing where possible. The Provincial Health Officer's recommendation to stay 2 metres apart should be followed as much as possible, but it may not be feasible and is not expected at all times in the school setting. Physical distancing can be supported through a combination of classroom design, scheduling, monitoring, and supervision. Outdoor play and learning is recommended as COVID-19 transmission in outdoor settings is less likely.

4. Perform routine cleaning with enhanced cleaning of high touch surfaces. Schools should continue using their usual commercially-available cleaning products. Items that cannot be easily cleaned should be limited.

Further information regarding restarting B.C.'s schools is available at B.C. Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) webpage at <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/childcare-schools> and on the B.C. Government webpage at <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/program-management/safe-caring-and-orderly-schools>

Thank you for all your efforts towards a safe return to learning in our schools. The gradual and part-time return will help us prepare for a return to full-time classes in September, provided it is safe to return.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Silvina Mema', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Silvina Mema, MD MSc FRCPC
Medical Health Officer

SM/ls