

**Date:** October 14, 2021

**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 guidance and updates**

NH recognizes the dedication and efforts of everyone in the school community throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This diligence and perseverance has played an integral role in reducing the spread of COVID-19. NH will continue to provide support as we focus on pandemic recovery. With many population groups being immunized and protected with the COVID-19 vaccine we are hopeful immunization rates will continue to increase, including among your employees and students that are 12 and older.

This letter will review:

- Key considerations (page 2)
- COVID-19 public health management (pages 2-3)
- School exposure notifications (pages 3-4)
- Report of absenteeism (page 4)
- Immunization priorities for NH (pages 4-5)
- Mandatory reporting of immunization (page 5)
- COVID-19 impact (page 5)
- Mental health support (page 5)
- Prevention and management of other infectious diseases (pages 5-6)
- School health supports (pages 6)
- When and how to get in touch with NH (page 7)
- Appendix 1: COVID-19 resources to support schools (page 8-9)
- Appendix 2: COVID-19 resources that support schools and mental health (page 9)

Public health recommends following the infection prevention and exposure control measures in the Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools ([bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12](https://bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12)), BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) updated on October 1, 2021. Measures that reduce COVID-19 transmission in schools are outlined in the Hierarchy for Infection Prevention and Exposure Control Measures for Communicable disease on page 5.

## Key considerations

- Vaccination is the most effective way to reduce the risk of COVID-19 in schools and communities. The COVID-19 vaccination (two doses) remains available to everyone who turns 12 years old this calendar year and older.
- Students and staff or other adults entering the school should not come to school if they are sick or directed to self-isolate by public health. Staff, other adults entering the school, parents, caregivers and students should continue to complete a daily health check and stay home when they are sick. The K to 12 Health Check ([bit.ly/Kto12HealthCheck](https://bit.ly/Kto12HealthCheck)) (Ministry of Education) and when to get tested for COVID-19 ([bit.ly/WhentoGetTested](https://bit.ly/WhentoGetTested)) (BCCDC) are resources that can assist families in their decision making. If a student or staff member or other person develops symptoms at school, follow the process outlined on page 14 of the Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools ([bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12](https://bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12)).
- For those experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, assessment and testing continues to be available by calling their primary care provider or the virtual clinic. The NH Virtual Primary and Community Care Clinic ([bit.ly/NHVirtualPCCClinic](https://bit.ly/NHVirtualPCCClinic)) is available to all Northern BC residents 7 days a week, 10am to 10pm, at 1-844-645-7811.
- All staff, adult volunteers and visitors, and K-12 students in “bricks and mortar” schools should wear a non-medical mask or face covering (a “mask”) at school. For guidance including exceptions on non-medical masks and face coverings refer to the Personal Protective Equipment section on pages 16-17 of the Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools ([bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12](https://bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12)).
- Additional measures may be required by NH Medical Health Officers in areas identified with increased risk to prevent further transmission. Additional orders may be put in place during times of increased community transmission of COVID-19, and within communities with low vaccine uptake. For more information on Outbreaks and Clusters see page 8 of the Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K to 12 Schools ([bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12](https://bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12)).
- For additional COVID-19 resources please see [Appendix 1](#) on pages 8-9 of this letter.

## COVID-19 public health management

With many people being immunized against COVID-19, schools continue to be considered low-risk settings for COVID-19 transmission. Exposures to COVID-19 become less likely to lead to further spread as community immunity continues to increase.

Schools should continue to maintain daily attendance records for staff, students, and visitors (including teachers on call, parents/caregivers, volunteers, and field trip chaperones) and keep accurate bus lists to assist with contact tracing if necessary.

This includes maintaining attendance for all school-supported activities, including extracurricular activities and field trips. NH will remain diligent in monitoring the cases of COVID-19 and will determine if actions should be taken to prevent or control spread. NH will continue to respond and manage accordingly through the following process:

- Public health will continue to follow up any lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19, following the process outlined in the Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools ([bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12](https://bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12)) on page 7 and K-12 Schools and the COVID-19 ([bit.ly/BCCDCCasesInSchools](https://bit.ly/BCCDCCasesInSchools)) BCCDC website.
- Public health will continue gathering information from lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19 to determine how they were infected and who they were in close contact with while infectious. This could include contacts in social settings, at school, or in the community. Close contacts, are identified by using criteria such as distance, duration, and body fluid contact.
- If a person that is a lab confirmed COVID-19 case attends school while infectious public health may work with the school to determine who may have been exposed and determine what actions should be taken, and identify if other students or staff have been exposed.
- Public health will inform staff or students if they are close contacts to a lab-confirmed COVID-19 case, and give directions on what actions they should take e.g. monitor for symptoms, self-isolate, seek testing, etc. Staff and students whom are not identified as close contacts will not be contacted by public health. If a contact does not receive a phone call or letter from public health they can continue going to school.
- Schools are not required or responsible to inform close contacts or determining themselves who is a close contact, as Public health will follow up directly. NH may contact a school if needed to gather more information for contact tracing, schools are not required to do anything further unless directed by NH.
- Public health will consider vaccination status when investigating school exposures. Staff and students who are not fully immunized and are identified as close contacts are more likely to be asked to self-isolate than those who are fully immunized.

## School exposure notifications

General notifications are typically provided to those who are at greater risk for communicable disease and need to take subsequent actions beyond continuing to follow general public health recommendations.

Public health may send targeted notification letters for case and contact management. For example, a notification letter could be sent to a classroom or specific group. This is in line with notification practices for other community and workplace settings. NH Medical Health Officers will determine when exposure letters need to be sent and for whom depending on their assessment. The determination of sending a notification letter is based on several factors including, if a cluster of cases are identified or if it is necessary for contact tracing or outbreak management.

The Superintendent is notified first, who then notifies the school Principal. If the exposure is at an Independent School with no Superintendent, the Principal is notified directly.

Once the school community is informed, NH will post exposure notifications on the Public exposures and outbreaks ([bit.ly/NHExposuresandOutbreaks](https://bit.ly/NHExposuresandOutbreaks)) website under COVID-19 school

exposures. Northern Health will post notifications after contact tracing is complete for a case in a school setting, where an exposure letter has been circulated to one or more contacts within the school. **Please note:** Information will be posted to or updated on the website, *after* notification letters have been distributed to the intended recipients

## Report of absenteeism

Routine reporting to public health when absenteeism exceeds 10% is no longer required, because school absenteeism rates are not a reliable indicator of communicable disease rates in the school setting. 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 ([bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12](https://bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12)). 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.

## Immunization priorities for NH

Planning is underway in NH for childhood immunizations and COVID-19 immunization delivery for youth. NH has identified the following priorities:

- Provide regular school-aged K, 6, and 9 immunizations and catch up for students who missed immunizations due to COVID-19.
- COVID-19 immunization for youth (12 to 17 years) is a provincial priority for the 2021-2022 school year

Vaccination is the most effective way to reduce the risk of COVID-19 in schools and communities. NH will collaborate with schools to provide COVID-19 immunizations to youth to increase immunization coverage and maximize environments that enable access to immunization.

A variety of options of immunization delivery specific to communities is being offered which may include COVID-19 immunizations in school settings during school hours or after hours, youth “pop up” clinics in other community locations, and regular COVID-19 immunization clinics in community settings including health units. Schools are encouraged to share reliable COVID-19 related information with students, families, and caregivers. Information can be found on NH’s new public webpage ([bit.ly/NHCovid-19BacktoSchool](https://bit.ly/NHCovid-19BacktoSchool)). Further resources are available under Vaccination in [Appendix 1](#) on pages 8-9 of this letter.

When COVID-19 immunizations are offered on school grounds **during school hours**, a COVID-19 immunization package and consent form will be sent home to those eligible. The immunization package is to be sent home to encourage parents, guardians and representatives, and their children to review the information, discuss it, and make a decision about immunization together. The immunization package includes the consent form with instructions, NH Health Unit contact information, COVID-19 Vaccination Information Children

Aged 12-17 ([bit.ly/VaxInfo12-17](https://bit.ly/VaxInfo12-17)), HealthLink BC Files, The Infants Act, [bit.ly/MatureMinorConsent](https://bit.ly/MatureMinorConsent), and [bit.ly/HealthLinkCovid-19Vaccines](https://bit.ly/HealthLinkCovid-19Vaccines).

There is no set age in B.C. for when a child can provide consent on their own. To provide consent for getting a COVID-19 vaccine, the child must be able to understand the benefits and risks of vaccination and be able to make decisions about their own health. The health care provider giving the vaccine decides if they can provide consent on their own. Generally, children aged 13 and older are given the opportunity to consent to immunizations themselves. Children aged 12 and under will usually need a parent/guardian to provide consent. For additional information review [bit.ly/BCCDCMatureMinorConsent](https://bit.ly/BCCDCMatureMinorConsent).

## **Mandatory reporting of immunizations**

BC's Vaccination Status Reporting Regulation (VSRR) ([www.healthlinkbc.ca/vaccination-status-reporting](https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/vaccination-status-reporting)) 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. Implementation of the VSRR was paused February 2020 due to the pandemic. Further information about implementation, and associated responsibilities of schools, will be forthcoming as it is known.

## **COVID-19 impact**

As the pandemic shifts from pandemic response to recovery for the K-12 sector the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be explored. The [bit.ly/K-12EducationRecoveryPlan](https://bit.ly/K-12EducationRecoveryPlan) (B.C. Ministry of Education) was updated on August 24, 2021, which provides direction to boards of education and independent school authorities on delivery of educational programs and supports with pandemic recovery efforts. This guide assists in clarifying provincial expectations, providing guidance on key topics, and includes additional resources and information.

## **Mental health support**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many impacts on mental health including increased isolation, stress, and anxiety. It is vital to promote and protect the mental wellbeing of students and school staff ([see the attached Appendix 2 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 ([bit.ly/CommonChildhoodDiseases](https://bit.ly/CommonChildhoodDiseases)).

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 [bit.ly/ways-prevent-manage-cd-schools](https://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;
- COVID-19 immunizations to eligible youth
- Kindergarten immunizations
- 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, air quality, and indoor and outdoor gatherings (e.g. track meets). They issue permits for temporary food service. 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. For further information contact the Public Health Protection and Disease Prevention ([bit.ly/ContactsQuestionsandC-19](https://bit.ly/ContactsQuestionsandC-19)) office at [php@northernhealth.ca](mailto:php@northernhealth.ca) or 250-565-7322.



## When and how to get in touch with NH

Schools are encouraged to contact NH in the following situations:


Situation	Contact
<p>Individual(s) in need of immediate medical care.</p> <p><b>Urgent</b> questions or concerns about infectious diseases among students or staff, including:            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)            urgent COVID-19-related questions</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>or</i></p> <p><b>Routine</b> local planning related to non-urgent health issues (immunizations, education, health promotion, overdose prevention, injury prevention, mental health and wellness, etc.)</p>	<p>Call 9-1-1.</p> <p>Urgently or routinely, contact your local Primary and Community Care Team.</p> <p>This team will be reaching out to school principals early in the school year to provide specific contact information.</p>
<p>Assistance with <b>health and safety planning relating to COVID-19</b></p>	<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 NH Schools Liaison Team.</p>
<p>To learn more about Comprehensive School Health (CSH), or to discuss district priorities regarding health promotion in schools</p>	<p>Contact the Regional Nursing Lead for Healthy Schools, via email at <a href="mailto:healthyschools@northernhealth.ca">healthyschools@northernhealth.ca</a>.</p>


To review our previous communications to schools on topics such as COVID-19, immunization reporting, vaping, and others, please visit NH School and Youth Health ([bit.ly/SchoolandYouthHealth](https://bit.ly/SchoolandYouthHealth)) public 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,

  
 Dr. Jong Kim, MD MSc  
 FRCPC  
 Chief Medical Health  
 Officer  
**Northern Health**

  
 Dr. Rakel Kling, MD  
 MSc MPH FRCPC  
 Medical Health Officer,  
 Northern Interior  
**Northern Health**

  
 Dr. Raina Fumerton, MD  
 MPH FRCPC  
 Medical Health Officer,  
 Northwest and A/Northeast  
**Northern Health**

  
 Dr. Trevor Comeil, MD<sup>RC</sup>  
 FRCPC  
 Medical Health Officer  
**Northern Health**

## Appendix 1: COVID-19 resources to support schools

### Resources for schools

#### Guidelines:

- Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools ([bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12](https://bit.ly/PHCDGuidanceforK-12)) (BCCDC) 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
- Education (K-12): Protocols for returning to operation (Work Safe BC) (<https://www.worksafebc.com/en/covid-19/bcs-four-step-restart>). Protocols for K-12 education providers that include guidance for school administrators, teachers, bus drivers, and others that support the school community.

#### Websites:

- School COVID-19 Information (BCCDC) (<http://www.bccdc.ca/schools>) provides information and FAQs on how to keep risk low for COVID-19 in schools.
- COVID-19 safe schools ([bit.ly/BCGovCOVID-19SafeSchools](https://bit.ly/BCGovCOVID-19SafeSchools)) provides information on COVID-19, including guidelines and resources.

#### Handouts:

- Home Learning During the Pandemic for Students with Concussions ([bit.ly/LearningforConcussions](https://bit.ly/LearningforConcussions)) (GF Strong School Program) tip sheet to help students learn from home and manage common concussion symptoms

### Resources for children and youth with neurodevelopment diagnoses

- Resources for Families and Support Teams of Children and Youth with Neurodevelopment Diagnoses (e.g., Autism, FASD) during COVID-19 (NH) ([bit.ly/resources-neurodevelopmental-diagnoses](https://bit.ly/resources-neurodevelopmental-diagnoses))

### Immunization resources

- Handout:
  - COVID-19 Vaccination Information for Children Aged 12-17 (BCCDC) ([bit.ly/VaxInfo12-17](https://bit.ly/VaxInfo12-17)) for information including how to register and book an appointment.
- Websites:
  - COVID-19 Vaccine (BCCDC) ([www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/covid-19-vaccine](https://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/covid-19-vaccine))
  - COVID-19 ImmunizeBC ([immunizebc.ca/covid-19](https://immunizebc.ca/covid-19))
  - Health Gateway (Government of B.C.) ([www.healthgateway.gov.bc.ca/](https://www.healthgateway.gov.bc.ca/)) Individuals can access their electronic record of COVID-19 immunization through registering at Health Gateway.
  - COVID-19 community toolkit (NH) ([bit.ly/C-19CommunityToolkit](https://bit.ly/C-19CommunityToolkit)) toolkit for partners to use to promote immunization and encourage people to visit their local clinic, pop up, or drop in clinic.
  - COVID-19 vaccine plan (NH) ([bit.ly/NHC-19VaccinePlan](https://bit.ly/NHC-19VaccinePlan))



- [KidsBoostImmunity.com](https://kidsboostimmunity.com) (Public Health Association of BC, UNICEF Canada). Free curriculum resources on immunization and related topics. Includes lesson plans and quizzes developed by teachers and health professionals.

## Appendix 2: COVID-19 resources that support schools and mental health

### Support Services

- Child & Youth Mental health and Substance Use Resource Guide for Families (NH) ([bit.ly/CYMHSUResourceGuide](https://bit.ly/CYMHSUResourceGuide))
- Northern BC residents can call to speak to a nurse, family doctor, or nurse practitioner for information, health advice, or virtual health screenings and assessments by contacting NH Virtual Clinic ([bit.ly/NHVirtualPCCClinic](https://bit.ly/NHVirtualPCCClinic)): 1-844-645-7811
- [BounceBackBC.ca](https://BounceBackBC.ca) or [AnxietyCanada.com](https://AnxietyCanada.com) for help with mental health and anxiety

### Electronic resources

- Mental Wellbeing during COVID-19 (BCCDC) ([bit.ly/BCCDCMentalWellBeing](https://bit.ly/BCCDCMentalWellBeing)) offers tips for supporting mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic
- COVID-19-Mental Health Resources (Child Health BC) ([www.childhealthbc.ca/covid-19-mental-health-resources](https://www.childhealthbc.ca/covid-19-mental-health-resources)) includes tips for children, youth, parents and other mental health and wellbeing resources
- Returning to School During COVID-19 (BC Children's Hospital and Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre) ([keltymentalhealth.ca/info/returning-school-during-covid-19](https://keltymentalhealth.ca/info/returning-school-during-covid-19))
- Stigma Free Toolkit (Stigma Free Society) is a COVID-19 based Online Wellness Program to support youth mental health at home ([stigmafreetoolkit.com/youth-corner/downloadable-resources/](https://stigmafreetoolkit.com/youth-corner/downloadable-resources/))