
NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2021HLTH0079-002460
Dec. 29, 2021

Ministry of Health
Ministry of Education

Enhanced safety measures, delayed return to school to support safe, in-person learning

VICTORIA – A full return to school for students in kindergarten to Grade 12 will be delayed until Monday, Jan. 10, in order to give public health and B.C. schools additional time to adapt to the impacts of the Omicron variant on communities and schools, and to implement enhanced safety plans to support the continuation of in-class learning.

During this time, schools will be open for limited numbers of students in particular need. Districts will be communicating out to families about how this process will work.

“Schools have safety protocols in place that have kept students and staff in school over the past two years, but as the pandemic changes, our protocols must change, too,” said Dr. Bonnie Henry, provincial health officer. “That’s why schools will be implementing enhanced public-health measures to ensure we can continue the in-person learning that is so important for well-being and mental health.”

The delayed return is supported by an Order from the Provincial Health Officer, which applies to all public and independent schools in British Columbia. While students will return on Jan. 10, staff will return on Jan. 3 and 4. This will allow schools to implement enhanced safety measures and proactively implement continuity of learning plans.

“We know how important it is for students to return to safe, in-person learning,” said Jennifer Whiteside, Minister of Education. “This extra time will allow the Ministry of Education and public health to better understand the impact of the Omicron variant on the education system, and school communities to prepare for students returning to class with enhanced safety measures. Safety is our top priority, and we’re going to keep working with public health to ensure the right measures continue to be in place to keep students and staff safe.”

The Ministry of Education has developed an addendum to the Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines for K-12 settings based on public health’s current knowledge of the Omicron variant. The guidelines were developed in collaboration with the BC Centre for Disease Control, Indigenous rightsholders and education partners, including teachers, parents and school administrators. As the ministry has done throughout the pandemic, safety measures for schools will continue to be updated as needed in consultation with public health.

K-12 schools must 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., avoid face-to-face seating arrangements where possible).
- Everyone able to wear a mask.
- Doing daily health checks, and staying home when sick.

K-12 public and independent schools must also implement enhanced safety measures, such as:

- Implement strategies that prevent crowding during class transition times.
- Hold school gatherings and events (e.g., assemblies, etc.) virtually. If they must be in-person, limit the number of people to no more than 50% operating capacity.
- Hold staff-only gatherings (e.g., meetings, professional development activities) virtually whenever possible.
- 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.

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

- Encouraging everyone who is eligible to get fully vaccinated.
- Using available space to spread out and to respect personal space.
- Wearing masks in accordance with Provincial Health Officer Order on Face Coverings: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/covid-19/covid-19-pho-order-face-coverings.pdf>
- Cleaning hands regularly.
- Cleaning and disinfecting all surfaces at least once a day.

As the Province awaits new rapid tests shipments from the federal government, B.C.'s existing supply of rapid tests will continue to be used at schools where there has been exposure events and outbreaks. When new federal shipments of take-home rapid tests arrive in mid-January, their use will be scaled up with 500,000 tests deployed as needed to support the safe continuation of in-person learning.

Transmission in B.C. schools reflects transmission in the community and schools with consistently implemented prevention measures have proven to be lower risk throughout the pandemic. The government is committed to continuing to support safe in-person education in recognition of its positive impact on the intellectual, social and emotional development of students. Schools also provide important supports for children, such as meal programs and mental-health supports.

Learn More:

To learn more about COVID-19 vaccines for children:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/vaccine/children>

To see the addendum to the Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/safe-caring-orderly/k-12-covid-19-health-safety-guidelines-addendum.pdf>

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