
NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Ministry of Education

2020EDUC0040-001415

July 29, 2020

Plan to safely bring K-12 students back to class full time

VICTORIA – Enhanced safety measures and additional resources will enable most students in grades K-12 to return to school on Sept. 8, 2020, with full-time in-class learning as the province moves to Stage 2 of B.C.'s Education Restart Plan.

"The classroom is an essential part of a child's social, academic and mental development, and that's why we are working hard to ensure students can safely spend the next school year with their teachers and classmates," said Rob Fleming, Minister of Education. "We were the only jurisdiction in Canada that brought students back into the classroom provincewide before the end of the school year and this has given us valuable information that we are using to develop our plans, ensuring health and safety at schools remain paramount."

On the advice of the provincial health officer, students will be organized into learning groups, a consistent group of staff and students. This will reduce the number of people each student or staff member will come into contact with, reducing the risk of transmission and ensuring quicker contact tracing by health authorities.

All boards of education and independent school authorities will continue to be required to implement a suite of health and safety measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, following the recently updated guidelines from the BC Centre for Disease Control.

"We know how important it is for children to be back in school – to both support their emotional and mental health and their ability to socialize and to learn," said Dr. Bonnie Henry, B.C.'s provincial health officer. "Being back in school is also crucial to support many parents in being able to work, but we must do it safely. We ask for families and workplaces to continue to be flexible as we come into the fall. We've put a lot of thoughtful work and consideration into reopening schools this fall and in making sure we're supporting children in ways that keep them, the people who teach them and our communities safe."

To support and ensure the health and safety of students and staff during this pandemic, a one-time investment of \$45.6 million as part of the BC COVID-19 Action Plan will support school districts and independent schools for the start of the school year. This investment will ensure the increased cleaning of high-contact surfaces, increased number of hand-hygiene stations and the availability of masks upon request, among other safety measures.

Staff and students (or their parents/guardians) must also assess themselves daily for symptoms of COVID-19. If any student or staff member has even mild symptoms, arrangements will be made for that person to return home.

The ministry is developing operational guidelines that will further assist school districts and independent schools with their planning for September. An education steering committee

including teachers, parents, Indigenous rightsholders, support staff, principals and vice-principals, school trustees and the public health sector has also been established to identify best practices and find solutions to potential issues.

“B.C. will continue to keep a strong focus on science-based decisions as we learn to adjust the delivery of education during the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Stephanie Higginson, president of the B.C. School Trustees Association. “Boards of education across the province will utilize updated health and safety measures, created on the advice of the provincial health officer, to ensure that students can continue to receive the social, emotional and academic supports provided by their community school during this critical time in education.”

Families will hear from their school district or independent school throughout the summer with updated health and safety guidelines for elementary, middle and secondary schools, as well as learning groups, schedules, enrolment and registration information with the final details being submitted to the ministry and posted online by the districts on Aug. 26, 2020.

“The safety of students and staff is paramount and government will continue to make science-based decisions, following the expert advice of Dr. Henry and her public health team,” Fleming said.

Quotes:

Andrea Sinclair, president, BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC) –

“BCCPAC thanks our dedicated board members who have worked on the different restart committees to ensure equity, inclusion, health and safety, and educational programming remain at the forefront in the planning for a return to school in September. Parents should feel assured that as things progress and evolve over the coming weeks, the Ministry of Education will be working directly with BCCPAC and our education partners to ensure student safety remains a top priority.”

Paul Faoro, president, CUPE BC –

“We are pleased to see the provincial government recognize the critical work our members do to keep schools clean, safe and inclusive. The additional investment of resources will help ensure the necessary level of custodians to ensure that schools are properly cleaned and that students and staff are safe in our schools. The June reopening of schools showed that under the guidance of provincial health officer Bonnie Henry, we can safely welcome students and staff back to schools in September. We look forward to continuing to work with the provincial government and all education partners to ensure we’re all ready for September.”

Learn More:

For more information on the K-12 Education Restart Plan, visit:
gov.bc.ca/covid19returntoschool

To find a local school district, visit: <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/schools/bcmap.htm>

Two backgrounders follow.

Contact:

Ministry of Education
Government Communications and Public
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BACKGROUND 1

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Keeping students, teachers and staff safe in B.C schools

The June school restart saw almost 200,000 students safely return to the classroom, giving students a chance to acclimatize to new safety protocols and ensuring the Province has important information to plan for the 2020-21 school year.

The Ministry of Education has developed a five-stage approach to operate schools, depending on risk of transmission and direction from health authorities, ensuring school districts can make a quick transition if there is a second wave or a community outbreak. Schools were in Stage 3 in June 2020, with most kids in the classroom part-time. Under enhanced safety protocols, the Province is now moving to Stage 2 of the education plan.

To support and ensure the health and safety of students and staff during this pandemic, a one-time investment of \$45.6 million as part of the BC COVID-19 Action Plan will support school districts and independent schools for the start of the school year.

This investment includes \$23 million for more staff and staff time for cleaning schools, \$9.2 million for improving and increasing access to hand hygiene and \$5.1 million for cleaning supplies and \$3.1 million to independent schools. There will be \$2.2 million to ensure reuseable face masks are available to staff if they choose to wear one, and for all students who need to travel on school buses or public transportation outside of their learning group. This funding also includes \$3 million to support remote learning, such as technology loans or software to support students with disabilities or complex needs.

More updated health and safety measures include:

- Increased cleaning of high-contact surfaces like door knobs, keyboards, desks and chairs; increased hand hygiene with all students, staff and visitors being required to clean their hands before boarding school buses and entering school buildings, before and after eating, using the washroom and using playground equipment.
- School districts may also install transparent barriers for people who have more contact with others, such as front desk staff, bus drivers or food services staff, where appropriate.
- Older students and staff may use masks in situations where the person is interacting outside their learning group and cannot maintain physical distance for an extended period of time. This includes riding the bus to school where a student may be sitting next to a person outside of their household or learning group. These masks will be available upon request.
- If students or staff are mixing outside their learning group for electives, extracurricular activities, sports or social clubs, they will need to maintain physical distancing of two metres, while younger students will be encouraged to minimize physical contact.

- If space is available, students should have their own seat or sit with family members on school buses.
- Extracurricular activities in middle and secondary schools, including sports, arts or special interest clubs can occur if physical distance can be maintained between members of different learning groups and reduced physical contact can be practised by those within the same learning group.
- All students and staff who have travelled outside of Canada are required to self-isolate for 14 days under both provincial and federal orders. This includes students who are attending school from abroad.

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BACKGROUND 2

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Learning groups

To get the most students back in full-time in-class instruction in September, the Office of the Provincial Health Officer created cohorts (learning groups) to reduce the number of close, in-person interactions.

Learning groups are groups of students and staff who remain together throughout the school year and who primarily interact with each other.

Cohorts (learning groups) will be no more than 60 people in elementary and middle school and no more than 120 people in secondary school. It will not be necessary for students in a learning group to all be in the same class, but they will be able to interact and connect with each other as a consistent group during breaks, in common areas like the gym, library, or at the playground.

Limiting the number of people each student or staff member comes into contact with will reduce the risk of transmission and will ensure quicker contact tracking.

Learning groups are smallest in elementary and middle schools because it is more challenging for younger students to maintain physical distance. Older students are better able to minimize physical contact, practice hand hygiene and recognize if they are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.

Each school district and independent school authority will plan for their local needs based on their school populations and classroom space available.

Elementary schools

- Elementary schools will remain organized into classrooms as students' primary learning environment.
- Most elementary schools in the province can return to full-time in-class instruction with minimal modifications to school bell schedules and timetables.

Middle schools

- Middle schools that follow an elementary school model (for instance, one classroom with one teacher) will be organized like elementary schools, with minimal modifications to school bell schedules and timetables.
- Middle schools that follow a "junior high" model, where students move from class-to-class and take a range of subjects taught by different teachers, may need to be reorganized for full-time, in-class learning.

Secondary schools

Secondary school students will continue to be organized in classrooms, ensuring students still have access to electives and they will be able to reconfigure their learning group for each new semester. Some schools may reorganize how they offer courses, such as allowing students to take two courses at a time every 10 weeks.

Small secondary schools

- There are 96 public secondary schools and 49 independent schools that have fewer than 800 students. These schools will likely require only minor modifications to their bell schedules or timetables to ensure a safe, full-time return to the classroom for all students.

Medium-sized secondary schools

- There are 104 public secondary schools and one independent school with between 800 and 1,500 students. They will need to consider modifications to their bell schedules and timetables to accommodate students in the classroom full-time.

Large secondary schools

- There are 16 public secondary schools with between 1,500 and 2,000 students, located primarily in the Lower Mainland and the Okanagan.
- For these larger secondary schools, school districts are looking at a variety of options to maximize in-class learning and, in rare cases, may need to offer a hybrid approach with a blend of remote online and self-directed learning.
- Students with disabilities, those who need extra support in school and children of essential service workers will continue to receive full-time, in-class learning.

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