

May 21, 2020

Dear School Administrators, Teachers, Staff, Parents and Students,

Re: Safety of the school environment in the Vancouver Coastal Health region during the COVID-19 pandemic

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

Although children are often at increased risk for viral respiratory illnesses, that is not the case with COVID-19. 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. Children who have developed COVID-19 have mostly acquired it from adults in the household setting.

Additionally, COVID-19 activity in the Vancouver Coastal Health region has decreased significantly and there is currently very little evidence of community transmission. As a result, Vancouver Coastal 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 BC's plan.

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

1. Stay home when sick. Children and staff with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 should not come to school and should be tested for COVID-19. Those who test negative can attend school once their symptoms resolve. Those that test positive will be advised by public health to stay home for at least 10 days. Children and staff who have been in close contact with a COVID-19 case should follow directions from public health and self-isolate.

There is no public health restriction on students or staff with medical conditions or age over 65 or who live with somebody who is elderly or has medical conditions from working in the school environment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As always, individual students and staff should follow the advice of their physicians.

2. Wash hands frequently and practice respiratory etiquette. Hand hygiene using soap and water or alcohol based hand sanitizer regularly through the day is recommended. Non-medical masks are not needed or recommended but wearing a mask by personal choice 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 is important and 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 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.

COVID-19 Public Health Guidance for the K-12 School Settings is available here:
https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/covid-19/covid-19_k-12_school_guidance_-_2020_may_15_-_final.pdf

For further advice regarding COVID-19 in the school setting, contact your school Public Health Nurse or School Medical Officer. School administrators may also consult with a VCH Environmental Health Officer (ehvc@vch.ca) regarding their school safety plans.

Sincerely,



Mark Lysyshyn MD MPH FRCPC
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Vancouver Coastal Health