

## **Back to school Q&A with Dr. Ariella Zbar**

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### **1. Are schools going back to normal this school year?**

While schools will look closer to normal in September, we're not back to normal just yet. Students can expect a full return to classrooms in September. COVID-19 prevention measures are still needed since children under the age of 12 cannot get vaccinated yet, and more people have yet to receive the protection of two doses of COVID-19 vaccine. While effective prevention measures are still in place, there will be more opportunities for activities, sports and interactions that are important for learning.

### **2. What prevention measures will schools have in place?**

Staff and students will be familiar with many of the health and safety measures for the coming school year:

- Completing a daily health check and staying home when sick
- Spreading out as much as possible and going outside more often
- All K to 12 staff, students in grades 4 to 12, and visitors are required to wear masks in all indoor areas
- Practicing diligent hand hygiene and cleaning/disinfection practices
- Recommending everyone over the age of 12 receive two doses of COVID-19 vaccines

### **3. Will quarantine still be required (staff and students) if they travel outside of Canada?**

The requirement to quarantine after international travel is determined by the Federal government and is updated often. It is the onus of staff and families to abide by all travel restrictions and orders.

### **4. Is school safe for my child?**

Schools remain a lower-risk setting for COVID-19. Since September 2020, we have learned a lot about COVID-19 and the prevention measures that will keep staff and students safe. Based on what we have learned, the province, in consultation with the education sector and health authorities have updated health and safety guidelines that will continue to provide effective prevention, while allowing greater opportunities for learning and development.

### **5. Why are cohorts no longer required?**

Cohorts or learning groups were initiated to reduce the number of interactions people had. We have since learned it was the type of interaction that mattered, more than the number of interactions. COVID-19 is most often spread through prolonged social interactions and for the most part a school case had limited spread in-school. Cohorts also restricted the type of learning and social opportunities that could occur in schools. This year will see a return to normal groupings of students and staff.

**6. Why are we not requiring a physical distance of 2 meters anymore?**

Keeping your distance is still an important prevention tool and schools will continue to maintain space between people, by using all available space, preventing crowding at drop off and pick up times, managing the flow of people in common areas, including hallways and around lockers. We can also remind students to respect people's personal space by role modeling the behaviour, signs and visual supports.

**7. Why are masks not required for students in kindergarten to grade 3?**

Schools were a lower-risk settings last year. We expect it to be the same this year, including in elementary schools where most students cannot be vaccinated yet, because effective prevention measures continue to be in place and most adults are vaccinated. The best way to protect those who can't be vaccinated is for everyone eligible to get two doses of COVID-19 vaccine. This is especially important for adults who interact with children under 12.

Mask use in the K-3 student population is encouraged, as they do provide some protection from COVID-19. However, additional layers of prevention remain in use to reduce the spread of COVID-19 among younger students who may be less able to consistently wear a mask.

**8. Why is it important to get vaccinated and can it protect those who aren't yet eligible?**

Vaccines are an incredibly effective and important tool in our fight against COVID-19. Most people in B.C. are vaccinated and this is providing protection in our communities and schools, and is the reason we are able to return to a near-normal.

Our data analysis from spring 2021 showed that when staff vaccinations occurred along with an increase in general vaccination rates, we saw a decrease of COVID-19 in vaccinated individuals, but we also saw a decrease in the unvaccinated student population. We continue to encourage every eligible person to be fully vaccinated to protect themselves and those who are not yet eligible to get vaccinated

**9. Is it safe for my child to start participating in extracurricular activities?**

Extracurricular and inter-school activities can occur in line with local, regional and provincial public health recommendations. This may mean that events and activities may be different in one area than another and sometimes activities may need to be put on pause.

Schools continue to have a number of effective health and safety measures in place so that extracurricular activities can occur as safely as possible. Students will need to wash their hands frequently, be asked not to share equipment and sports should be held outside when possible. Extracurricular activities will follow local, regional and provincial public health recommendations and the order for community events and gatherings.

**10. Will visitors be able to attend extracurricular events and field trips this year?**

Parents and visitors will once again be able to participate in many of the fun events, such as field trips and extracurricular activities. Having two doses of the COVID-19 is one of the best ways of protecting students under 12 who cannot be vaccinated. These type of activities and participation by visitors must follow all current province-wide and regional restrictions.

**11. What will happen if our community sees an increase in COVID-19 cases?**

Schools remain a reflection of the broader community – if cases begin to rise in the community we can expect to see more cases in schools. To better respond to community differences, local health orders may be put in place. A local Medical Health Officer may issue a recommendation for an individual school, a group of schools, a school district or all schools within the health authority region, to implement specific additional health and safety measures during times of increased risk.

Additional regional measures are likely to be similar to those in place during the 2020/2021 school year and could include:

- Limits on gatherings and events
- Modifying room arrangements or using more activities that maximize space between people and reduce face-to-face contact
- Limiting visitors
- Increasing mask use

One of the best ways to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the community is getting your two doses of COVID-19 vaccine.

**12. Is it safe for staff to start meeting in person? How can we protect ourselves in meetings?**

School staff may feel comfortable to start meeting in person, but should be considerate of each other's comfort levels and need for personal space. When in-person meetings are held, people should be spread out as much as possible and use all available space. Masks should be worn by staff. Meetings must follow all relevant public health guidance. Getting two doses of COVID-19 vaccine is one of the best ways to protect one another from COVID-19.

**13. Are the disinfecting products and electrostatic sprayers safe for use around children? Why can't the district use a more natural cleaner (like vinegar and water) to clean schools?**

All products used in schools are approved for use by Health Canada.

**14. What happens if there is a COVID-19 exposure at school? Will I be notified?**

Public health will continue to provide case and contact management for all positive cases of COVID-19 in schools during the 2021/22 school year. Schools are a priority setting for contact tracing.

If a student or staff member is confirmed to have COVID-19, and were potentially infectious while they were at school, public health will investigate to determine if there were any potential close contacts within the school.

If it is determined that there are close contacts within the school, public health will notify the school administrators and request information to assist with contact tracing and provide guidance on what steps should be taken.

Public health may then:

- Recommend 14-day self-isolation if necessary
- Recommend self-monitoring for symptoms if necessary
- Provide follow-up recommendations if necessary

Schools will ensure students who are required to self-isolate are able to continue their educational program. Together, schools and public health officials will determine if any other actions are necessary.

Parents, caregivers and families will be notified by public health if their child is determined to be a close contact of a COVID-19 positive person.

As per provincial direction, public health will notify only those staff and students who will need to take a specific action as a result of a COVID-19 exposure. This includes individuals who will need to isolate or self-monitor as a result of an exposure. The school community will be notified when appropriate, such as in the case of an outbreak, and this will be posted to our website.

If you are not contacted, there is no action for you to take and your child can continue to safely attend school.

#### **15. Are schools a priority for contact tracing?**

Schools remain a priority setting for contract tracing and we do have specific questions that we ask to get a full picture of where the student or staff member was during the period of potentially be infectious.