

September 3, 2020

Dear Parents/Guardians of Alberta students:

With the 2020-21 school year starting up, I wanted to reach out with a few reminders. We're all going to need some help as we navigate the upcoming weeks and make our children's school experience as comfortable as possible while we manage our own anxiety about what a school experience in a time of COVID-19 looks like.

Adjusting to living with COVID-19

Let me start by saying I'm a parent too. I know that all of us want the best for our children whether they are going back to a classroom or you're supporting their learning at home. This pandemic is hard for everyone. Our kids are not going back to the same school environment they left in March. Things will not look or feel the same this year. For my family, I truly believe that returning our children to in-person classes is part of ensuring their overall health. You may feel differently and your decisions must be made in the best interest of your family. Whatever your choice, your school authority has a program to suit your decision and my team is working to support your school authority.

Public health guidance for schools

We have been working with our partners in Alberta Education and Alberta Health Services (AHS) to develop the guidance for school re-entry. Your children's schools and their school authorities have plans for putting this health guidance into action. I believe that this is the right next step to getting Alberta's students back to classes in a way that reduces COVID-19 risks in our schools, but also considers other aspects of their health. My team and I will be closely watching the return to school experience to use this information to adjust our public health advice if needed. I have committed to posting any new orders Monday through Thursday, and will share information when new orders get posted online via social media, and at my regular updates.

If everyone works together to follow the public health guidance, we can help keep one another safe. Please screen your child daily for any symptoms with the list your school has provided. If your child is sick, please keep them home and arrange for them to be tested for COVID-19 through AHS. Appointments can be booked online at www.ahs.ca/covid. Some of you may have heard that it isn't worth getting tested because it takes too long to get results. AHS is working hard to improve testing turnaround times and result notification, because it is so important to be able to get a test and results as quickly as possible.

Schools have put in place enhanced cleaning and disinfecting, physical distancing plans and cohort plans for students. Your school has developed a plan for implementing these measures within its specific setting. It is important that all members of your school community follow this plan to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Clarification of mask requirement

As a part of the safety measures to reduce COVID-19, mask use for students in grade 4 through 12, and all staff and visitors is provincially required. This applies to all staff in all settings outside of seated classroom instruction where physical distancing of two metres cannot be maintained. Students will be required to wear masks in all shared and common areas, including hallways and on the school bus.

We recognize that wearing a mask all day during instruction may have impacts on communication and learning for children. The mask policy and guidance announced in early August has always stated that masks are not required when children are seated at their desks. Where two meters is not possible between desks or tables, students should be arranged with the greatest distance possible between them, and so they are not facing each other, such as in rows, so they are not likely to cough or sneeze directly on the face of another student. If close contact between students, or students and staff is occurring due to a non-seated activity, non-medical face masks should be used for the duration of the activity.

While the above information on the mask requirement has been part of our guidance for several weeks, it was formally adopted on August 29th through Order 33-2020. This order was finalized and issued over the weekend before schools started with the intent to ensure that school authorities could review the order before it came into effect on August 31st. The order does not change the policy or my advice for guidance in schools. I am sorry for any anxiety or confusion that this order may have caused.

How to help your child prepare

You are critical in supporting your children to manage these changes. I know that it can be hard for children to stay at a distance from friends or to stay in one cohort. It is natural for children of all ages to want to be close to their friends and play together, especially after having been apart for a long time. You can help by talking to your child about the changes they will see in their school, helping them become comfortable with wearing a mask, showing them how to wash their hands and teaching them about the importance of keeping physical distance where possible. It is also important to help our children remember to be compassionate to others who may forget the new rules or are unable to wear a mask. Supporting each other to adjust to the new normal will be our best long-term defence.

Dealing with cases of COVID-19 in schools

Despite all the measures that will be taken in your child's school, I expect there will still be some cases of COVID-19 in school settings. My team has developed a resource guide to help school communities understand what tools are available when responding to COVID-19 in school settings. That includes what to do when there are symptomatic

students or staff in the school, what to expect when a case or outbreak is identified and information to provide to the school community. This COVID-19 School Outbreak Resource Guide can be found online at alberta.ca/ReturnToSchool.

You will be notified if there are any cases of COVID-19 at your child's school. Our partners at AHS public health will work closely with school administrators to ensure that all close contacts of any COVID-19 case are identified and informed as quickly as possible. You will also be made aware of any additional public health measures being implemented at the school.

Supporting mental health

With the big changes to our children's lives over the past several months, it is natural that they may be feeling anxious or fearful. If you need any supports for your children or for your own mental health, you can find resources at the AHS website "[Help in Tough Times](#)". Please don't hesitate to reach out to any of the resources listed there if you need them.

Conclusion

Finally, I want to say thank you for your continued efforts to help slow the spread of COVID-19. Successful re-entry depends on all members of our school community working together to ensure the safety of all those attending school. We are all in this together.

I wish your family a safe return to school.

Yours sincerely,

Deena Hinshaw, BSc, MD, MPH, CCFP, FRCP
Chief Medical Officer of Health

For more information on school re-entry, please visit: alberta.ca/ReturnToSchool.