



# Relaxing COVID-19 restrictions in schools

## Questions and answers for school authorities

As announced on [February 8, 2022](#), the government is taking steps to begin relaxing COVID-19 measures, including in schools. As of Monday, February 14, 2022, provincial health orders will not require early childhood services (ECS) to Grade 12 students to be masked to attend school in person or ride a school bus.

### Implementation

#### **Why remove mask requirements for students and not adults?**

- At this time, masking will still be required for adults including teachers, administrators and other school staff including bus drivers.
- If COVID hospitalizations continue to trend downwards, mandatory masking for adults will end March 1, 2022.
- The government is taking a phased approach to removing restrictions, rather than lifting all restrictions at once, and will monitor health system capacity as we do so. Step 2 will come into effect on March 1, 2022, if hospitalization numbers continue to trend down, and will include removing the broader provincial mask mandate at that time.
- It is important to keep layers of public health measures in these settings as we ease, so that we can continue to minimize transmission.

#### **Is data available on the decision to remove masking for students at this point in time?**

- As of Monday, February 14, 2022, provincial health orders will not require early childhood services (ECS) to Grade 12 students to be masked to attend school in person or ride a school bus.
- Alberta's rolling seven-day average positivity rates have dropped across the province, and measures such as wastewater surveillance have shown a general decrease in most regions of the province. The government is continuing to watch trends and taking a prudent approach to easing measures, similar to what is being done in many other jurisdictions.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all Albertans, including children, who have had their lives and schooling disrupted over the past two years. The government has aimed to balance the risks of COVID-19 to children with the impacts caused by public health restrictions. Such measures can have an adverse effect on the physical, mental and social development of children.

#### **Are school authorities able to keep mask mandates in place?**

- As of Monday, February 14, 2022, provincial health orders will not require early childhood services (ECS) to Grade 12 students to be masked to attend school in person or ride a school bus. School authorities cannot deny their students access to education due to their personal decision related to wearing a mask in schools.
- Every child in Alberta is entitled to have access to an education program as per Section 3(1) of the Education Act.
- School authorities cannot put a policy in place at the expense of students being able to access in-person instruction.
- School authorities cannot discriminate against a student if they choose to wear a mask.

#### **Can students voluntarily wear masks in schools?**

- As of Monday, February 14, 2022, provincial health orders will not require early childhood services (ECS) to Grade 12 students to be masked to attend school in person or ride a school bus. Students can continue to wear masks if they choose to. Schools should support children and youth who choose to wear masks.

### **Can students access at-home learning if they are not comfortable learning in person without masks?**

- Every child in Alberta is entitled to have access to an education program as per Section 3(1) of the *Education Act*.
- Educational programming should be delivered in a manner that best meets students' needs, where operationally feasible.
- School authorities cannot deny their students access to education due to their personal decision related to wearing a mask in schools.

### **Are school authorities still able to transition a class or a portion of a school to at home learning?**

- Yes. The same processes are in place.
  - School authorities continue to have the discretion to shift a class or individual grade to short-term at-home learning if needed to address operational challenges at a school.
  - Approval from the Minister of Education is required for a short-term shift of one or more schools or an entire school authority to at-home learning for operational reasons.
  - A decision for a school authority request will be based on student absentee rates, the ability of a school or school authority to have staff available to operate in-school classes, and other relevant information including local health data, if available.

### **Will the department provide some thresholds for student or staff absence in a school to precipitate a request to at-home learning?**

- The same processes will remain in place. These include recognizing student and/or staff absences as part of the rationale for a shift to at-home learning.
- The government will continue to recognize and allow for local and individual context in these submissions. Impacts of staff and student absences will vary depending on the specific school (e.g. those focused on specialized supports), type of staff absent (administrators) and region (bus drivers in a rural or remote area).

### **In communicating to parents, can school authorities encourage students to wear masks if they choose to do so?**

- As of Monday, February 14, 2022, provincial health orders will not require early childhood services (ECS) to Grade 12 students to be masked to attend school in person or ride a school bus. Authorities are encouraged to consider the intent of this communication. It should align with the overall approach of returning to more normal school operations.

### **Are students required to mask in kitchen settings such as a cooking class?**

- As of Monday, February 14, 2022, provincial health orders will not require early childhood services (ECS) to Grade 12 students to be masked to attend school in person or ride a school bus. Masks will also no longer be required for children aged 12 and under in any setting.
- This includes kitchen and food services.
- Students can continue to wear masks if they choose to do so. Schools should support children and youth who choose to wear masks.

### **What about students who may be at risk, such as those with medical conditions?**

- As of Monday, February 14, 2022, provincial health orders will not require early childhood services (ECS) to Grade 12 students to be masked to attend school in person or ride a school bus. Students can continue to wear masks if they choose to do so. Schools should support children and youth who choose to wear masks.
- Preventative public health measures remain in place in schools, including cohorting (grades K-6) and enhanced cleaning.
- Students, parents/guardians, staff and visitors are encouraged to assess their personal risk factors and/or the risk factors for their families and take precautions that make sense in their situations.
- Schools should support these personal choices, whenever possible.

### **Should other measures (such as enhanced cleaning and cohorting) be maintained?**

- Yes. Public health measures remain in place in schools. At this time, prevention measures including cohorting (grades K-6), enhanced cleaning and sanitization will remain in schools.
- There have been some positive lessons during the pandemic, such as regular handwashing and staying home when sick that likely should continue beyond the response to COVID.
- Please refer to [Guidance for Schools \(K-12\) and School Buses](#) and [General Operations Guidance](#) for guidance on cleaning and disinfection.
- Cohorting is required under CMOH order 08-2022, for grades K-6.
- If COVID hospitalizations continue to trend downwards, then the government will move to Step 2 on March 1. In Step 2, remaining school requirements will be removed.

### **Should we continue to use online access for large gatherings?**

- Alternate options would be encouraged until March 1, 2022, when remaining school restrictions are lifted.

### **Can school authorities continue visitor access policies, such as asking guests and parents not to come into the school?**

- School authorities have the autonomy and flexibility to put local policies in place, as long as this does not deny their students access to education due to their personal decision related to wearing a mask in schools.
- School authorities cannot require parents, volunteers, spectators or other non-school employees to show proof of vaccination.
- Parents, volunteers, spectators and other non-school employees are required to follow all provincial health orders and guidelines that are applicable in schools.

## **Mask/test/HVAC**

### **Is Alberta Education still sending medical grade masks and at-home rapid test kits to schools?**

- The entire second shipment, with a few possible exceptions, has already been sent out. This shipment will be delivered and then mask deliveries will stop.
- This shipment includes a 4-week supply of medical masks as well as a box of five at-home rapid test kits for every student and staff member who wants to continue to use them.

### **Should school authorities continue to distribute the masks we receive? Can school authorities donate the masks?**

- School authorities can determine how best to use the masks they receive.
- School authorities should recognize the intent of the distribution of masks (for students and staff) and ensure staff and students/parents who would like to have these masks continue have access to them.
- Adults will still be required to mask in school settings.

### **Can school authorities send the masks back to the government?**

- Unfortunately, the government is not able to accept return shipments. However, as masking is still mandatory for adults, school authorities may choose to redistribute the masks to adults within the school community or local groups that need them.

### **Is there any updated information on air filtration?**

- An email was provided on February 2, 2022 with information. This has not changed.
- Key information on Alberta's considerations for managing COVID-19 and respiratory illness, including ventilation, can be found in the general guidance document, which was made available to school boards in August 2021. This provincial guidance is informed by guidance from the Public Health Agency of Canada on indoor ventilation and COVID-19.

## **Vaccination and the Restrictions Exemption Program (REP)**

### **What are the vaccination requirements for staff?**

- Vaccines remain the most effective way to ensure less severe COVID-19 outcomes.
- Vaccine requirements for employees remain within the purview of the employer. Employers should follow applicable employment & health and safety legislation. Should a school jurisdiction wish to retain or remove these requirements they should suggest they seek legal advice.

**Are school authorities able to require proof of vaccination for visitors to the school?**

- School authorities cannot require parents, volunteers, spectators or other non-school employees to show proof of vaccination.
- Parents, volunteers, spectators and other non-school employees are required to follow all provincial health orders and guidelines that are applicable in schools.

**Are guidelines for spectator events still in place for spectator events in schools?**

- Effective February 9, the REP came to an end.
- For all facilities – whether they were previously eligible for the REP or not – capacity limits are removed, except for:
  - Facilities with capacity of 500 to 999, which will be limited to 500.
  - Facilities with capacity of 1,000-plus, which will be limited to 50 per cent.
- Individuals may temporarily remove their masks while in their seats to eat or drink.
- Physical distancing is recommended, but not required between families.

**What about children 13 and over who are spectators in recreation activities in the school?**

- Spectators at events who are 13 and older would need to wear a mask at a school-based spectator event.
- As of Monday, February 14, 2022, provincial health orders will not require early childhood services (ECS) to Grade 12 students to be masked to attend school in person or ride a school bus. Outside of schools, the provincial direction in step 1 is for everyone 13 and older to wear a mask in public places.
- School authorities cannot require parents, volunteers, spectators or other non-school employees to show proof of vaccination. Parents, volunteers, spectators and other non-school employees are required to follow all provincial health guidelines.

**Isolation requirements and daily checklist**

**If students are out of school for symptoms, will they need to do the daily checklist?**

- The daily health checklist remains in place.
- The decision to remove mandatory isolation requirement, making it a recommendation only, will not be considered until step 3. This is contingent on hospitalizations continuing to trend downward.
- The government will consider the recommendation to have it as a guiding document once we reach step 3.
- The Alberta government continues to encourage Albertans to stay home when they feel unwell.

**Do children still have to wear masks for five days after COVID infection?**

- These requirements remain in place.
- For fully vaccinated, the isolation period is 5 days or until their symptoms resolve. They can return to work or school and complete the remainder of their isolation (day 6 to 10) by continuous, mandatory masking. They must not share breaks where masks must be removed to consume food or beverages with non-COVID-19 infected individuals. If more than one individual is isolating, it is possible to cohort people with COVID-19 for breaks and lunch.
  - no exceptions are permitted for the masking following the isolation period

**Can school authorities send students home who are not well?**

- Schools should continue to refer to their operational guidelines when dealing with students who are not well.