



Health and
Wellness

Prince Edward Island COVID-19 Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021 - 2022

August 2021

Department of Health and Wellness
Chief Public Health Office

Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

INTRODUCTION

This document is intended to support planning for the 2021-2022 school year and to help inform students and their families on what they can expect in terms of public health measures. It is aligned with PEI's *Moving Forward* plan for easing public health measures.

The combined efforts of PEI students, teachers, families, administrators and school staff helped make the 2020-2021 school year as close to normal as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students attended in-class learning and participated in sports and extracurricular activities, teachers, parents, and school staff embraced public health measures with determination, and cases of COVID-19 were minimal and quickly addressed, with support from the Chief Public Health Office.

The 2020-2021 school year was not without challenges. Cohorting of students, masking requirements, and physical distancing, among other measures, were necessary to minimize the transmission risk of COVID-19 and facilitate contact tracing and follow up in the event of an outbreak.

The 2021-2022 school year will be different. Before the school year begins, it is projected that 80% of the eligible PEI residents will be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Mandatory COVID-19 public health restrictions continue to be lifted, as per PEI's *Moving Forward* plan. Schools will not be under the same restrictions that were in place last year, and all students in PEI will be able to learn in-school and participate in activities to an even greater extent than last year.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing. The evolution of the fourth wave in Canada this fall, driven by the more transmissible and virulent Delta variant, means that Islanders must remain informed and adaptable. Students under age 12 who are not yet eligible to be vaccinated, other individuals who are not fully vaccinated, and those who are immune compromised or who have underlying medical conditions, are at higher risk of being negatively impacted by the fourth wave.

As such, ongoing public health measures are recommended to support the operation of schools during the 2021-2022 school year and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on students, staff, and school communities. Ongoing measures include vaccination, screening and managing symptoms of COVID-19, hand hygiene, cleaning and disinfection.

Enhanced measures may be recommended in response to elevated COVID-19 risk situations.* These enhanced measures including masking, cohorting, and physical distancing. For young children (Grades K to 6), cohorting is a more effective strategy than physical distancing, which is difficult to enforce among young children and can negatively impact social interaction that is central to childhood development. For older students (Grades 7 to 12), masking and physical distancing are more effective strategies than cohorting, which is difficult to implement due to the structure of education delivery in those grades.

Public health will continue to offer individual and community guidance and recommendations to manage the risk of COVID-19 in PEI. Measures to minimize community transmission throughout PEI will also continue, including testing if symptomatic, isolation of COVID-19 cases, and contact tracing, as well as other time limited interventions such as border screening and testing and isolation for unvaccinated travellers, as needed.

* COVID-19 risk is determined by the Chief Public Health Office by assessing a number of indicators, including rates of vaccination among the eligible PEI population, COVID-19 transmission in the community, the impact of a fourth wave of COVID-19 locally and nationally, and the impact of new variants of concern.

Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

PRINCIPLES AND FACTORS

The Back-to-School 2021-2022 public health guidance is informed by the following core principles:

- Minimizing COVID-19 transmission in the community is key to supporting in-school learning.
- The safety of students, staff, and school communities is essential.
- Full-time in-person instruction is vital to student learning and overall health and well-being.
- Peer-to-peer interaction and school-based activities maximizes social development.
- Some ongoing measures are recommended for schools throughout in the 2021-2022 school year, and other enhanced measures will depend on the level of risk in the community.

These principles are influenced by the following factors:

- Rates of vaccination are high among the eligible PEI population.
- Adults are much more likely to experience severe illness or death from COVID-19, with risk increasing with age. The majority of children and youth who become infected with COVID-19 are either asymptomatic or have mild symptoms.
- A fourth wave of COVID-19 is being driven by the Delta variant.
- Children under age 12 are not currently eligible for vaccination.
- Vaccines are not expected to be authorized for children ages 5-11 until late fall or early winter.
- Indoor spaces like school buildings are a higher risk than outdoor spaces.

ONGOING PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES

Vaccination

Being fully immunized is our best defense against COVID-19. Once fully vaccinated, most people will be well-protected against COVID-19, meaning:

- The risk of serious illness is much lower;
- The risk of others catching the virus from you is reduced; and
- It is likely you will have good protection against infection, including against most of the identified variants of concern.

The more individuals in PEI that are immunized, the more protection we have and the less risk of exposure in the community.

Vaccine measures in schools:

- It is recommended that eligible students, staff, volunteers and families be fully vaccinated against COVID-19.
- Public health will support vaccination among staff, students, volunteers and parents.
- Public health will provide aggregate data on student immunization rates.

Managing Symptoms of COVID-19

COVID-19 is an illness caused by a coronavirus. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause respiratory illnesses. The virus is most commonly spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes, and the droplets land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or inhaled into the lungs. People may also catch the virus from touching contaminated surfaces, then touching the eyes, nose or mouth without washing hands.

A list of COVID-19 symptoms is available [here](#). When assessing for COVID-19 symptoms, it is important to think about the time of year and what is usual for the person.

Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

Staying home when sick or exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 will help protect others from exposure to the virus. Being tested is also important to help to identify if COVID-19 is circulating in the community and to limit further transmission.

Measures for screening and managing symptoms in schools:

- Exclusion policies are in place for symptomatic students, staff and visitors.
 - Daily self-screening for symptoms of COVID-19 is recommended for students, staff, and visitors. A [COVID-19 screening tool](#) will be available.
- Students, staff, and visitors should stay home when unwell. If experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, they should get tested. Testing guidance may evolve over time; refer to the most up-to-date guidance.
- Schools should follow procedures for students and staff who become sick during the school day.
- If students develop symptoms while at school:
 - They should be given and wear a medical mask, unless there are safety issues that prevent the person from wearing a mask.
 - Parents or guardians should be notified to come and pick up their child immediately and follow public health advice regarding testing and isolation.
 - If the student is young and requires close contact and care while isolated at school, staff can continue to care for the child until the parent is able to pick up the child. Caregivers should be mindful of hand hygiene and avoid contact with the respiratory secretions of the student. The staff person caring for the child should wear a mask.
- If staff/visitors develop symptoms while at school:
 - They should be given and wear a medical mask (unless there are safety issues that prevent the person from wearing a mask), immediately isolate themselves from other staff and students, notify their administrator, return home and follow public health advice regarding testing.
- For anyone who develops symptoms at school:
 - Shared items should be cleaned and disinfected as per guidelines.
 - Staff, students, and visitors should wash their hands before and after touching any items used by the person with symptoms.
- If testing for COVID-19 is advised and students, staff, and/or visitors with symptoms have tested negative for COVID-19, they may return to school if they are feeling well and symptoms have resolved.
- Schools should not notify staff or students' families (other than the family of the ill student) if a staff member or student becomes ill at home or at school, including if they display symptoms of COVID-19, unless directed to do so by public health.

Hand Hygiene

Hand hygiene is a simple and effective defense against COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Hand hygiene includes hand washing with soap and water or using alcohol-based sanitizer. Hand washing with soap and water mechanically removes pathogens from the hands, and alcohol-based sanitizers are effective at inactivating the virus that causes COVID-19. Key times for performing hand hygiene include before and after eating, after using the washroom, and before and after using shared equipment. Conducting hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene may be a particular challenge among children, particularly younger age groups.

Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

Hand hygiene measures in schools:

- Students, staff, and visitors should perform hand hygiene frequently during the day; hand washing with soap and water is preferred when hands are visibly soiled.
- Students, staff and visitors should be encouraged to practice frequent hand hygiene and proper respiratory etiquette, using age-appropriate interventions.
- Handwashing supplies and alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol should be made available throughout the school.
- Signage on personal hygiene etiquette such as handwashing, and sneezing and coughing etiquette, should be clearly posted throughout the school.

Cleaning and Disinfection

Proper cleaning with soap and water or approved cleaning products, as well as disinfection with approved sanitization products, can remove and inactivate viruses from commonly touched surfaces and materials.

Cleaning and disinfection measures in schools

- Regular cleaning and disinfection schedules with additional focus on frequently touched objects like door handles, railings, and waste containers, and shared equipment like sports equipment, both in schools and on buses.
- In an elevated COVID-19 risk situation*:
 - Enhanced cleaning and disinfection schedules for frequently touched surfaces, particularly between cohorts or where no cohorting is possible.

Ventilation

COVID-19 is primarily transmitted by aerosols and respiratory droplets during close contact and is transmitted also over a longer range through aerosols especially in poorly ventilated indoor areas. Well-ventilated indoor spaces help decrease the risk of COVID-19 and other respiratory illness transmission. Risk of transmission of COVID-19 is reduced outdoors.

Ventilation measures in schools

- Improvements to ventilation systems are recommended in schools where they do not meet standards.
- It is recommended that ventilation systems be maintained to appropriate standards.
- It is recommended to open windows when possible, and if weather permits.

ENHANCED PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES

Masking

Non-medical masks assist in the reduction of respiratory droplets being spread through regular speaking, breathing, and coughing and sneezing. Mask mandates have been proven to associate with lower incidence of infection in schools.

Masking measures in schools

- Mask requirements are adjustable depending on the COVID-19 situation in the community.
- Masks are recommended for staff and visitors who are not fully vaccinated.

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Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

- Masks are recommended for staff who work with students who are at higher risk of severe illness and outcomes from COVID-19 whenever physical distancing is not possible, regardless of vaccination status.
- In low-risk scenarios where there are minimal COVID-19 cases in the community:
 - Masks are not required in school or on school buses.
 - It is the choice of the student or staff to wear a mask if they choose.
 - Anyone who wants to wear a mask is supported in doing so.
- In an elevated COVID-19 risk situation*:
 - Masks are recommended for staff, students, and visitors in all grades when transitioning through school buildings.
 - Masks are recommended for staff in classrooms in Grades K to 6 when physical distancing is not possible.
 - Masks are recommended for staff, students, and visitors at all times in Grades 7 to 12 when physical distancing is not possible.
 - Masks are recommended for staff and students in all grades on school buses.
- The Chief Public Health Office recommends some mask measures remain in place as a short-term measure until October, with further assessment at that time. These measures include:
 - Masks are recommended for staff, students, and visitors in all grades when transitioning through school buildings. Masks may be removed when seated classrooms.
 - Masks are recommended for staff in classrooms in Grades K to 6 when physical distancing is not possible.
 - Masks are recommended for staff and students in all grades on school buses.

Cohorting

Cohorting of students and staff into small, consistent groups of 50 or fewer people, with minimal interaction between cohorts, was implemented during the 2020-2021 school year to slow the potential spread of COVID-19 by limiting close contacts within a school population. Cohorting assists the contact tracing process, permitting rapid identification of close contacts of a positive case.

Cohorting is generally feasible in kindergarten to Grade 6 and in schools with small populations but becomes more difficult to implement in Grades 7 to 12 due to the structure of education delivery in those grades.

Cohorting measures in schools

- In low-risk scenarios where there are minimal COVID-19 cases in the community:
 - Cohorting is not required in school or on buses.
- In an elevated COVID-19 risk situation*:
 - Cohorting may be recommended in Grades K to 6, for both staff and students, during classroom learning, recess, and breaks.
 - Cohorting is not recommended in Grades 7 to 12 unless the school population is small enough that it can be effectively implemented.
 - Students should sit with consistent groups on the bus.
 - Visitors should be limited to essential activities supporting learning.

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Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

Physical Distancing

Physical distancing (maintaining at least 2m/6ft from people outside of your own household) is extremely difficult to implement in a school and classroom setting without extensive classroom infrastructure and human resource investment, and/or alternative instructional models (for example, hybrid in-class and online instruction). As well, physical distancing is disruptive to regular social interaction that is central to childhood development.

Physical distancing measures in schools

- In low-risk scenarios where there are minimal COVID-19 cases in the community:
 - Physical distancing is not required, however preventing crowding in indoor common spaces (e.g. entrances, hallways, gymnasiums, buses) is encouraged.
- In an elevated COVID-19 risk situation*:
 - Physical distancing measures may be recommended in Grades 7-12, including, but not limited to, classroom desk configuration, locker/cubby access, cafeterias, and flow control in hallways and stairwells.
 - Physical distancing may be recommended for staff areas.
 - Staff and students in all grades may be encouraged to practice physical distancing where possible with people from outside of their close social groups and/or cohorts (if cohorts are in place).
 - It is recommended that students find alternative means of transportation other than bussing, when reasonable, including walking, bicycle riding, and parent/guardian drop-off and pick-up.

GATHERINGS AND EVENTS

Gatherings and events, including assemblies, extracurricular activities, and school sports can occur following current community public health measures (e.g. gathering limits of 200 outdoors, 100 if the activity includes close contact, and 100 indoors).

School administration should give consideration to hosting in-school gatherings, assemblies, and extracurricular activities in Grades K to 6 as the students in those grades are not fully vaccinated. Alternatives to in-person gatherings may be appropriate.

VULNERABLE STUDENTS AND STAFF

Students and staff considered vulnerable or immunocompromised can attend school; however, they may want to consult with their health care provider. People who are immune compromised may not mount a full immune response to vaccination, and some may not be eligible for vaccination. Parents/caregivers and staff should discuss their situation and work with the education provider to adapt learning scenarios as appropriate.

PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

The support of parents and guardians is key to ensuring a successful school year, especially as we transition out of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021-2022.

- Vaccinating yourself and eligible children is the best measure to ensure ongoing operation of schools and in-person learning for the upcoming school year.

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Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

- Other measures such as proper hand hygiene and keeping students home when sick will support in-person learning.
- Enhanced measures such as masking, cohorting, and physical distancing may be recommended depending on the COVID-19 situation and recommendations may be different based on the age group or grade.

COMMUNITY USE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES

Community use of school facilities and access to buildings should follow community public health measures.

OPERATIONAL PLANS

Schools should have operational plans, including for the elevated risk scenarios.

CASES, CONTACT TRACING AND OUTBREAK MANAGEMENT

Managing cases of COVID-19

If there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 connected with a school, public health will lead the response and provide guidance and support. Contact tracing will be done to identify the close contacts of a positive case and inform those who may have been exposed.

Measures for managing cases of COVID-19 in schools:

- The Chief Public Health Office will work with school authorities in order to:
 - Identify cases,
 - Identify close contacts,
 - Initiate testing and isolation measures when needed, and
 - Provide follow-up recommendations to prevent further spread of COVID in the school community.

Outbreak Management

An outbreak in a school is defined as two or more lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases in students and/or staff (or other visitors) in a school with an epidemiological link, within a 14-day period, where at least one person could have reasonably acquired their infection in the school (including transportation and before/after school care). Two or more unrelated cases associated with a school would be considered a COVID-19 cluster.

Examples of reasonably having acquired infection in school include:

- Known exposure in the school setting; or
- No obvious source of infection outside of the school setting.

Outbreak management measures in schools:

- The Chief Public Health Office will support school officials regarding decision-making for enhanced measures in schools in outbreak situations, including the potential of moving to online learning.
- Communication to parents, guardians and staff regarding case(s) of COVID-19 in a school will be the responsibility of the school administration, with support from the Chief Public Health Office.

Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

GUIDANCE SUMMARY TABLE

Table 1 provides an overview of the guidance in this document.

Table 1: Overview of Public Health Measures Based on Low and Elevated COVID-19 Risk in K-12 Schools

	Low-Risk Ongoing Public Health Measures	Elevated Risk Enhanced Public Health Measures
Vaccination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Vaccination rates for those eligible are expected to be 80% or higher when school starts in the fall. When vaccine is approved for 5-12 yr. olds everyone who is able will be encouraged to get fully vaccinated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continue following guidance for ongoing measures.
Screening and Managing Symptoms of COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Daily home or self-screening for symptoms of COVID-19 using the COVID-19 symptom screening tool is recommended for staff, students, and visitors. ○ If experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, get tested; testing guidance may evolve over time, refer to the most up to date information on the testing webpage. ○ Schools should follow procedures for students, staff and visitors who become sick during the school day. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continue following guidance for ongoing measures.
Hand Hygiene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Frequent hand hygiene and proper respiratory etiquette is encouraged throughout the day, using age-appropriate interventions. ○ Handwashing supplies and alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol should be made available throughout the school. ○ Signage on personal hygiene etiquette such as handwashing, and sneezing and coughing etiquette, should be clearly posted throughout the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continue following guidance for ongoing measures.
Cleaning and Disinfection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Regular cleaning and disinfection schedules with additional focus on frequently touched objects like door handles, railings, and waste containers, and shared items, like sports equipment, both in schools and on buses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Increased frequency of cleaning and disinfection for frequently touched surfaces, particularly between cohorts or where no cohorting is possible.
Ventilation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improvements to ventilation systems are recommended in schools where they do not meet standards. ○ It is recommended that ventilation systems be maintained to appropriate standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continue following guidance for ongoing measures.

Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

	Low-Risk Ongoing Public Health Measures	Elevated Risk Enhanced Public Health Measures
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It is recommended to open windows when possible, and when weather permits 	
Masking	<p><i>The Chief Public Health Office recommends some mask measures remain in place as a short-term measure until October 2021, with further assessment at that time. These measures include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Masks are recommended for staff, students, and visitors in all grades when transitioning through school buildings. ○ Masks are recommended for staff in classrooms in Grades K to 6 when physical distancing is not possible. ○ Masks are recommended for staff and students in all grades on school buses. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Masks are recommended for staff and visitors who are not fully vaccinated. ○ Masks are recommended for staff who work with students who are at higher risk of severe illness and outcomes from COVID-19 whenever physical distancing is not possible, regardless of vaccination status. ○ Masks are not required for students in school or on school buses. ○ It is the choice of the student, staff, or visitor to wear a mask if they choose. ○ Anyone who wants to wear a mask is supported in doing so. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Masks are recommended for staff, students, and visitors in all grades when transitioning through school buildings. ○ Masks are recommended for staff who work with students who are at higher risk of severe illness and outcomes from COVID-19 whenever physical distancing is not possible, regardless of vaccination status. ○ Masks are recommended for staff in classrooms in Grades K to 6 when physical distancing is not possible. ○ Masks are recommended for staff, students, and visitors at all times in Grades 7 to 12 when physical distancing is not possible. ○ Masks are recommended for students in all grades on school buses.
Cohorting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cohorting is not required in school or on buses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cohorting may be recommended in Grades K to 6, for both staff and students during classroom learning, recess, and breaks. ○ Cohorting not recommended in Grades 7 to 12 unless the school population is small enough that it can be effectively implemented. ○ Students should sit with consistent groups on the bus. ○ Visitors should be limited to essential activities for supporting learning.
Physical Distancing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Physical distancing is not required, however, preventing crowding in indoor common spaces (e.g. entrances, hallways, gymnasiums, and buses) is encouraged. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Physical distancing may be recommended in Grades 7-12, including, but not limited to, classroom desk configuration, locker/cubby access, cafeterias, and flow control in hallways and stairwells.

Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

	Low-Risk Ongoing Public Health Measures	Elevated Risk Enhanced Public Health Measures
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Physical distancing may be recommended for staff areas. ○ Physical distancing may be encouraged with people from outside of their close social groups and/or cohorts (if cohorts are in place).
Gatherings and Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gatherings, assemblies, and extracurricular activities are permitted, however, consideration should be given to the risk associated with these activities in Grades K to 6 and in schools with larger populations. Alternatives to in-person gatherings may be appropriate. ○ Gatherings and school sport activities must follow current community public health measures (e.g. gathering limits of 200 outdoors, 100 if the activity includes close contact, and 100 indoors). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continue following guidance for ongoing measures.
Vulnerable Students and Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Vulnerable students and staff can attend school; they may want to consult with their health care provider. ○ Alternative education plans (e.g. online learning) for those individuals who are at higher risk of COVID-19 and are not attending in person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continue following guidance for ongoing measures.
Community Use of School Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Community use of school facilities and access to buildings should follow current community public health measures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Community use of school facilities and access to buildings should follow current community public health measures.
Operational Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Schools should have operational plans, including for the elevated risk scenarios. CPHO review and approval is not required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School applies operational plan for elevated risk scenario.
Bussing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Occupancy may return to normal levels for K-12. Masking not required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Alternative means of transportation other than bussing are encouraged, where reasonable, including walking, bicycle riding, and parent/guardian drop-off and pick-up. ○ Masks are recommended for students in all grades on school buses.
Cases, Contact Tracing, and Outbreak Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Public health will continue to manage cases of COVID-19 through isolation and contact tracing in the event there is a positive case associated with a school. Schools should continue to maintain accurate attendance records and class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continue following guidance for ongoing measures.

Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2021-2022

	Low-Risk Ongoing Public Health Measures	Elevated Risk Enhanced Public Health Measures
	and bus lists to assist with contact tracing, if required.	