

August 13, 2021

Dear parents and guardians of Alberta students,

With the 2021-22 school year starting up, I want to share information with you about what this school year will look like.

The safety and well-being of our children is what all of us want most. While there is no perfect solution to the very challenging problem COVID-19 presents, what I can tell you is I have studied the issue, examined the research and looked at our own data here in Alberta. I considered both evidence of COVID infection risks as well as the impacts that restrictions have had over the past 18 months on the mental health, learning and social interaction of our children.

As your Chief Medical Officer of Health, and as a parent of children in school myself, I believe the provincial approach we are taking balances the many competing risks our children face, and moves to a sustainable framework that can also protect kids from other risks such as influenza and other viruses. We cannot eliminate COVID-19, which means we must all learn to live with it, including in our schools.

Public health guidance

To prevent and manage all respiratory illnesses in schools, we have developed a guidance document that helps children safely stay in the classroom and considers all aspects of their health and well-being. In addition to the general guidance, if an outbreak of any respiratory sickness happens in a school, local health officials will work with school staff on additional measures as needed.

The general guidance includes an important practice that all of us need to follow: that anyone sick with symptoms of COVID-19 or any respiratory virus stay at home until they are well. COVID-19 testing availability for those with symptoms has been extended for six weeks to provide an additional monitoring period during the start of school, and it will remain a legal requirement for those with COVID-19 to stay home for 10 days during this time.

There has been much discussion about masks, and the use of face masks in indoor settings is one intervention that can decrease the risk of transmission of all respiratory illnesses. On the other hand, it can interfere with communication and interpersonal interactions, and last year was not mandated provincially in kindergarten through grade 3 for that reason. While masks are no longer required across the province, it is an expectation that schools continue to support those students and staff who choose to continue wearing a mask. In addition, I believe that local policy on measures in schools needs to be informed by local perspectives and context. School boards have the ability to implement additional measures where they deem it appropriate.

My team and I will be monitoring the back to school experience closely. We are continuing to watch COVID-19 in Alberta and will recommend any adjustments if needed.

Vaccines

The most important thing that adults and older children can do to protect themselves and others is to be fully immunized. Vaccines are safe and effective and protect against severe illness and outcomes. Together we are building a protective shield around those for whom the vaccine is not yet available.

Global studies are well underway to measure how COVID-19 vaccine works in children under 12. Until vaccines are approved for this age group, younger children rely on older Albertans who are immunized to strengthen our defenses to protect everyone in our province.

This is why, before the school year begins, I am asking all eligible students, parents, guardians, staff and teachers to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Now is the perfect time to add a vaccine appointment to your back to school list. The school year begins for most students in just a few weeks, and it takes about two weeks to develop the highest protection after getting your second dose.

To help make vaccine as accessible as possible, we also plan to offer COVID-19 vaccines in schools, like we already do as part of the routine school immunization program. Providing immunizations in school ensures we will be able to reach all eligible students in the province. More information will be provided to parents and guardians in the coming days, as parental consent will be required for in-school immunizations.

We have been through a lot in the past year and a half, and our kids' lives in particular have been profoundly changed. COVID has taken a lot from them by the impacts of the measures we needed to protect our communities. Vaccines have changed our community risk, and I believe it is now critical to make decisions for our children by looking at the landscape of all the risks they face, not just COVID infection. I will be monitoring closely what happens as this new school year begins, and will not hesitate to look at additional measures as required. I have said throughout the pandemic that we are all in this together, and this remains true. I deeply care about, and am committed to, the overall health of all in Alberta and I thank you for how you care for your families and communities every day.

I wish your family a safe return to school.

Yours sincerely,



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