

Considerations for Re-Opening BC First Nation Schools

May 27, 2020

Based on the advice of the Provincial Health Officer, on March 17, 2020, the BC Ministry of Education announced the suspension of in-class instruction in public and independent K-12 schools. On May 15, 2020, the Ministry announced that K-12 public and independent schools will resume in-class instruction on a part-time basis beginning June 1st.

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and First Nations Schools Association (FNSA) fully respect the authority of First Nations to make decisions in the best interest of their schools and communities. Understandably, many First Nations have decided to maintain the suspension of in-class instruction. For those First Nations considering a partial or complete re-opening of school, FNESC and FNSA have compiled a number of resources and relevant considerations, recognizing that the safety and well-being of students, staff, families, and communities is the highest priority.

Our intention is not to recommend when and how First Nation schools should resume in-class activity. Rather, the purpose of this document is to support First Nations in planning to address the complex realities of delivering in-class education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following information is adapted from the new BC Ministry of Education Resource, [Provincial COVID-19 Health and Safety Guidelines for K-12 Settings](#), which was informed by the guidelines of the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) and WorkSafe BC. We appreciate that not all of the advice will be suitable for all First Nation schools and that certain points may require further adaptation to suit local situations.

We will update this document as new information and guidance becomes available from the Provincial Health Officer or Ministry of Education. You can find this resource and others on FNESC's [COVID-19 information page](#), which includes links to [additional health and hygiene resources](#) as well as [suggestions for continuous learning](#).

PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES

The Provincial Health Officer's Order for Mass Gatherings continues to prohibit gatherings and events of more than 50 people, however, this Order does not apply to regular school activities. As such, there can be more than 50 students and staff in a school at any given time if they are not all in one area and if they are engaged in physical distancing to the greatest extent possible. However, large assemblies of staff and students should not be held.

Should children, youth, and staff have common cold, influenza, or COVID-19-like symptoms they must stay at home and be assessed by their health care provider and tested for COVID-19. If a person is found to be a confirmed case of COVID-19, thorough contact tracing and management by the appropriate health authority will be needed.

ENVIRONMENTAL MEASURES

Cleaning and Disinfection

Regular cleaning and disinfection are essential to preventing the transmission of COVID-19 from contaminated objects and surfaces, as described in the BCCDC's [Cleaning and Disinfectants for Public Settings document](#).

This includes:

- Clean and disinfect the premises at least once a day.
- Clean and disinfect frequently-touched shared surfaces at least twice a day. (e.g. door knobs, light switches, toilet handles, tables, desks, chairs, electronic devices, keyboards and toys).
- Clean and disinfect any surface that is visibly dirty.
- Use common, commercially-available detergents and disinfectant products and follow the instructions on the label.
- Limit items that are not easily cleaned (e.g. fabric or soft items).
- Empty garbage containers daily.
- Wear disposable gloves when cleaning blood or body fluids (e.g. runny nose, vomit, stool, urine).
- Wash hands before wearing and after removing gloves.

The Ministry of Education has indicated that there is no evidence that the COVID-19 virus is transmitted via textbooks, paper, or other paper-based products. As such, there is no need to limit the distribution of books or paper based educational resources to students because of COVID-19.

Additional Considerations

Recognizing facilities across the education system vary, consistent with BCCDC guidelines, First Nation schools may also choose to include the following in their health and safety plan to reduce the risk of transmission:

- Providing paper hand towels rather than hand dryers.
- Disabling water fountains.
- Provision of cleaning products for common devices and materials used for the delivery of education (e.g. photocopiers, supply rooms, etc.).

ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES

Physical Distancing and Minimizing Physical Contact

Physical distancing (e.g. maintaining a distance of 2 metres between individuals) is challenging in a K-12 school setting, particularly with younger students. As such, it is reasonable to establish different expectations for varying age levels and activities. For example, younger students should be supported to have minimized physical contact with one another, while older students and adults should seek to maintain a safe physical distance whenever possible.

The following physical distancing strategies should be implemented where possible in the K-12 school setting:

- Avoid close greetings (e.g. hugs, handshakes). Regularly remind students about keeping their hands to themselves.
- Spread people out into different areas:
 - Consider different classroom and learning environment configurations to allow distance between students and adults (e.g. different desk and table formations).
- Organize students into smaller groups that stay together throughout the day.
- Strive to minimize the number of different teacher(s) and educational assistant(s) that interact with groups of students throughout the day (e.g. minimize the amount of mixing between student and different staff in the setting).
- Stagger pick-up and drop-off times (including bussing).
- Stagger recess/snack, lunch, and class transition times to provide a greater amount of space for everyone.
- Take students outside more often.
 - Organize learning activities outside including snack time, place-based learning, and unstructured time.
 - Take activities that involve movement, including those for physical health and education, outside.
 - Reassure students and parents that playgrounds are a safe environment, and encourage appropriate personal hygiene practices before, during, and after outdoor play.
- Incorporate more individual activities or activities that encourage more space between students and staff.
 - For younger students, adapt group activities to minimize physical contact and reduce shared items.
 - For adolescent students, minimize group activities and avoid activities that require physical contact.
- Manage flow of people in common areas, including hallways.

- Parents and caregivers and other non-staff adults entering the school should be minimized as much as is practical to do so. They should also be reminded to practice diligent hand hygiene and maintain physical distance when they are in the school.
- Assemblies and other school-wide events should be held virtually to prevent a large number of people from gathering in one space.

Student Transportation on Buses

Consider cleaning and disinfecting buses and vans used for transporting students according to the guidance provided in the [BCCDC's *Cleaning and Disinfectants for Public Settings* document](#).

Additional measures should be taken, including:

- Encourage private (e.g. parents or caregivers) vehicle use where possible to decrease transportation.
- Consider installing a physical barrier between the driver and passengers (e.g. plexiglass).
- Have students sit in their own seat.
 - Students should be separated side-to-side and front to back.
 - Students from the same household can share seats if space is limited.

PERSONAL MEASURES

Stay Home When Sick

The following personal measures are very important for preventing the spread of COVID-19.

- All students and staff who have symptoms of COVID-19 OR travelled outside Canada in the last 14 days OR were identified as a close contact of a confirmed case or outbreak should stay home and self-isolate, including children of essential service workers who are ill.
- Parents and caregivers should assess their child daily for symptoms of common cold, influenza, COVID-19, or other infectious respiratory disease before sending them to school.
- Staff should assess themselves daily for symptoms of common cold, influenza, or COVID-19 prior to entering the school.
- School Administrators should ensure school staff are aware of their responsibility to assess themselves daily for symptoms of common cold, influenza, COVID-19 or other infectious respiratory disease prior to entering the school.
- School Administrators should develop a local protocol that:
 - Clearly communicates with parents and caregivers their responsibility to assess their children daily before sending them to school.
 - Establishes appropriate conduct and process for school drop-off and pick-up.

- Establish procedures for students and staff who become sick while at school to be sent home as soon as possible.
- Staff and students who are ill should not be permitted to attend school (note: students and employees should stay home until deemed healthy to return).
- Those unsure of if they or a student should self-isolate should be directed to use the [BC COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool](#).
 - If concerned, they can be advised to contact 8-1-1 or the local public health unit to seek further input.
 - They can also be advised to contact a family physician or nurse practitioner to be assessed for COVID-19 and other infectious respiratory diseases.

Hand Hygiene

Rigorous hand washing with plain soap and water is the most effective way to reduce the spread of illness. Both students and staff can pick up and spread germs easily, from objects, surfaces, food, and people. Everyone should practice diligent hand hygiene. Parents and staff can teach and reinforce these practices amongst students.

How to practice diligent hand hygiene:

- Wash hands with plain soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Antibacterial soap is not needed for COVID-19.
- If sinks are not available (e.g. students and staff are outdoors), use alcohol-based hand rub containing at least 60% alcohol.
- If hands are visibly soiled, alcohol-based hand rub may not be effective at eliminating respiratory viruses. Soap and water are preferred when hands are visibly dirty.
- To learn about how to perform hand hygiene, please refer to the [BCCDC's hand washing poster](#).

Strategies to ensure diligent hand hygiene:

- Hand hygiene stations should be set up at the school entrance, so everyone can perform hand hygiene when they enter and throughout the day (e.g. placing alcohol-based hand rub dispensers at the front entrance; put up [posters](#) to promote the importance of regular hand washing).
- Regularly remind staff and students about the importance of diligent hand hygiene.
- Incorporate additional hand hygiene opportunities into the daily schedule.
- Ensure hand washing supplies are well stocked at all times including soap, paper towels and where appropriate, alcohol-based hand rub with a minimum of 60% alcohol.
- Staff should assist younger students with hand hygiene as needed.

Respiratory Etiquette

Students and staff should:

- Cough and sneeze into their elbow sleeve or a tissue. Throw away used tissues and immediately perform hand hygiene.
- Refrain from touching their eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Refrain from sharing any food, drinks, unwashed utensils, cigarettes, or vaping devices.

The Ministry of Education has communicated that wearing cloth or homemade masks, particularly for children, is not recommended. Wearing cloth or homemade masks is a personal choice and it is important to treat people who choose to wear one with respect. Parents, caregivers, and staff can teach and reinforce these practices amongst students.

Personal Protective Equipment

According to the Ministry's guidelines, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), such as masks and gloves, are not needed beyond those used by staff as part of regular precautions for the hazards normally encountered in their regular course of work; **however, PPE policies are the discretion of individual First Nations and First Nation schools.** PPE should only be used when all other controls fail (i.e. only used when other control methods cannot reduce the risk to a low enough level).

Managing students with complex behaviours, on a delegated care plan, or experiencing a health emergency may require staff to be in close physical proximity with the student. No additional PPE are required (for reducing COVID-19 transmission) beyond precautions regularly taken or previously identified for the use with a specific student.

Social/Emotional Resources

The FNEC/FNSA communique, [Mental Health and Resiliency Resources \(May 1, 2020\)](#) includes the following resources for First Nations approaches to nurturing mental health and wellness:

- [KUU-US Crisis Line Society](#) operates a 24 hour provincial Indigenous crisis line for Adults/Elders (250-723-4050), Child/Youth (250-723-2040), Toll-free Line (1-800-588-8717).
- [Coping with COVID-19](#) and [The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health](#) are two short videos featuring Dr. Nel Wieman, Senior Medical Officer, FNHA.
- [Mental Wellness and Cultural Supports Available During the Pandemic](#) summarizes a variety of resources, including telephone and online supports as well as health benefits relating to mental wellness and counselling.

- [Staying Connected during the Pandemic](#) recommends drawing upon cultural strengths to stay connected while we practice social distancing and includes a list of ideas for spending quality time with children.
- [Supporting Children in a Time of Crisis](#) describes how to share age-appropriate information about COVID-19 and offers tips for supporting children’s emotional health.

CONCLUSION

FNESC and FNSA acknowledge the unique challenge the COVID-19 pandemic presents for First Nations and First Nation schools. Our intention is not to recommend that First Nation schools re-open at this time. FNESC and FNSA respect the authority of individual First Nations to make decisions about school operations, consistent with local priorities.

We hope that this document, which represents the most current guidance related to the re-opening of K-12 settings, will serve as a useful planning reference for schools and communities, understanding that adaptations may be required to suit local contexts. Given the constantly evolving nature of the situation, we encourage you to regularly consult the links and resources included in this document to ensure you have the latest information.

Feedback and questions relating to this resource are welcome and can be directed to info@fnesc.ca. For additional resources, please visit www.fnesc.ca/covid19.