



Back to School During COVID-19

September 2020

Background

In March of 2020 COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic and BC subsequently declared a state of emergency. On the 17th of March BC Schools were closed for an indefinite period of time per the instructions of the Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. At that time, it was unclear what the go-forward plan would be and when schools might reopen. Initially, target dates of March 30th were set but the reality remained tentative at best. The province's top priority was ensuring that students would be safe in schools, but the uncertainty around the pandemic made it difficult to understand what 'safe' would look like. In most cases, the initial closures coincided with spring break, allowing the province, teachers and school districts an opportunity to plan and prepare for how to handle student instruction during the early days of the pandemic. Most instruction shifted to an online format. However, approximately 5,000 students remained in school across BC because either they had parents who are essential services workers or required special support and instructionⁱ.

For many K-12 students who suspended their in-class instruction, this was a difficult time. In addition to coping with the stresses of the pandemic, students missed the structure of in-classroom learning and the all-important connections with peer groups for social, academic and extra-curricular activity. Many parents felt the pressure of having children at home while some also navigated a new work from home life. Rob Fleming, Minister of Education was clear that this would be a difficult period, but the actions undertaken to remove most students from school were necessary in order for public health officials to continue to monitor, learn and develop a deeper understanding of COVID-19 and its impacts on the health and well-being of students and parents.

As the pandemic wore on and BC transitioned from Phase 1 to 2 and now 3, an increasing number of services were reopened and the issue of how to return to school was back on the table. In early June, Premier John Horgan announced a 'voluntary' return to class process. The idea was that a gradual reopening for K-12 students would pave the way for a full return to in school instruction for all students starting in September. This initial reopening in June not only limited the number of students in class, the number of hours spent in class were also reduced. Coupled with staggered start times, physical distancing and rigorous cleaning procedures, students were welcomed back into class on alternating days. Elementary schools were limited to 50% class instruction and secondary schools were limited to 20% class instructionⁱⁱ. The BC Teachers Federation, working collaboratively with the province, helped to devise this phased, voluntary return to school to ensure maximum safety for both students and teachers. In-classroom instruction would be different than it had been, and questions and concerns remained, notably around access to personal protective equipment (PPE). However, schools would re-open for any student who chose to return, and students who chose not to return could continue with online instruction at home or elsewhere.

The Provincial Health Officer, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Advanced Education continued to work diligently over the summer to help control the spread of COVID-19, and ensure that the public remained safe, informed and up to date on the evolving COVID-19 science. COVID-19 has circulated in the population for less than one year and in that time, science has learned much about this illness, for example we understand much better how it is spread and its physical impacts.

In the summer of 2020, the BC Government announced that schools would return to full instruction starting just after Labour Day. In order to facilitate a safe return as of September, the use of non-medical masks, regular and increased classroom sanitation, increased and frequent hand-washing, limiting the number of students who interact through smaller cohorts, controlling 'traffic' flow and installing physical barriers in key areas around schools will all be in effect.ⁱⁱⁱ As well, global data has demonstrated that youth 19 years and younger have a low infection rate, and the rate is lower still for children age 10 and younger.^{iv} In addition, the provincial government will be providing more than \$45 million to assist schools during this transition time to ensure that all BC classrooms will have the resources necessary to keep the students, teachers and other staff



safe. There is more to learn but we have come a long way in better understanding COVID-19, and in recognizing which subpopulations in BC have been impacted and how those people have fared.

The province's decision to reopen schools has led to controversy and concern. BC's infection rate for COVID-19 hovers around 2.3% (the percentage of those tested who test positive) which is still considered within acceptable levels according to the Provincial Health Officer. That said, increased testing levels, and several large mass exposure events this summer have pushed BC's COVID-19 numbers into an upward trend. Our average is nearing 100 new cases daily since about mid-August and this alone has many parents and teachers worried about what it may mean to open schools, even with students grouped into limited cohorts. These concerns are understandable given that parents simply want to protect their children, families and friends from possible COVID-19 exposure.

As noted, the province made the decision to reopen classrooms thanks to the coordinated effort of our local health care providers and researchers from around the world, providing up-to-date science on how best to proceed safely during this pandemic. As more research becomes available, so too do more evidence-based approaches on how to stay safe and healthy during COVID-19. As Dr. Bonnie Henry and Minister Adrian Dix often remind us, COVID-19 will be with us for a long time and we have to figure out how to safely move forward by learning how to live with the virus, at least for the foreseeable future until a safe widely available vaccine is produced. Moreover, in a recent interview, Dr. Henry cited that schools can be an emotional refuge for many children and providing them with that safe space is necessary. She has also noted that much more is known now about COVID-19, and that measures can be readily taken in order to stop the spread through isolation and contact tracing if an outbreak were to occur.^v

Nurses understand the concerns around COVID-19 having been at the forefront of managing the virus since the start of this pandemic. Nurses and other health care providers were expected to continue their jobs as this pandemic began, despite uncertainty and fear-based stigma directed at them. Because nursing is based in science, nurses understand the importance of trusting evidence-based approaches and evolving science. Moreover, nurses trust the knowledge of the public health officials who have done an excellent job navigating the challenges and difficulties of dual public health emergencies.

Key Messages

- Due to uncertainty in the early stages of COVID-19, the majority of in-classroom learning was suspended.
- NNPBC applauds the decision by the provincial government to begin a phased approach to return to school, allowing for proper safety measures and training to be undertaken and implemented by school staff prior to full implementation.
- NNPBC understands that for many children school can be a refuge, a place where they are safe and feel protected.
- Nurses understand that COVID-19 will be something that we will live with for a long time. While great efforts are being made in developing a vaccine, we are not there yet and as such we must adapt to our new reality.
- Nurses recognize that the science and evidence around COVID-19 has continued to and will continue to evolve as we learn more.
- NNPBC understands that the safety of our families and children are highly emotional issues around which people have strong feelings. However, NNPBC also recognizes the diligent and focused efforts on the part of the Government, the Minister of Health and the Provincial Health Officer to protect the public from harm caused by COVID-19.
- NNPBC supports listening to evolving science, and following parameters and guidelines set by the Provincial Health Officer as new evidence becomes clear.



- NNPBC trusts that the Government of BC, the Minister of Health and the Provincial Health Officer will continue to serve the people of BC with ongoing transparency and evidence-based practices and principles.

Further Reading/Resources

- [B.C.'s Back to School Plan](#)
- [Mask Use](#)
- [Public Health Guidance for K-12 School Settings](#)
- [Five Stages Framework for K-12 Education](#)
- [COVID-19 for Children with Medical Complexity](#)

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to info@nnpbc.com.

ⁱ [CBC News 'BC Announces Voluntary Return to School June 1'](#)

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/covid-19-return-to-school#health-safety>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/henry-on-school-return-august-6-1.5677597>