



COVID-19: BC's Back-to-School Plan 2021/2022

August 2021

Background

On August 24, 2021, BC's Provincial Health Officer Dr Bonnie Henry, Minister of Education Jennifer Whiteside, and Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training Anne Kang announced the BC government's back-to-school plan for the 2021/2022 school year.ⁱ The plan outlined a full return to in-person learning with specific health and safety measures in place to ensure a safe environment for students in K-12 as well as those at post-secondary institutions.

For students in grades 4-12 as well as all school staff, faculty, and visitors, mask mandates will be in effect in all indoor locations as well as in school buses.ⁱⁱ While children in kindergarten through grade three will not be required to wear a mask, they will be encouraged to do so.ⁱⁱⁱ Students in K-12 will continue to participate in daily health checks (assessment for symptoms of illness such as fever, chills, cough, loss of sense of smell or taste, difficulty breathing, loss of appetite, sore throat, extreme tiredness, headache, body aches, nausea or diarrhea) and stay home when they feel sick. Parents and caregivers are responsible for assessing the health of their children before sending them to school and can use the '[K to 12 Health Check](#)' app to help learn what to look for and decide whether the student is safe to go to school. Dr Henry and the BC government officials noted that research out of the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) showed a significant negative impact that remote learning had on many children and youth, specifically on their mental health by means of increased stress and loneliness.^{iv} Furthermore, the majority of cases of COVID-19 detected in schools last year were connected back to the community, not a result of student-to-student transmission.^v Moreover, health authorities will have the authority to institute additional COVID-19 health and safety measures to schools, school districts, or the authority region on the whole based on transmission and current data.

In addition to regular sanitizing processes, school districts will continue to update school ventilation systems to ensure that mechanical heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) units are operating to standard. A total \$87.5 million was invested into an HVAC refurbishment and maintenance project in BC schools, and the project also includes the installation of HEPA (high efficiency particulate-absorbing) filters in classrooms.^{vi}

For post-secondary education institutions, students, staff and faculty will also be expected to adhere to a mask mandate for all indoor locations on campuses including classrooms, laboratories, hallways, stairwells, elevators and other common spaces.^{vii} Following the August 23, 2021 announcement whereby the BC government outlined details of a new [BC Vaccine Card](#), proof of vaccination will be required for non-essential services and discretionary activities (including extracurricular activities, orientation events, on-campus dining) on college and university campuses. There will also be a vaccination mandate for all students enrolled in health sciences programs as the majority of these students will be required to do on-site training in health care settings.^{viii} Furthermore, post-secondary students moving into on-campus housing will have to provide proof of vaccination, and will need to demonstrate that they have received at least their first dose by September 7 in order to move in.^{ix} For staff and teaching faculty, the decision as to whether or not any given post-secondary institution will implement a mandatory vaccination policy or similar remains a workforce employment decision and will be managed individually by each institution.

The announcement of a mask mandate for BC classrooms is similar to the messaging in other provinces and territories across Canada. Most have also stated that masks will be mandatory in school classrooms and/or common areas (Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Northwest Territories)^{x,xii,xiii} while some have stated that they will be recommended and requirements may change as needed based on transmissions (Alberta, PEI, Manitoba, Newfoundland Labrador).^{xiv,xv,xvi,xvii} The province of Saskatchewan is leaving the decision to each school division as to whether they would like to have a mask mandate or not.^{xviii} In Nunavut, masks will be required and the Nunavut government announced that schools will be handing out 'illness response kits' to all students which will include masks, hand sanitizer, gloves, and disinfectant wipes, and all schools will also be required to designate a specific room where students exhibiting symptoms of illness can wait to be picked up.^{xix} Official back-to-school details have yet to be released for Yukon.



Dr Henry, Minister Whiteside, and Minister Kang strongly encouraged all British Columbians to get vaccinated if they have not already done so. As per the BC Vaccine Card details released on August 23, Premier John Horgan noted that the BC government will continue to ensure that there are many pop-up clinics in high-needs areas around the province, and the Ministry of Health will work closely with health and regional authorities to ensure that all British Columbians can become vaccinated.

Nurses are acutely aware of the concerns raised by parents, students, instructors, and administrators with respect to back-to-school plans during COVID-19 and understand the importance of effective measures to help ensure the safety of everyone in school settings. These safety measures are based on a strong foundation of well-established public health protocols, coupled with immunization strategies to ensure that BC schools remain safe as students, staff and instructors head back to classes in the fall of 2021. While anxiety remains high particularly as the Delta variant continues to spread largely amongst partially or unvaccinated people, it will be important to continue monitoring and assessing safety protocols at school in order to ensure maximum safety for students and teachers. BC nurses remain at the ready to provide evidence-based public health guidance as the province continues to navigate the realities of living with COVID-19 in our communities.

Key Messages

- On August 24, 2021, BC Provincial Health Officer Dr Bonnie Henry, Education Minister Jennifer Whiteside, and Advanced Education Minister Anne Kang announced BC's back-to-school plan for K-12 and post-secondary education.
- Students in grades 4-12 as well as all school staff, faculty and visitors will be required to wear masks in all indoor locations.
- Students in kindergarten through grade 3 are encouraged to wear a mask indoors if they are able to do so.
- In addition to thorough sanitizing processes, school districts will continue to ensure that HVAC systems and HEPA filters are operational and well-maintained in BC's classrooms.
- Post-secondary students, staff, and faculty will be required to wear a mask in all indoor locations.
- Post-secondary students will be required to show proof of vaccination for on-campus living and to participate in many services and discretionary activities.
- Nurses understand the level of anxiety and concern over school safety and fully endorse strong public health protocols including immunization to protect against COVID-19 in order to foster a safe school environment.
- BC nurses are trusted resources for both public health and immunization protocols and will continue to provide guidance as the province moves forward with COVID-19 management.

Further Reading/Resources

- [Province of BC: COVID-19 Safe Schools](#)
- [BC Government: Back to K-12 School, What You Need to Know](#)
- [BC Government: Returning to Post-Secondary, What You Need to Know](#)
- [Province of BC: Post-Secondary Studies During COVID-19](#)
- [BC Government: Mask mandate to reduce transmission, protect people in public spaces](#)
- [Province of BC: Proof of Vaccination](#)
- [Coming Soon: B.C.'s Vaccine Card](#)



ⁱ BC Gov News. Health, safety remain top priority for return to campus: Returning to Post-Secondary, What you need to know. August 24, 2021. <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021AEST0053-001664>

ⁱⁱ BC Gov News. Back to K-12 school, what you need to know. August 24, 2021. <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021EDUC0058-001663>

ⁱⁱⁱ Zussman, Richard. Global. Masks to be required in B.C. classrooms from Grades 4-12 in September. August 24, 2021. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8136053/bc-back-to-school-covid-plan-2021/>

^{iv} Zussman, Richard. Global. *Masks to be required in BC classrooms from Grades 4-12.*

^v BC Gov News. *Back to K-12 School, what you need to know.*

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} BC Gov News. *Returning to Post-Secondary, What you need to know.*

^{viii} Kotyk, Alyse and Weisgarber, Maria. CTV News. Vaccines to be required for on-campus housing in B.C., many post-secondary activities. August 24, 2021. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/vaccines-to-be-required-for-on-campus-housing-in-b-c-many-post-secondary-activities-1.5559320>

^{ix} Kotyk, Alyse and Weisgarber, Maria. CTV. *Vaccines to be required for on-campus housing in B.C., many post-secondary activities.*

^x Gorman, Michael. CBC News. N.S. back-to-school plan eyes return to many pre-COVID routines. August 23, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/nova-scotia-back-to-school-covid-19-1.6150263>

^{xi} Davidson, Sean. CTV News. Ontario unveils back-to-school plan for September. Here's what you need to know. August 3, 2021. <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/ontario-unveils-back-to-school-plan-for-september-here-s-what-you-need-to-know-1.5532926>

^{xii} Laframboise, Kalina. Global. COVID-19: Quebec makes masks mandatory in classrooms across 9 regions, including Montreal. August 24, 2021. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8136282/quebec-covid-schools-masks-update/>

^{xiii} New Brunswick. Update on keeping schools health and safe through 2021-22. August 20, 2021. https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/news/news_release.2021.08.0602.html

^{xiv} Alberta. Preparing for a new school year. 2021. <https://www.alberta.ca/k-12-learning-during-covid-19.aspx>

^{xv} Manitoba. Manitoba Releases Safe Return to Schools Plan. August 5, 2021. <https://news.gov.mb.ca/news/index.html?item=52021&posted=2021-08-05>

^{xvi} CBC News. PEI releases back-to-school plan aiming for 'near normal' year. August 23, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/back-to-school-plan-1.6149950>

^{xvii} Newfoundland Labrador. Dept of Education and School Districts Provide Update on Return to K-12 School Plans for September 2021. August 12, 2021. <https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2021/education/0812n01/>

^{xviii} CBC News. Sask. Education minister defends lack of school mask mandate, despite medical concerns. CBC. August 23, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/education-minister-defends-lack-school-mask-mandate-1.6150261>

^{xix} CBC News. Nunavut lays out its back-to-school plan for 2021-22. August 4, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/nunavut-back-to-school-plan-2021-22-1.6128381>