

Operational guidance: COVID-19 management in schools

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Section 1: Introduction

Overview of operational guidance

This document is intended to support school boards and school authorities in preparation for the safe reopening of schools for the 2020-2021 school year. This document will also apply to childcare centres and before/after school programs that operate within schools.

In the event of a discrepancy between this Guidance and a Directive of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, the Directive prevails.

The Ministry of Education is requesting that school boards work in collaboration with local public health units and other local health partners to ensure that schools can re-open safely.

While the focus of this guidance document is on the new health, safety and operational measures that are required in order to safely re-open schools, please note that every effort should continue to be made to uphold the welcoming and caring environment that schools provide for children and families.

Additional information is available on the provincial [COVID-19 website](#), including resources to help stop the spread, sector specific resources, including helpful posters, mental health resources, and other information. If you have further questions or require clarification, please contact your Ministry of Education Regional Office.

Contact information for regional offices with the Ministry of Education

Central Region

Toll free: 1-800-471-0713

Local: 705-725-7627

West Region

Toll free: 1-800-265-4221

Local: 519-667-1440

East Region

Toll free: 1-800-267-1067

Local: 613-225-9210

North Region (Sudbury/North Bay)

Toll free: 1-800-461-9570

Local: 705-474-7210

Thunder Bay:

Toll free: 1-800-465-5020

Local: 807-474-2980

Toronto Region

Toll free: 1-800-268-5755

Local: 416-212-0954

Section 2: Management of COVID-19 in schools

Case definitions

The Ministry of Health maintains case definitions for a probable case and a confirmed case. These definitions are maintained on the [Ontario Ministry of Health site](#) and are subject to updating. Please refer to this site for the most current version of these key definitions.

Provincial closure protocols

The local public health unit (PHU) is responsible for determining if an outbreak exists, declaring an outbreak, and providing direction on outbreak control measures to be implemented. The outbreak case definition is listed below. However, even though an outbreak may be declared in the school, the public health unit will assist in determining which cohort(s) may be sent home or if a partial or full school closure is required based on the scope of the outbreak. Please note, there may be variability in scenarios based on local context and epidemiology, and the information below is intended as guidance only.

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

The local public health unit will work with the school to determine epidemiological links (e.g., cases in the same class, cases that are part of the same before/after school care cohort, cases that have assigned bus seats in close proximity to each other). The PHU will determine which cohorts are high risk contacts requiring isolation.

Reopening the school

The outbreak does not necessarily need to be over to re-open the school. Cohorts without evidence of transmission can be gradually brought back to school as additional information and test results become available. Consideration should be given to implementing additional preventive measures and active surveillance as part of re-opening.

Outbreak declared over

An outbreak will be declared over by the PHU. This may be based on:

- at least 14 days from the last outbreak associated case (including in a student, staff, essential visitor, or anyone else in the school during the outbreak)
- no further symptomatic individuals with tests pending.

Outbreak responsibilities

As part of the outbreak response, there should be well understood roles, responsibilities, and processes within the school board, school, and the local PHU.

Schools are responsible for:

- reporting a probable or confirmed COVID-19 case associated with the school to the local PHU and to the Ministry of Education through the daily reporting tool where they have become aware of such a case.
- reporting absenteeism to the PHU and to EDU through the daily reporting tool, in accordance with provincial and/or local PHU direction.

Local PHUs are responsible for:

- determining if an outbreak in a school exists
- managing the outbreak in collaboration with the school and other relevant partners
- determining when the outbreak can be declared over

Role of school administrators and school boards

School administrators and school boards should:

- implement prevention measures found in guidance from the Ministry of Education (EDU), Ministry of Health (MOH) and their local PHU
- cooperate with the local PHU, and other stakeholders as required
- communicate with early years partners about COVID-19 in schools and boards
- maintain accurate records of staff, students and visitors. Schools should be able to produce information regarding the students and staff members in any and all class

cohort(s) (for example, classroom, bus, before and after school programs, extra-curricular activities).

This information should include up-to-date attendance records and contact information for those groups and should be provided to the PHU within 24 hours of request to ensure timely follow-up.

In general, schools should not report all instances of ill individuals in the school setting to the PHU as these are frequent occurrences and typically students have non-specific symptoms, however, as required by Section 28 of the Health Protection and Promotion Act, school principals are required to report to the medical officer of health if they are of the opinion that a pupil has or may have a communicable disease.

Principal should connect with the PHU if they have concerns about student(s) related absences or attendance concerns within their school community.

The local PHU may be consulted if there are questions about the management of individuals with symptoms, environmental cleaning, and other measures, as necessary.

The public health unit is responsible for conducting case and contact management activities and measures will be taken to ensure privacy and avoid disclosure of details to the school community that would lead to identification of a COVID-19 laboratory confirmed case.

Communicating with the school community

Parents, students and staff have an understandable interest in knowing when a COVID-19 positive case has been identified in their school.

All school boards will be asked to create a COVID-19 advisory section on their website. Where schools have websites, they will also be asked to create a COVID-19 advisory section.

School boards and schools will be asked to post information if there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 that involves a student or a staff member in a school setting.

Students or staff members may withdraw from school if a family or household member has a confirmed case of COVID-19 but information will not be posted in these instances.

In the interests of privacy, information provided to school communities will not identify the student or staff member that has received a positive COVID-19 test.

If public health advises that a class, cohort or a school should be closed for a period of time, parents, students and staff will be notified immediately.

Notice of any closures of classes, cohorts or schools will be posted on school and school board COVID-19 advisory sections.

Section 3: Management of ill individuals during school hours

This section applies to students, staff or other members or visitors to the school community, who become ill during the school day and on school premises.

Students should be made aware, in age-appropriate and non-stigmatizing language, how to identify symptoms of COVID-19 and should be instructed to speak to a staff member immediately if they feel ill.

Schools should maintain a personal protective equipment (PPE) kit specifically for managing students or others who become ill during school hours.

If an individual, including students, staff, contractors, visitors, parents, guardians, becomes ill while at school, including before and after school care affiliated with the school, it is recommended that:

- anyone providing care to the ill individual should maintain as much physical distance as possible
- the staff person caring for the individual should wear a surgical/procedural mask and eye protection
- if tolerated, the ill individual should also wear a surgical/procedural mask.
- hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette should be practiced while the ill individual is waiting to be picked up
- cleaning of the isolation room area and other areas of the school where the ill individual was should be conducted as soon as reasonably possible after the ill individual leaves
- advise the ill individual and/or their parent or guardian to have the ill individual seek medical advice, including the recommendation of testing for COVID-19 as appropriate or as advised by their medical provider. Ensure direction is aligned with screening and return to school direction
- initiate communication protocols and plans to update and inform necessary stakeholders within the school community while maintaining confidentiality of the ill individual
- regular school functions can continue unless directed otherwise by the local public health unit

A list of students and staff in the school who were in contact with/in the same cohort as the ill individual should be prepared. Those who are identified as potential close contacts should remain cohorted. The local PHU will provide any further direction

on testing and isolation of these contacts, if necessary. In most instances testing and isolation would only be recommended for contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis.

Scenario: A student becomes ill during the school day

The following actions also apply to an individual, including students, staff, contractors, visitors, parents or guardians, who becomes ill while at school, including before and after school care affiliated with the school.

Recommended action by teacher

The teacher should:

- be aware of symptom descriptions and alert the principal if a student is ill
- continue to monitor students and themselves for symptoms

Recommended action by principal

The principal should:

- coordinate immediate student pick-up and designate an area to isolate the student until parent/guardian arrival
- advise student and any staff attending to them to use provided PPE kit
- advise student to remain at home and continue with remote learning, if they are well enough to do so
- if required, advise entire staff of the concern while protecting confidentiality and responding with sensitivity in the circumstances
- as required, contact Superintendent and make them aware of the situation
- ensure/coordinate environmental cleaning and/or disinfection of the space and items used by the individual(s)
- monitor school population for possible new/additional illnesses
- report in the daily attendance tracking tool as necessary

Recommended action by school board

The superintendent should:

- inform the board COVID-19 lead and others at the board office as required
- provide support to the school principal as needed

The board COVID lead should:

- continue to monitor attendance and student absences at the board level

Recommended action by parent and student

The parent and student should:

- Follow guidance of health care provider.
- Follow guidance under Return to School section.
- If a student is tested for COVID-19, follow the guidance of health care provider and related direction for isolation and returning to school. If there are other siblings or members of the household that attend school or childcare centres, advice of the health care provider should be followed on returning to school/child care centres.

Section 4: Management of individuals exposed to COVID-19 outside of the school

This section applies to individuals closely related to a school community, such as bus drivers, parents or members of a student's or staff member's household, who test positive for COVID-19 outside of the school.

Situations will arise where students, staff, or teachers may be exposed to COVID-19 outside of the school environment (for example, to family members that don't attend the school, social contacts outside of school).

Household members and others who live with the individual who has tested positive should isolate for 14 days.

Schools should have necessary arrangements in place to support continuity of education for students who require isolation.

Scenario: School bus driver becomes ill during the work day

Recommended action by bus driver

The bus driver should:

- notify employer
- consult health care provider and follow recommendations
- if tested for COVID-19, follow the isolation guidance provided by health care provider
- follow guidelines on return to work depending on scenario

Recommended action by Consortia

- Bus drivers who are ill should not be working and should be encouraged to consult their health care provider. Work with school bus operators to ensure bus(es) undergo deep cleaning as required and alternate drivers are found to deliver the service.

Recommended action by principal

The principal should:

- communicate with the Consortia as required and maintain situational awareness

- update school board COVID-19 lead as required

Recommended action by school board

The board COVID-19 lead should:

- stay connected with the consortium to maintain situational awareness for bus operations of the board and bus driver illnesses

The superintendent should:

- inform the board COVID-19 lead, others as required and support principal as needed

Scenario: School bus driver tests positive for COVID-19

Recommended action by bus driver

The bus driver should:

- notify employer
- consult health care provider and follow recommendations
- follow guidelines on return to work

Recommended action by Consortia

The Consortia should:

- notify potentially impacted schools
- work with school bus operators to ensure bus(es) undergo deep cleaning and alternate drivers are found to deliver the service
- provide bus cohort list to schools/board as required
- communicate with impacted school communities as appropriate

Recommended action by principal

The principal should:

- follow the direction of the PHU
- provide class and cohort lists to PHU
- in consultation with PHU notify impacted cohorts and classes outlining what to expect and sharing useful resources with families
- monitor for new and additional student illnesses in the school and classroom(s)
- ensure portfolio information (that is, class list, seating charts, transportation details, etc.) for affected students/staff and any sibling(s) attending the school is up-to-date. Note: Be prepared to provide this information to PHU upon request
- connect with supervisory officer and make them aware of the situation
- communicate with impacted schools, school boards and communities as appropriate

Recommended action by parent and student

The parent and student should:

- Adhere to direction provided by local PHU

- continue to adhere to current infection prevention, control practices and advice provided by local public health

Recommended action by school board

The board COVID-19 lead should:

- continue to monitor the situation and liaise with the Ministry of Education as necessary

The superintendent should:

- inform the board Covid-19 lead, others as required and support principal as needed.

Scenario: Parent tests positive for COVID-19

This scenario applies to anyone who shares a household with a student or staff member in a school community.

If a parent receives a positive test for COVID-19, he or she is not obligated to inform the school of their test result. However, it is strongly recommended.

Children in a household where a parent or other member has tested positive should stay home and isolate for 14 days.

The PHU would provide direction to close contacts, including household members of a person diagnosed with COVID-19.

The PHU would provide direction to the school principal on the actions to be taken with the school, depending on the circumstances of the positive COVID case.

Note: Testing recommendations are made by an individual's health care provider and PHU.

Recommended action by teacher

The teacher should:

- support continuation of learning for any students who need to isolate if necessary

Recommended action by principal

The principal should:

- if student is in the school, when notified by the parent, coordinate immediate student pick-up and designate an area to isolate the student until pickup
- ask that the student follow the direction of their health care provider and PHU
- ensure student portfolio information (that is., class list, seating charts, transportation details, etc.) is up-to-date. Note: Be prepared to provide this information to PHU upon request
- support PHU next steps
- connect with Superintendent and make them aware of the situation

- ensure/coordinate environmental cleaning and/or disinfection of the space and items used by the individual(s)
- if the student tests positive, refer to Management of Positive COVID-19 diagnosis in the school.
 - monitor the school population for new/additional illness
 - report in the daily tracking tool as necessary

Recommended action by school board

The superintendent should:

- inform the board COVID-19 lead and support principal as needed

The board COVID-19 lead should:

- continue to monitor the situation and liaise with the Ministry of Education as necessary

Recommended action by parent and student

The parent and student should:

- continue to adhere to current infection prevention, control practices and advice provided by local public health

Section 5: Management of a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 in the school community

This section applies to a student, staff member or a member of a school community who is regularly in the school, who informs the school that they have tested positive for COVID-19.

- Any individual who tests positive for COVID-19 should not attend school until they are cleared by their local PHU or health care provider.
- Any individuals who test positive must remain in isolation for 14 days. Retesting is not recommended and will not alter this 14 day isolation requirement.
- Every individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 is contacted by their local PHU for further follow-up.
- The local PHU will notify the school of a positive COVID-19 diagnosis. In some cases, the local PHU may not be the same local PHU as the school; and in these circumstances, coordination between the PHUs and the school is required for further direction. Having designated points of contact within the school and the PHU can assist with ensuring clear processes for communication are in place.
- Where the local PHU determines there was a transmission risk to others in the school, students and staff will be assessed to determine if they were at high risk

of exposure (requiring isolation) or if they were at low risk of exposure (can self-monitor for symptoms and return to school).

- Classroom cohorts (students and staff affiliated with the cohort) will generally be considered at high risk of exposure.
- All students and staff determined to be at high risk of exposure will be directed to isolate and recommended to be tested (voluntary testing) within their isolation period.
- Negative test results do not change the requirement for isolation nor do they shorten the isolation period for close contacts.

Scenario: Staff or student has tested positive for COVID-19

Recommended action by teacher

The teacher should:

- ensure continuation of learning for the student
- continue to monitor students and themselves for symptoms

Recommended action by principal

The principal should:

- follow PHU protocol for school outbreaks if necessary
- communicate with school community as appropriate
- ensure student and sibling(s) portfolio information (that is., class list, seating charts, transportation details etc.) is up-to-date and share this information to PHU upon request
- ensure/coordinate environmental cleaning and/or disinfection of the space and items used by the individual(s)
- monitor school population for new and additional illnesses and symptoms
- report absence in the daily absence tracking tool

Recommended action by school board

The superintendent should:

- inform the board COVID-19 Lead, other board staff and support principal as needed

The board COVID lead should:

- continue to monitor the situation and liaise with the Ministry of Education as necessary
- Work with PHU as required.

Recommended action by parent and student

The parent and student should:

- engage in continuation of learning if able
- communicate regularly with the school to inform daily routines
- follow advice by health provider and/or PHU on isolation protocol

Section 6: Special education

In order to ensure that students with special education needs are supported as schools reopen, school boards will need to consider additional planning and transition time for students with special education needs to support a smooth transition.

School boards should support attendance options including offering daily attendance to students with special education needs for whom adapted timetables or remote learning may be challenging based on the student's special education needs.

School boards should work with partners to develop local protocols for school access by regulated health professionals, regulated social service professionals and paraprofessionals for the purpose of delivering school-based supports and services. Protocols should include support for remote delivery where in-school delivery is not possible.

Scenario: Student with special education needs in a special education class (congregated or integrated class) has needs that conflict with COVID-19 safety protocols

Recommended action by teacher

The teacher should:

- meet pro-actively (face to face or virtually) with parent/guardian and special education staff to anticipate and discuss possible changes to accommodations in the Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- consider additional transition time to support smooth transitions

Recommended action by principal

The principal should:

- ensure coordination of staff and supports for student needs as necessary, for example, support staff and PPE
- ensure and coordinate environmental cleaning and/or disinfection of the space and items used by the individual(s).
- support planning for possible online learning.
- inform transportation of accommodations as needed.
- inform special education superintendent or designate of accommodations as requested.
- engage and support in updating the IEP as necessary.

Recommended action by school board

The school board should:

- with partners, ensure consistent practices across the system regarding students with special education needs (that is, access by regulated health professionals and service providers and paraprofessionals)
- ensure continued access to assistive technology

Recommended action by parent and student

The parent and student should:

- work pro-actively with the school to anticipate and discuss possible accommodations to support the needs of the student
- continue to adhere to current infection prevention and control practices
- communicate regularly with the school to inform daily routines

Section 7: Return to school

While an individual suspected to have COVID-19 is **waiting for test results they must be in isolation and cannot attend school in person**. The individual can attend school virtually if they feel well enough to participate.

Individuals who have had a COVID-19 test because of symptoms, but who test negative should not return to school until at least 24 hours after their symptoms have resolved.

Individuals who have traveled out of the country should isolate for 14 days.

Where a student or staff member has tested positive for COVID-19, the local PHU will be in contact with the school to provide further direction on returning to school.

Barriers to return to school, such as requirement of medical notes or proof of negative tests, should be avoided.

If an ill individual does not have COVID-19

For an ill individual who has a known alternative diagnosis provided by a health care provider, return to school can occur when symptoms are resolved for at least 24 hours.

Section 8: Records management

Working with the local Public Health Unit

In the event that schools are made aware of a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 for staff or students, it is essential that key information pertaining to staff and students be available upon request by the local PHU for the purposes of contact tracing. This information needs to be accessible by school administrators on short notice, both during and outside of school hours, when requested by the PHU. School board COVID leads are expected to establish a system with their local PHUs to ensure that these records can be accessed at all times.

The following information should be available:

- attendance records
- class lists and seating charts

- before-and-after child care lists
- transportation lists and seating charts
- up to date contact information for parents, staff and students
- special assignments and programs (for example, Education Community Partnership program (formerly Care Treatment Custody Corrections), Special Education)
- records of essential visitors

Resources and templates

Appendix A: Sample welcome back letter to parent or guardian

Dear Parent/Guardian:

With the 2020-21 school year underway, I would like to tell you about the actions we are taking to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in our school. This letter also includes information about what you can do to protect yourself and your family.

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- Fever (temperature of 37.8°C or greater)
- New or worsening cough
- Shortness of breath (dyspnea)

Other symptoms of COVID-19 can include:

- Sore throat
- Difficulty swallowing
- New olfactory or taste disorder(s)
- Nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain
- Runny nose, or nasal congestion (in absence of underlying reasons for these symptoms such as seasonal allergies, post nasal drip, etc.)

You must screen your child for symptoms every day before they come to school.

You can use the Ministry of Health's [Ontario COVID-19 self-assessment tool](#) for this purpose. If your child has any symptoms of COVID-19 or if they are ill, they should not attend school. You should report your child's absence from school by contacting us at: [Insert details on reporting student absence]. Students who become ill during the day will be isolated and must be picked up from school as soon as possible. Symptomatic students will not be able to use student transportation.

Please consult the [Ministry of Health's COVID-19 reference document for symptoms](#) for other clinical features of COVID-19 and when atypical signs and symptoms of COVID-19 should be considered, particularly in children.

If you're worried your child or any member of your household has been exposed to COVID-19 or has symptoms, you use [Ministry of Health's Ontario COVID-19 self-assessment tool](#). You will get a recommendation on what to do next.

We are working with our local Public Health Unit to take steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in our school and will keep you updated with new information as it becomes available. To reduce the risk of COVID-19 in our school, multiple measures have been implemented, for example, enhanced cleaning and reducing the number of contacts among individuals in the school, including students, staff, and others.

The Ontario Ministry of Health advises everyone to take an active role in protecting themselves from COVID-19. Here are a few things that you and your family can do:

- wash your hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- sneeze and cough into your sleeve
- avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth
- avoid contact with people who are sick
- stay home and isolate if you or anyone in your household is sick

For more information on COVID-19 please visit [Ontario.ca/coronavirus](https://ontario.ca/coronavirus).

If you have any questions about what our school is doing, please let me know.

Sincerely,

[Principal]

Appendix B: School board requirements in preparation for September 2020

School boards should:

- identify board COVID-19 Lead who will provide COVID-19 related information to the Regional Field Office of the Ministry of Education
- identify key contact(s) in the local public health unit(s)
- ensure that all schools have established an isolation area(s) for when a student is ill
- refine communication plans to stakeholders regarding health and safety measures and outbreak protocols for start-up
- ensure schools are prepared to support contact tracing (that is, class cohort lists and seating charts, school bus cohort lists and seating charts, before- and after-school care cohort lists)
- finalize training plans for all staff for health and safety and outbreak protocols.
- ensure preparation for continuity of leadership in the event of administrator illness or the need to isolate
- prepare contingencies to support student learning when staff are ill or absent.
- create and communicate a system-wide protocol for school visitors
- consider cleaning models that address shared spaces, alternate learning spaces and shared equipment
- be prepared to pivot between face-to-face and remote/distance learning

Other suggested key contacts for boards and schools

Boards may wish to identify key contacts within the community who can provide supports to families where required, such as:

- transportation companies
- local COVID-19 assessment centers
- municipal social services and children's services department
- local hospitals
- any other key contacts in the school community

Appendix C: Example of COVID-19 district school board / community contact list

School Board:

Ministry of Education regional contact: Office: Cell: Email:	Board COVID-19 Lead: Office: Cell: Email:
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Community key contacts and resources:

Contact name in the local public health unit: Office: Cell: Email:

Number of COVID-19 Testing sites: _____

(Please add additional sites and information below as necessary)

Testing Site Location	Contact Information

Student Transportation contact: Office: Cell: Email:
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