

COVID-19: Guidelines for Principals, Directors and Division Staff

The World Health Organization has declared COVID-19 global pandemic. The follow document provides information and general guidance for school division operations during a pandemic to protect the health and safety of staff, students and school communities.

With new evidence of community spread, the Alberta government is moving forward with measures that are more aggressive to help slow the spread of COVID-19. On March 15, 2020, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health announced effective immediately:

- Student attendance at K to 12 schools is prohibited and in person post-secondary classes are cancelled indefinitely.
- All licensed childcare facilities, out-of-school care programs and preschool programs are closed indefinitely.
- All long-term care and other continuing-care facilities limit visitation to essential visitors only.
- Places of worship are no longer exempt from restrictions on mass gatherings.

If you recently returned from travel outside of Canada or have flu-like symptoms such as cough, fever, fatigue or difficulty breathing:

- Stay home. Do not go to an emergency room or clinic.
- Take the [COVID-19 self-assessment test](#).
- Call [Health Link 811](#) for further testing and instructions.

Currently, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health recommends the following:

- **Avoid non-essential travel outside of Canada and cruise ship travel until further notice.** To limit the spread of COVID-19, many countries have put in place travel or border restrictions and additional measures such as movement restrictions and quarantines. Airlines have also cancelled flights. The province may impose other restrictions with little warning. As such, those who travel risk severe travel disruption and it's possibly of remaining outside of Canada longer than expected.
- **Canadians abroad should return home immediately.**
- **Check recent domestic and international flights for confirmed COVID-19 cases.**
- **Self-isolate for 14 days if:**
 - you're currently outside the country upon return—even if feeling well, and regardless of the country visited;
 - you're in close contact with someone who travelled outside the country and showing symptoms or diagnosed with the COVID-19. Call [Health Link 811](#) for further instructions.
- **Consult the Government of Canada's [travel advisory website](#)** if you must travel outside the country. Visiting the website will ensure you have the most up-to-date information about risks.
- **[Self-isolate](#) if you have influenza-like symptoms, such as fever or cough, for 10 days after the illness started or until symptoms resolve**, whichever is longer. Do not go to school or work. After self-isolating and on return to work, a [Medical Declaration Form](#) must be signed and provided to Human Resources.
- **Cancel all large-group gatherings** of more than 50 people or international events.
- **Enforce risk-mitigation measures at any event with attendees of 50 people or less**—including self-distancing, two metres or more, between attendees and the use of sanitizer stations.

- **Close playgrounds.** Currently, the Division is working with municipalities to advise of the playground closures.
- **Contact [Health Link 811](#) for additional information and followup testing** if a child, family member or close contact is showing symptoms of COVID-19.

What else can schools and worksites do?

Practice good hand hygiene

Washing hands regularly with plain soap and water. The mechanical action is effective for removing visible soil and microbes. Where possible, use a tissue or paper towel to turn off taps and open doors after washing. Keep waste cans near the washroom exit doors for the disposal of tissues and towels.

When handwashing sinks are not available, use of hand sanitizers may be considered. If hands are visibly soiled, hand sanitizers are not as effective at eliminating respiratory viruses.

[Additional Information about Hand Hygiene](#)

In addition to existing sinks, schools should offer hand-sanitizing stations such as wall-mounted hand sanitizer dispensers. Hand sanitizers are considered supplementary controls and not a replacement for proper hand-washing with soap and water. Schools and workplaces should also ensure:

- extra paper towels and waste receptacles are made available;
- hand sanitizer and secured dispensers—provided to supplement handwashing facilities—are located in supervised areas; and
- waste cans are located near washroom exit doors for disposal of towels or tissues used to turn taps on and off; and
- hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette posters are placed in washrooms and strategic areas throughout the building—available on StaffConnect or by contacting EIPS Central Services.

Maintain good respiratory etiquette

Respiratory etiquette in school and childcare settings include covering the mouth and nose during coughing or sneezing with a tissue or a flexed elbow. Dispose of the tissues in a plastic-lined waste container, followed by good [hand hygiene](#).

Reinforce "no sharing" policies

Reinforce "no food sharing" policies in school settings. Though these policies are generally put in place to reduce potential exposures to allergens, the practice of not sharing food in schools and childcare settings supports the efforts of reducing virus transmission between children.

To prevent the spread of respiratory viruses, water bottles used by sports teams should not be shared among athletes. Mouthpieces on musical instruments, especially on those used by more than one student, should be cleaned and disinfected as per standard practices recommended for the instrument. When feasible, students should have their mouthpieces. In addition, schools using shared pinnies for sport activities should wash after each use.

Schools should ask students to fill their own water bottles instead of drinking from fountains. Many schools have water bottle filling stations installed at various locations. As well, schools operating fitness centres, should follow the guidelines for [Fitness Centre Cleaning](#). During an illness outbreak fitness centres, libraries, hot-lunch programs and food services may need to close temporarily. For additional information about cleaning shared equipment, such as toys, consult EIPS' [Cleaning for Infection Control](#)

Reinforce social distancing strategies

Limit unnecessary school- or work-based travel, large-group or close contact activities. These include sports tournaments; music and field trips in the community or to other schools; professional learning and activity days; school-break day camps, avoiding close contact gym activities and combining several classes together for music. Unless otherwise directed by Alberta Health Services or the Superintendent, these decisions can be made on a school-by-school basis at the discretion of the principal.

Hold staff meetings in larger rooms like auditoriums or libraries to help with social distancing. Avoid I

As of March 12, 2020, all large-group gatherings of more than 250 people, or international events, in the province are cancelled. In keeping with this recommendation, EIPS will not hold assemblies. In addition, students will not attend festivals, athletic competitions, graduation events, field trips and other large-group gatherings until further notice. Non-essential visitors, volunteers and contractors are not permitted at the worksite. Before- and after-school programs, and after-hour user groups are cancelled until further notice.

Keep parents, caregivers and staff informed

Parents and caregivers are a major source of comfort and reassurance to children. As such, it's important schools keep families informed about steps being taken to protect children, such as preventing the spread of respiratory infections. Schools should also communicate what families can do at home, including reinforcing good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, undertaking environmental cleaning and providing increased reassurance. Refer families to the [eips.ca](#) for additional information and resources. In general, families and caregivers are the ones who make decisions about keeping their child home if they are sick. As such, open and frequent communication with families is an important part of ensuring sick children are not sent to school. During an illness outbreak or pandemic, school staff have the authority to direct a sick child not attend school and sent home if they develop symptoms. Also, it's recommended all schools and worksites post illness prevention [posters](#) in a building's entrances.

Support those individuals who are self-monitoring for symptoms, or self-isolating

If students or staff are advised by public health to [self-monitor](#) for symptoms or [self-isolate](#) at home because of illness or returning from travel to an [affected area](#), the school community should make efforts to support families, including:

- being as flexible as necessary with school attendance. For staff, make sure Human Resource policies are followed;
- treating families and staff with respect, fairness and compassion and focus on privacy;
- taking steps to reduce the potential for stigma and discrimination—for example, through outreach, information sharing, and school and division-level education;

- putting measures in place for students or staff self-isolating at home to do meaningful work—to help ensure they don't fall behind in their work or studies and maintain a sense of connection;
- considering flexible approaches to work that's missed because of self-isolation or illness;
- putting measures in place for families self-monitoring for [symptoms](#) that help them recognize those symptoms and keep infected individuals separated from staff and students.

Implement a protocol for managing students and staff with flu-like symptoms or possible COVID-19

If a student or staff member, who is self-monitoring, begins to experience symptoms of the flu, COVID-19 or another illnesses while attending a school or work:

- Promptly separate students and staff who show symptoms from others in a supervised area until they can go home. In addition, anyone who is required to provide care to ill staff or students should try to maintain a two-metre distance between them and the ill person.
- Practice good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
- Provide tissues to ensure good respiratory etiquette. Proper disposal of the tissue and hand hygiene should occur after coughing or sneezing. Ensure appropriate environmental cleaning of the space the student occupied once departed. Follow [guidelines](#) for cleaning and disinfection.
- Have protocols in place to notify parents and guardians if a child shows symptoms of COVID-19 while at school—including the need for immediate pickup. It is important for schools to ensure the appropriate mode of transportation is used—ambulance or private vehicle—and other precautions are followed during transit. Avoid public transit and school buses.
- Avoid putting sick students back on a school bus. Students who begin to show symptoms of illness and have no other transportation options should sit on a seat by themselves, at least two-metres away from other students and be provided with tissues. Also, inform the student about what's expected of them while on the school bus.
- For those without symptoms, masks are not recommended for protection. Those working in schools are not typically trained on mask use. There is also a potential risk of infection with improper use and disposal. For young children, masks are often irritating and can lead to increased touching of the face and eyes.
- **Close areas used by the ill persons and wait as long as practical before cleaning and disinfecting** to minimize potential for exposure to respiratory droplets. If possible, open outside doors and windows to increase air circulation and wait up to 24 hours before disinfection.
- Cleaning staff should clean and disinfect all areas (e.g., offices, bathrooms, and common areas) used by the ill persons, focusing especially on frequently touched surfaces.

Reporting to Alberta Health Services

Administrators need to observe and know the usual absenteeism patterns of their school. Notify Alberta Health Services in outbreaks or other unusual situations—when student absenteeism is greater than 10 per cent or if a case of COVID-19 or serious communicable disease is suspected. Alberta Health Services can provide advice on the implementation of measures specific to COVID-19 beyond what is standard respiratory disease prevention protocol, including the separation or exclusion of affected students and staff from the school. If there is an illness outbreak or confirmed case of COVID-19, the Division will implement its [Guidelines for School Illness Outbreaks](#).

Follow EIPS cleaning and disinfecting protocols

It is not yet known how long the COVID-19 virus lives on surfaces. Preliminary findings suggest it can survive on objects and surfaces anywhere from a few hours to a few days. Regularly cleaning and disinfecting objects and high-touch surfaces will help prevent the transmission of viruses. EIPS is reinforcing these protocols with its custodial contractors. Staff should increase their monitoring of hand-cleaning supplies to ensure all sinks in washrooms, kitchens and classrooms remain well stocked with soap and paper towel. Facility Services is currently working with the Division's primary suppliers to ensure it has the safest and most effective cleaning and disinfecting products on hand.

Principals are encouraged to review existing cleaning needs in their schools to help determine where increased cleaning is beneficial. Administrators and staff should follow the [EIPS Guidelines for Cleaning and Disinfection](#), as posted on Staff Connect. For additional resources, review EIPS' [Infection Control Information](#). Schools can ask the custodian to dispense EIPS-approved products for this purpose for use by staff only. Contact the Facility Service Centre if additional assistance is required.

As per standard procedures, it's recommended schools have toys that are easy to clean and disinfect—avoid plush toys. It may be prudent to increase cleaning frequency or limit use of certain types of toys, especially when there is an increased level of illness among children.

High-Touch Surfaces

It's recommended high-touch objects and surfaces such as pencil sharpeners, water-fountain knobs and push buttons, doorknobs, faucet handles are cleaned and disinfected regularly. Custodians routinely do this daily, but during an illness outbreak school staff are encouraged to assist whenever possible. Staff are responsible for cleaning and disinfecting shared educational-related equipment such as toys, electronics, keyboards and fitness equipment. Products can be dispensed by the custodian into labelled spray bottles for staff use only. Follow the [guidelines](#) for [Cleaning and Disinfection](#) posted on Staff Connect.

Drinking Fountains

There is no clear evidence to suggest that water fountains spouts are a major source of virus transmission. However, custodians clean them regularly, as per the Division's high-touch surface cleaning protocols. During an illness outbreak, fountains may be covered, and students asked to bring their own water bottles for refilling at taps or existing bottle-filling stations. Schools should recommend to parents their child bring their own labelled water bottle to school. If necessary, Facility Services will provide minimal bottled water for those students who don't have their own water bottle.

Books and Paper

Current research suggests the COVID-19 virus can last four to five days on paper at room temperature. That said, there is insufficient data available to validate if this is correct and little research on transmission through paper objects after several days. The risk, of course, is not through the inhalation of droplets, rather coming in contact with mucous membranes—eyes, mouth and nose—that contain virus. As such, continue to practice proper hygiene precautions before and after handling papers.

Cleaning and Disinfection Products

EIPS uses commercial-cleaning and disinfection products that are safe, environmentally friendly and effective for a range of germs and viruses. The products allowed at schools or worksites are approved for use by EIPS. If staff want to bring in their own products, check with the Principal and EIPS' Occupational Health and Safety Specialist first to ensure the product is safe to use in a school environment. During an outbreak situation, some flexibility may be permitted. *NOTE:* as of March 13, 2020, schools that have ordered additional approved product should receive delivery within a week. Hand sanitizers are ordered and on backorder with no delivery date delivery as of yet.

At home, cleaning surfaces and objects with water and household detergents or common disinfectant products are sufficient in most cases. If a household or commercial disinfectant cleaning products are not readily available, disinfect hard surfaces with a mixture of one-part bleach—five per cent sodium hypochlorite—and nine-parts water. Ensure the solution contacts the surface for one minute.

Psychosocial considerations

A new virus such as COVID-19 can create anxiety and is difficult for students and children to understand. It's especially difficult if someone in their school or family is sick, or they see or hear troubling messages on the radio, internet or television.

It's normal for students and staff to feel worried or nervous and have questions. Communication should reflect the diverse linguistic, literacy and cultural characteristics and needs of the students and their families. Schools need to monitor for discrimination or bullying surrounding COVID-19, toward those who may have been exposed to the virus, are self-isolating at home or are self-monitoring for symptoms. Schools should make all efforts to correct misinformation and adhere to anti-discrimination and anti-bullying protocols.

School staff need to pay attention to children's feelings and reactions. The way the situation is handled strongly affects how children respond. The National Public Radio has created a [three-minute podcast and foldable comic](#) to share with students in the classroom. Staff can also reach out to their supervisor or Human Resources for information and support. Addition information about mental health supports is available on [StaffConnect](#).

Provide reassurance

Reassure students and staff about their safety and health. Tell children it's OK to be concerned, it's comforting. Assure them they are safe, and there are many things they can do to stay healthy:

- **Handwashing:** Wash hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer, especially after coughing or sneezing. Turn off taps and open doors with a tissue or towel.
- **Practicing good cough and sneeze etiquette:** Cough and sneeze into your arm or tissue.
- **Stay home when sick:** Children should tell parents if they don't feel well, and together, make a plan to stay home from school.
- **Keep clean:** Keep hands away from face and mouth.
- **Stay healthy:** Stay healthy by eating well, keeping physically active and getting enough sleep.
- **Stay connected:** Staff can contact the Occupational, Health and Safety Specialist and Human Resources for information on how to stay safe at work.

Listen to students and staff

Students and staff want to be heard and to talk about their feelings. Students do not need detailed information about events. Let them know they can ask questions. Answer questions honestly, making sure the information is suitable for their age level.

If you don't know the answer to their question, it's OK to say so and together look for resources that provide accurate information. Remember, students are often listening when you talk to others about COVID-19. Administrators and staff should be mindful of how students share information in less-supervised settings such as before and after school, lunch and snack times, recess and on the bus. It's important for administrators and staff to correct any misinformation as they become aware of it.

Maintain routines

Maintain familiar activities and routines at schools and childcare programs as doing so can reinforce a sense of security for students and staff.

Pay attention to what students and staff are reading and hearing from the media

Limit media exposure or ensure information accessed online is reputable. Exposure to excessive amounts of media coverage can give students an exaggerated view of the risks associated with COVID-19. Limit exposure in younger students as this becomes more difficult as they get older.

Explain the events and help put information into perspective. Keep students informed about what is happening—and what may happen—at a level that is suitable for their age. For staff, a new module on COVID-19 is available on the [Hour Zero](#) training platform.

Do not rely on non-government sources, as misinformation abounds on the internet. The best sources for information on COVID-19 are the following agencies.

- [Alberta Health](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control](#)