

September 2021

Dear School Administrators, Teachers and Staff:

**Re: Updates and Considerations for a Healthy & Safe Return to School – 2021/2022**

This is our annual letter to welcome you back to school with an update on public health guidance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health programs & services, and resources to support the health and well-being of your school communities. As we begin the 2021/2022 school year, we would like to express our appreciation for the hard work and dedication teachers, school staff and school administrators have shown over the past 18 months, and continue to show, as you prepare for a safe return to school this fall.

- **COVID-19 vaccine for staff and students born in 2009 and earlier** - We strongly encourage everyone born in 2009 and earlier to receive a full series of COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible. Both the Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines have been approved by Health Canada for use, and are very effective at decreasing the risks of harm from COVID-19.
  - [Appointments are available](#), and alternatively anyone can walk-in to an Island Health clinic for either a first dose, or a second dose if it has been at least 28 days since the first. A listing of clinic dates and locations is at [covid19.islandclinics.ca/](https://covid19.islandclinics.ca/).
  - Island Health will also be offering in-school vaccination in select areas with lower vaccine coverage among youth. If your school needs assistance in facilitating COVID-19 vaccination to staff and/or students – such as blocking off time at an immunization clinic for a group of students – please contact [Matt.Herman@VIHA.CA](mailto:Matt.Herman@VIHA.CA).
  - Clinical trials in children under 12 are ongoing; at this time, the vaccine is not available to younger children. The risk of harm from COVID-19 for young children is very low.
  - More information about the COVID-19 vaccine for children aged 12-17 can be found [here](#).
- **Routine in-school public health services** – Due to the significant demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, there may have been interruptions in some services to schools. The Healthy Schools team is gearing up to re-engage with schools for the 2021/22 year. Island Health Healthy Schools Team includes Public Health Nurses and Dietitians. They are ready to listen to what your district's priorities are and how they can best work with you to strengthen the health and safety of your school communities. In the light of ongoing unintended consequences of Covid-19 pandemic, now is the time to increase efforts to support overall health and wellbeing of our children, youth, families and school staff. Visit the [Healthy Schools Initiative](#) page for a list of [Mental Health and Wellbeing Resources for Schools](#). More information and resources can be found at [Healthy Schools BC](#). Lastly, routine in-school immunization clinics will be provided for routine target grades of 6 and 9, as well as catchup grades where immunizations are overdue
- **Supporting the health and well-being of children & youth** – School transitions, such as a return to a school routine after a summer break, can cause students to feel anxious and overwhelmed as they are faced with new challenges and concerns. The ongoing pandemic and associated restrictions have created new stressors for young people, and many are experiencing heightened mental health challenges. Trends in other health behaviors impacted by the pandemic are concerning and include declining physical activity

rates, escalating sedentary behavior, disruptions in sleep, inadequate nutrition, and increases in youth substance use - all have impacts on emotional, mental and physical well-being.

- **Public health guidance for K-12 schools** – Evidence demonstrates that during the 2020-2021 school year schools were low-risk sites for COVID-19 transmission, even after the introduction of variants of concern. Unfortunately, evidence also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictive measures have had significant unintended consequences for the mental, physical, and social health of children and youth. Provincial guidance has been updated to support a balance between risk prevention and recovery efforts, and can be found [here](#).
- **Case and Contact Management** – Public health continues to follow-up on all positive COVID results and will follow the processes outlined in the [COVID-19 protocols](#) for administrators. Cases in school age children are priority investigations. School superintendents can anticipate a continuation of the process for investigation of infectious cases in school settings. Public health will notify the schools when a school investigation is required. Contacts of cases will be advised when required to take action.

We thank you for your continued thoughtful consideration toward the health and safety of students and staff as you welcome them back to school. Our Healthy Schools team is reaching out to schools in the next few weeks, and plans are underway for in school immunization clinics. Our COVID-19 Case and Contact Management Team continues to respond to cases, contacts and inquiries and can be reached at any time through [hmcovid@viha.ca](mailto:hmcovid@viha.ca). We are looking forward to a safe, rewarding, and successful year as the schools fill with children and families.

Sincerely,



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### **COVID 19 Resources**

[COVID 19 Information for Community Partners](#)

[COVID 19 Information for Childcare, Schools and Camps](#)

[Impacts of the COVID 19 Pandemic on the Health and Wellbeing of Young Adults in BC July 2021](#)

### **Other health and well-being school resources:**

- [Middle Years Developmental Instrument reports](#)
- [DASH BC](#) including [Healthy at Home Resources](#)
- [KidsBoostImmunity.com](#) (new lesson plans about covid19)
- [PHEcanada.ca \(Physical & Health Education Canada\)](#)
- [TeachingSexualHealth.ca](#)