



Health and  
Wellness

# Prince Edward Island COVID-19 Back to School Public Health Guidance for Public and Private Kindergarten to Grade 12 Schools 2022-23

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**Department of Health and Wellness**  
**Chief Public Health Office**



# Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

## INTRODUCTION

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This document is intended to support planning for the 2022-2023 school year and to help inform students and their families on what they can expect in terms of public health measures.

The 2021-2022 school year was not without challenges. Cohorting of students, masking requirements, physical distancing, asymptomatic testing prior to attending school, periodic at home/on-line learning, in addition with other measures, were necessary to minimize the transmission risk of COVID-19 and facilitate contact tracing and outbreak management.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not over. Worldwide, the evolution of the COVID-19 virus continues to present challenges with the emergence of new variants, some of which are highly transmissible and escape the immune system. The continued presence of the Omicron variant, and its sub-variants, means that Islanders must remain informed and adaptable. COVID-19 vaccines for everyone 6 months and over are widely available. However, older adults, individuals who are not up to date with their eligible vaccines, and those who are immune compromised or who have underlying medical conditions continue to be at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19.

Although we continue to learn about COVID-19 and its variants, we anticipate the 2022-2023 school year will be more routine than the past two years, given the high rates of vaccine uptake, including boosters, in the general population. The province has undertaken a vaccine campaign aimed at “back to school” to encourage families to have children up to date on their vaccines as they prepare to return to the classroom for the school year.

Routine public health measures for managing COVID-19 and other respiratory illness will form the basis of the recommendations to support the operation of schools during the 2022-2023 school year. These measures include encouraging vaccination and booster doses of vaccine as applicable, getting tested for COVID-19 when you have symptoms, staying home when you are sick, hand hygiene, routine cleaning and disinfection, encouraging outdoor time and good indoor air quality in schools. Enhanced measures may be recommended in response to elevated COVID-19 risk situations.

Public health will continue to offer individual and community guidance and recommendations to manage the risk of COVID-19 in PEI. Measures to minimize community transmission throughout PEI will also continue and adjust based on the local and national epidemiology.

# Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

## PRINCIPLES AND FACTORS

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The Back-to-School 2022-2023 public health guidance is informed by the following core principles:

- Minimizing COVID-19 transmission in the community is key to supporting in-school learning.
- The safety of students, staff, and school communities is essential.
- Full-time, in-person instruction is vital to student learning and overall health and well-being.
- Peer interaction and school-based activities maximize social development.
- Routine public health measures for minimizing the impacts of communicable disease such as COVID-19 are recommended for schools throughout the 2022-2023 school year; enhanced measures will be dependent on the level of risk in the community, informed by COVID-19 surveillance and epidemiology.

These principles are influenced by the following factors:

- High vaccination rates among the eligible PEI population help to reduce serious outcomes in the population.
- Adults are much more likely to experience severe illness or death from COVID-19, with risk increasing with age. The most common symptoms of COVID-19 have been shown to vary depending on the variant that is circulating. In earlier waves of the pandemic, typical symptoms in children were fever and cough, and many children had no symptoms or very mild symptoms. More recently with the Omicron variant, the most common (>50%) symptoms among children are runny nose, sneezing, sore throat and headache. As new variants emerge and more of the population becomes vaccinated, there will be ongoing changes in the patterns of symptoms that individuals experience. As we still are learning about this new and evolving virus, particularly with respect to longer term effects, it is important to avoid new or repeat infections as much as possible.
- The virus continues to change which could result in additional waves of COVID-19 being driven by repeat infections and emerging variants.
- Indoor spaces like school buildings are higher risk for COVID-19 transmission when compared to outdoor spaces.
- Current evidence suggests that the virus spreads mainly between people who are in close contact with each other, for example at a conversational distance. The virus can spread from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing or breathe. Another person can then contract the virus when infectious particles that pass through the air are inhaled at short range (this is often called short-range aerosol or short-range airborne transmission) or if infectious particles come into direct contact with the eyes, nose, or mouth (droplet transmission). The virus can also spread in poorly ventilated and/or crowded indoor settings, where people tend to spend longer periods of time. This is because aerosols can remain suspended in the air or travel farther than conversational distance (this is often called long-range aerosol or long-range airborne transmission). To a lesser extent, people may also catch the virus from touching contaminated surfaces, then touching the eyes, nose or mouth without washing hands. (Source: World Health Organization)

## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

### **THIS DOCUMENT OUTLINES TWO LEVELS OF PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES, ROUTINE AND ENHANCED, WHICH ARE OUTLINED BELOW.**

#### **ROUTINE PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES**

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The following are routine public health measures to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on students, staff, and the broader community.

##### **Masking**

Masks are encouraged and anyone who wants to wear a mask is supported in doing so.

Masks are recommended for staff who work with students who are at higher risk of severe illness and outcomes from COVID-19 whenever physical distancing is not possible.

Masks are not required for students and staff in school or on school buses.

##### **Vaccination**

Being immunized is the best defense against COVID-19. Individuals are encouraged to remain up-to-date with COVID-19 vaccination and receive a booster dose when eligible. Most people, who are up-to-date with vaccines will be well-protected against COVID-19, meaning:

- The risk of serious illness is lower;
- The risk of transmitting the virus to others is reduced; and
- Although the virus continues to evolve, the current vaccine provides protection against most of the identified variants of concern.

##### ***Vaccine measures in schools:***

- It is recommended that students, staff, volunteers and families are up to date with their COVID-19 vaccination including booster doses when eligible.
- Public health will support vaccination among staff, students, volunteers and parents/guardians.
- Public health will provide aggregate data on student immunization rates to schools.

##### **Managing Symptoms of COVID-19**

A list of COVID-19 symptoms is available [here](#). When assessing for COVID-19 symptoms, it is important to think about the time of year and what is usual for the person.

##### ***Measures for screening and managing symptoms in schools:***

- Exclusion policies are in place for symptomatic students, staff and visitors.
- Students, staff, and visitors should stay home when unwell. If experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, they should get tested. Molecular testing is available at various community clinics. Appointments can be made by visiting <https://pe.skipthewaitingroom.com/walk-in-clinic-provider/vaccination-and-testing-clinics>, or by calling [1-844-975-3303](tel:1-844-975-3303) toll free Monday – Friday 8 a.m. - 4 p.m. Testing guidance may evolve over time; refer to the most up-to-date guidance.

## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

- Schools should have a supply of rapid antigen tests available for students and staff for home use.
- Schools should follow procedures for students and staff who become sick during the school day.
- If students develop symptoms while at school:
  - If they are not wearing a mask, they should be given and wear a medical mask, unless there are safety issues that prevent the person from wearing a mask.
  - Parents or guardians should be notified to come and pick up their child immediately and follow public health advice regarding testing and isolation.
  - If the student is young and requires close contact and care while isolated at school, staff can continue to care for the child until the parent is able to pick up the child. Caregivers should be mindful of hand hygiene and avoid contact with the respiratory secretions of the student. The staff person caring for the child should wear a mask.
- If staff/visitors develop symptoms while at school:
  - If they are not wearing a mask, they should be given and wear a medical mask (unless there are safety issues that prevent the person from wearing a mask), immediately isolate themselves from other staff and students, notify their administrator, return home and follow public health advice regarding testing and isolation.
- For anyone who develops symptoms at school:
  - Shared items should be cleaned and disinfected as per guidelines.
  - Staff, students, and visitors should wash their hands before and after touching any items used by the person with symptoms.
- If testing for COVID-19 is advised and students, staff, and/or visitors with symptoms have tested negative for COVID-19, they may return to school if they are feeling well and symptoms have resolved.
- Schools should not notify staff or students' families (other than the family of the ill student) if a staff member or student becomes ill at home or at school unless directed to do so by public health.

### Hand Hygiene

Hand hygiene is a simple and effective defense against COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Hand hygiene includes hand washing with soap and water or using alcohol-based sanitizer. Hand washing with soap and water is effective against COVID-19. Soap actively destroys the surface of the virus and the mechanical action of hand rubbing reduces how much of the virus is left on the hands. Alcohol-based sanitizers are effective at inactivating the virus that causes COVID-19 when hands are not visibly soiled. Key times for performing hand hygiene include before and after eating, after using the washroom, and before and after using shared equipment. Conducting hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene may be a challenge among children, particularly younger age groups.

#### ***Hand hygiene measures in schools:***

- Students, staff, and visitors should perform hand hygiene frequently during the day; hand washing with soap and water is preferred when hands are visibly soiled.
- Students, staff and visitors should be encouraged to practice frequent hand hygiene and proper respiratory etiquette, using age-appropriate interventions.
- Handwashing supplies and alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol should be made available throughout the school.
- Signage on personal hygiene etiquette such as handwashing, and sneezing and coughing etiquette, should be clearly posted throughout the school.

## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

### Cleaning and Disinfection

Proper cleaning with soap and water or approved cleaning products, as well as disinfection with approved sanitization products, can remove and inactivate viruses from commonly touched surfaces and materials.

#### *Cleaning and disinfection measures in schools*

- Regular cleaning and disinfection schedules with additional focus on frequently touched objects such as door handles, railings, and waste containers, water fountains and shared equipment such as sports equipment, both in schools and on buses.

### Ventilation

COVID-19 is primarily transmitted by aerosols and respiratory droplets during close contact especially in poorly ventilated indoor areas. Longer range aerosol transmission has also been described. Well-ventilated indoor spaces, as well as other protective measures, help decrease the risk of COVID-19 and the spread of other respiratory illness. Risk of transmission of COVID-19 is reduced in outdoor settings.

#### *Ventilation measures in schools*

- Good indoor air quality in schools reduces the risk of virus transmission.
- Outdoor activities should be encouraged where feasible.
- A variety of methods and technologies may be employed to improve indoor air quality that are influenced by existing infrastructure. Examples are natural ventilation by opening windows, mechanical ventilation systems, and/or standalone HEPA filtration units.
- More information about ventilation can be found at <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks/covid-19-improving-indoor-ventilation.html>

## ENHANCED PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES

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In response to elevated COVID-19 risk situations enhanced public health measures may be required for schools to reduce the impacts of COVID-19. A combination of these enhanced measures may be recommended by the Chief Public Health Office based on COVID-19 epidemiology, or to minimize transmission of the COVID-19 virus in anticipation of further waves of COVID-19.

### Masking

Non-medical and medical masks assist in the reduction of respiratory droplets being spread through regular speaking, breathing, coughing and sneezing. Mask mandates have been proven to associate with lower incidence of infection in schools. Schools should have a supply of 3-layer masks to provide to every student and staff person who requires one. Mandatory masking may be required if physical distancing is not feasible. The Chief Public Health Office may impose additional masking requirements when enhanced public health measures are necessary.

- Masks are required for staff, students, and visitors in all grades when transitioning through school buildings. Masks may be removed when seated in classrooms.

## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

- Masks are required for staff and students in all grades on school buses.
- Masks are required for staff who work with students who are at higher risk of severe illness and outcomes from COVID-19 whenever physical distancing is not possible.

Exemptions to mask requirements include:

- A person who cannot wear a mask for health or behavioural reasons.
- A person unable to put on or take off a mask without the assistance of another person.
- While engaging in an educational activity that would otherwise be inhibited by the mask (i.e. engaging in physical activity, playing a wind instrument, etc.)
- Instructional staff may remove their mask if it inhibits instruction, while maintaining physical distancing.
- While actively eating or drinking.
- While providing a service to a person where visual cues, facial expression, lip reading, etc. are important.

The requirements may change. For general information on mask use see:

[www.princeedwardisland.ca/masks](http://www.princeedwardisland.ca/masks)

### Testing

Rapid antigen tests are a valuable tool that can be used to assess and monitor for COVID-19 infection. In addition to testing those with symptoms of COVID-19, asymptomatic screening with rapid antigen tests may be implemented at times of elevated risk for students and staff. Rapid antigen tests are intended to reduce the incidence of COVID-19 exposures in the school setting through early detection of cases.

Frequency of testing may be dependent on current community COVID-19 situation and an adequate supply of rapid antigen tests. Families will be provided with rapid antigen tests to permit testing when these additional enhanced public health measures are recommended. Testing is also accessible at a Health PEI testing clinic.

More information on rapid antigen tests can be found at: [www.princeedwardisland.ca/hometestkit](http://www.princeedwardisland.ca/hometestkit)

Information on how to get tested at a testing clinic can be found at:

[www.princeedwardisland.ca/covidtesting](http://www.princeedwardisland.ca/covidtesting)

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

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### Water Fountains

Water fountains may be used and should be cleaned on a regular basis.

### Extracurricular Activities at School

Extracurricular activities and school sports should be encouraged, however overcrowding should be avoided where possible. In elevated COVID-19 risk scenarios, selective enhanced measures may be



## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

recommended for school sports, other extracurricular activities, and assemblies to reduce disease spread.

### Community Use of Schools

Community use of school facilities and access to buildings should be encouraged for fostering community connections and support, following current general public health measures.

### Vulnerable Students and Staff

Students and staff considered vulnerable or immunocompromised can attend school; however, they may want to consult with their health care provider. People who are immune compromised may not mount a full immune response to vaccination, and some may not be eligible for vaccination. Parents/caregivers and staff should discuss their situation and work with the school to adapt learning scenarios as appropriate.

### Parents and Guardians

The support of parents and guardians for public health measures is essential to ensuring a successful school year.

- Vaccination for those eligible is the best measure to ensure ongoing operation of schools and in-person learning.
- Proper hand hygiene and keeping students home when sick will prevent disease spread.
- Other measures such as masking and rapid antigen screening may be recommended depending on the COVID-19 situation and recommendations may be different based on the age group or grade. The support of parents and guardians for these measures is key for implementation.

### Operational Plans

Schools should have operational plans, including for the enhanced public health measure scenarios.

## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

### GUIDANCE SUMMARY TABLE

**Table 1:** Overview of Public Health Measures Based on Routine and Enhanced Public Health Measures in K-12 schools.

	<b>Routine Public Health Measures</b>	<b>Enhanced Public Health Measures</b>
<b>Vaccination</b>	Vaccination is the best protection against COVID-19. Recommend everyone eligible for COVID-19 vaccines be up to date with their immunizations, including boosters.	Continue following guidance for routine public health measures.
<b>Managing Symptoms of COVID-19</b>	Monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19 is recommended for staff, students, and visitors.  Stay home from school when sick.  If experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, get tested using a rapid antigen test or at a Health PEI clinic test. Refer to the most up to date information on the testing webpage as testing guidance may evolve over time.  Schools should follow procedures for students, staff and visitors who become sick during the school day.	Continue following guidance for routine public health measures.
<b>Hand Hygiene</b>	Frequent hand hygiene and proper respiratory etiquette is encouraged throughout the day, using age-appropriate interventions.  Handwashing supplies and alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol should be made available throughout the school.  Signage on personal hygiene etiquette such as handwashing, sneezing, and coughing etiquette, should be clearly posted throughout the school.	Continue following guidance for routine public health measures.
<b>Cleaning and Disinfection</b>	Regular cleaning and disinfection schedules with additional focus on frequently touched objects like door handles, railings, and waste containers, water fountains and shared items, like sports equipment, both in schools and on buses.	Continue following guidance for routine public health measures.
<b>Ventilation</b>	Good indoor air quality in schools will reduce the risk of virus transmission.  Outdoor activities should be encouraged where feasible.	Continue following guidance for routine public health measures.
<b>Masking</b>	Masks are encouraged and anyone who wants to wear a mask is supported in doing so.	Masks are required for staff, students, and visitors in all grades when transitioning

## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

	<b>Routine Public Health Measures</b>	<b>Enhanced Public Health Measures</b>
	<p>Masks are recommended for staff who work with students who are at higher risk of severe illness and outcomes from COVID-19 whenever physical distancing is not possible.</p> <p>Masks are not required for students in school or on school buses.</p>	<p>through school buildings.</p> <p>Masks are required for students in all grades on school buses.</p> <p>Masks are required for staff who work with students who are at higher risk of severe illness and outcomes from COVID-19 whenever physical distancing is not possible.</p>
<b>Testing</b>	<p>Students and staff should monitor closely for symptoms of COVID-19 and follow current public health guidance regarding testing and isolation.</p> <p>Rapid antigen screening tests will be available for students and staff for at-home testing when symptoms develop.</p>	<p>Asymptomatic regular at-home screening with rapid antigen tests may be implemented.</p> <p>Families will be provided with rapid antigen tests when regular testing is recommended</p>
<b>Gatherings and Events</b>	<p>Gatherings and events, including assemblies, extracurricular activities, and school sports should be encouraged, however, overcrowding should be avoided where possible.</p>	<p>Continue following guidance for routine public health measures.</p>
<b>Vulnerable Students and Staff</b>	<p>Vulnerable students and staff may want to consult with their health care provider for advice regarding attending school.</p> <p>Alternative education plans should be considered for those individuals who are at higher risk of COVID-19 and are not attending in person.</p>	<p>Continue following guidance for routine public health measures.</p>
<b>Community Use of School Facilities</b>	<p>Community use of school facilities and access to buildings is encouraged.</p>	<p>Continue following guidance for routine public health measures.</p>
<b>Operational Plans</b>	<p>Schools should have operational plans, including consideration of enhanced public health measures. CPHO review and approval is not required.</p>	<p>School applies operational plan with enhanced public health measures.</p>

## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

	<b>Routine Public Health Measures</b>	<b>Enhanced Public Health Measures</b>
<b>Bussing</b>	Occupancy may return to normal levels for K-12. Masking not required.	Masking required on buses.
<b>School Sport and other Extracurricular Activities</b>	Organized sport and recreation activities are encouraged. Over-crowding should be avoided where possible.	Select enhanced measures may be recommended for assemblies, school sports and other extracurricular activities to reduce disease spread.

## Back-to-School Public Health Guidance 2022-2023

### Outbreak Management

In the event that enhanced public health measures are implemented, teams of staff in the Chief Public Health Office, the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, Public Schools Branch and *La Commission scolaire de langue française*, and at the individual school level, may carry out Outbreak Management measures. The following is a broad overview of the responsibilities of each team.

The Chief Public Health Office will:

- Assess school impact and closure requirements
- Provide guidance and support to the Education COVID-19 Response Team and School- Based teams as necessary
- Supply rapid antigen tests to schools

The Education COVID-19 Response Team will:

- Request attendance records and submit them to the Chief Public Health Office
- Assess school impact and closure requirements

The School-Based COVID-19 Response Team will:

- Receive case notification from parents/guardians and monitor school situations as necessary
- Submit attendance records to the Education COVID-19 Response Team
- Provide rapid antigen tests to parents/guardians, students and staff