

2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Guidance for School Administrators: Kindergarten – Grade 12

COVID-19 is a new type of coronavirus that can cause acute respiratory illness. In general, these viruses are spread when a sick person coughs or sneezes. COVID-19 is spread person-to-person through large respiratory droplets (e.g. coughing, sneezing) that can travel up to two metres. It may also be possible for a person to get COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. The majority of people with COVID-19 develop a mild illness, which may include fever, cough, or shortness of breath. For more general information about COVID-19, see the [Toronto Public Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Fact Sheet](#).

The following interim guidance for school administrators includes recommendations to help reduce the risk of school-based exposures to acute respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19, and planning considerations if there is community spread of COVID-19.

Advice for school administrators to take now

Preventing respiratory infections (including COVID-19) in schools

- **Actively encourage sick staff and students to stay home**
 - School staff and students who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness are recommended to stay home and not go to work/school until they are symptom-free for at least 24 hours. Staff and parents should notify the school when ill.
 - Monitor and plan for absenteeism. Review usual patterns for both students and staff and alert Toronto Public Health (TPH) about large increases in absenteeism, particularly if absences appear to be due to respiratory illnesses such as colds or flu, which have similar symptoms to COVID-19 (e.g. fever, cough, difficulty breathing).
 - Review attendance and sick leave policies for staff and students to allow flexibility for those needing to stay home due to illness. Remove barriers to staying home if ill where possible (i.e. test/exam re-scheduling, not requiring doctors note for absence, allowing staff to stay home to care for a sick family member).

- **Emphasize hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and other healthy practices by all members of the school community**
 - Place posters that remind staff and students of [cough and sneeze etiquette](#), [hand washing](#) and [hand sanitizing](#) at the school entrance, and in areas where they are likely to be seen.
 - Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles for use by school staff and students.
 - Promote proper hand washing with soap and water for at least 15 seconds or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (minimum 70% alcohol-based) when hands are not visibly dirty.
 - Increase monitoring of hand hygiene supplies to ensure adequate amounts of soap, paper towel and hand sanitizer are available.
 - Access handwashing teaching resources for schools through [Toronto Public Health](#).

- **Monitor and maintain cleaning and disinfecting policies**
 - Schools/childcare programs in schools are encouraged to review existing activities and practices within their setting to help determine where enhancements or increased cleaning frequencies may be recommended.
 - Use extra diligence when cleaning high touch areas that could increase the likelihood of the virus spreading from person to person.
- **Reinforce "no sharing" policies**
 - This includes the current practice of not sharing food, water bottles and proper cleaning/disinfecting of musical instrument mouth pieces or if feasible have students use their own mouth piece.

Keep parents/caregivers informed

- Maintain up-to-date information on school board and school websites. Refer parents/caregivers to the [TPH COVID-19 website](#) and TPH communications for the most up-to-date information.
- Provide advice to families and school staff before travelling, including:
 - Check the Government of Canada's [travel advisories](#) for the latest guidance and recommendations for each country to which you will travel.
 - Be aware of guidance being provided to travellers upon return, including those [affected areas](#) where individuals are asked to monitor for symptoms or self-isolate for 14 days upon return.

Support those self-monitoring for symptoms or self-isolating

- If students/children or staff have been advised by TPH to self-monitor for symptoms or self-isolate at home due to return from travel to an [affected area](#) or illness, the school community should make efforts to support families to ensure:
 - Sick leave policies are in place and school attendance is flexible.
 - Families are treated with respect, fairness and compassion with a focus on dignity and privacy protection.
 - Provision of homework for students to keep them from falling behind in studies.
 - Students/staff who are self-monitoring but not in self-isolation are aware of symptoms to monitor, and procedures to take if they should become ill.

Provide support and reassurance

- Listen and acknowledge student concerns and provide reassurance for their personal safety and health. Students/children want to be heard and ask questions.
- Being a positive role model is an effective strategy to help reduce student fear and anxiety as well as promoting healthy behaviours. Remember students/children are often listening when you talk to others about COVID-19.
- Help identify when sources of misinformation are circulating (often in less supervised settings such as before-and-after school programs and during lunch and recess breaks) and correct this information when it occurs.
- Maintain familiar routines and activities to reinforce a sense of security for students.

Engage in planning in the event of community spread

- Considerations for planning include considering the continuity of operations, absenteeism, supplies and needs specific to the education sector. Toronto Public Health is updating the Influenza Pandemic Plan regarding COVID-19, however, the checklists from these prior planning activities are still relevant and can be used now in preparation. In addition, see below for details about considerations regarding school cancellations.

Additional school considerations in response to current or suspected cases of COVID-19

- Management advice of students/staff currently self-monitoring and experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 while attending school is available at the [Public Health Agency of Canada website](#):
 - Schools should immediately separate students/children and staff who show symptoms of COVID-19 from others in a supervised area until they can go home.
- Confirmed and suspect cases of COVID-19 are reported by health care providers and laboratories to local public health units, in Toronto this is Toronto Public Health.
- Toronto Public Health performs a risk assessment for all exposures in Toronto, including those that may occur in a school setting.
- Toronto Public Health will provide advice regarding any other measures that the school or school board may need to take to reduce the risk of transmission. If a student or staff member has been diagnosed with COVID-19, school and program administrators should seek guidance from TPH to determine when students and staff should return to school, and what additional steps are needed for the school community.
- Students and staff who are well but are taking care of or share a home with someone who is diagnosed with COVID-19 should follow instructions from TPH to determine when to return to school/work.
- Unless advised by TPH through the above assessment, there are no restrictions or special measures required for contacts of suspected cases of COVID-19 in the school setting. There is no need to close the school or send people home.
- Toronto Public Health will advise if any special cleaning processes are recommended. Regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces and hands reduces the risk of infection.

Planning considerations for community spread of COVID-19

School boards and schools should plan to be able to respond in a flexible way, and be prepared to change their response plans as needed. Keep up to date with information on the [Toronto Public Health website](#). School boards and schools may need to take additional steps in **response** to increased cases in the community to prevent spread in the school community, including implementing school board and school emergency operations plans. ^{CDC}

Toronto Public Health may recommend school closures as a public health measure in very rare circumstances. This is something that would be done in consultation with Toronto Public Health and the Ministry of Health, and would be undertaken with careful consideration.

Some advance contingency planning to consider if this were to occur: ^{CDC}

- Temporarily cancel extracurricular group activities and large events.
 - Cancel or postpone events such as after-school assemblies and pep rallies, field trips, and sporting events.
- Discourage students and staff from gathering or socializing in all other settings.
 - Discourage gatherings at places like a friend's house, a favorite restaurant, or the local shopping mall.
- Explore other options to ensure continuity of education.
 - Review continuity plans, including plans for the continuity of teaching and learning.
 - Implement e-learning plans, including digital and distance learning options, as feasible and appropriate.
 - In consultation with school board officials or other relevant Ministry of Education or local partners, determine:
 - how to convert face-to-face lessons into online lessons and how to train teachers to do so;
 - how to triage technical issues if faced with limited IT support and staff;
 - how to encourage appropriate adult supervision while children are using distance learning approaches; and
 - how to deal with the potential lack of students' access to computers and the Internet at home.

More detailed information for school administrators can be accessed at:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/guidance-schools-childcare-programs.html>

More information

For more information, contact Toronto Public Health at 416-338-7600.

References

Public Health Agency of Canada (2020). *Public health guidance for schools (K-12) and childcare programs (COVID-19)*.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/guidance-schools-childcare-programs.html>

Public Health Agency of Canada (2020). *Public health management of cases and contacts associated with novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)*. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/interim-guidance-cases-contacts.html>

Toronto Public Health (2020). *2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) [Fact Sheet]*. City of Toronto. Retrieved from https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/8d59-Fact-Sheet_Novel-Coronavirus.pdf

Centers for Disease Control (2020). *Interim Guidance for Administrators of US Childcare Programs and K-12 Schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-schools.html>