

Date: January 7, 2022

COVID-19 Update for Parents/Guardians and staff

Dear Parents/Guardians and staff,

As students return to school following the holiday break, I want to wish everyone a happy new year and thank you for your ongoing support as we work to keep our students and staff safe. We know that in-person learning is best for our students and your help is very much appreciated as we strive to maintain student learning and keep our schools open.

Over the Christmas break there have been numerous provincial announcements related to COVID health restrictions. The attached letter describes some of these changes and provides answers to some common questions. To lower the risk of in-school transmission of the Omicron variant and provide an additional layer of protection, the Government of Alberta will be supplying rapid tests and masks to schools. Masks and rapid tests are just two ways to maintain safety and we continue to implement numerous strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID.

Although, individuals exposed to sick people (e.g. close contacts of COVID cases are not legally required to quarantine, we continue to ask staff and students to stay home and away from others when they are sick (until they feel better), even if they test negative for COVID. Furthermore, this is a reminder that vaccination is not mandatory for students and school authorities may not deny students access to learning based on vaccination status.

The following are some specific updates:

Horizon rapid screening program (unvaccinated individuals working with kids)

Horizon implemented a COVID harm reduction policy that requires staff and volunteers working with kids in our schools to provide proof of vaccination or proof of a negative COVID test. While parents may continue to enter the school to drop off and pick up kids, and meet with staff, parents wishing to spend time in classrooms are required to show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test.

Government provided rapid tests for all students and staff

Alberta Education is providing all Horizon students and staff with a box of rapid tests by January 14 (our intent is to disperse these as soon as they arrive). Testing is recommended to be done twice a week, meaning one box of 5 tests will allow individuals to test for 2.5 weeks. These are voluntary and results do not need to be reported to anyone. It is recommended that individuals test twice per week. Staff can test themselves at home if they wish. Schools will not be testing students. Parents can test their own child at home if they wish. Instructions on how to use these voluntary tests can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0HISLuBeAg>. A [how-to video](#) for parents and a [rapid test program fact sheet](#) translated into multiple languages offers tips on how to use the rapid test kits. Both are available online at <https://www.alberta.ca/k-12-learning-during-covid-19.aspx>. Detailed information about isolation when positive is available [here](#), but a summary can be found below.

If you test positive:

- You must isolate immediately.
- 24 hours after the initial positive result, you should take a second rapid test.
 - If the second test is positive, you must stay isolated as follows.
 - Fully vaccinated:
 - Isolate for 5 days from the start of symptoms or until they resolve, whichever is longer, plus for 5 days following isolation, wear a mask **at all times** when around others outside of home.
 - Not fully vaccinated:
 - Isolate for 10 days from the start of symptoms or until they resolve, whichever is longer.
 - If the second test is negative, and you are not sick, they can resume regular activities while continuing to follow all public health guidelines.

Masks

To lower the risk of in-school transmission of the Omicron variant and provide an additional layer of protection, the Government of Alberta will be supplying medical grade masks to schools. Schools have been providing twenty masks for each student and staff member.

Students, teachers, staff and visitors must follow provincial requirements for [masks](#).

- Masks should be well-constructed, well-fitted and properly worn.
- If non-medical masks are worn, they should be constructed of at least three layers: two of breathable tightly woven fabric, such as cotton, and an additional effective middle filter layer, such as non-woven polypropylene.

The province is strongly recommending mask use for all individuals (early learning to gr. 12) and strongly recommending that they be worn at all time. Masks however only remain mandatory for gr.4-12 and mandatory for all students on buses.

Although now strongly recommended, masks are not required while students are seated in the classroom during instruction if students are working quietly and desks are arranged so students are not facing each other and students are able to maintain social distancing. If close contact between students, or students and teachers/staff is going to occur, masks should be used for the duration of the class or activity.

Ventilation In Horizon School Division Buildings

The Mechanical Ventilation Systems in the buildings are designed to bring in fresh air from outside into building spaces and rooms and extract air from those same spaces and rooms. The design of mechanical systems for ventilation is completed by a Mechanical Engineer and based on North American standards.

Horizon School Division building Mechanical Ventilation Systems use pleated air filters that remove dust, pollen, mold, bacteria, and airborne particles. There are several kinds of filters that can be used in buildings to filter the air. A HEPA filter is an acronym for "high efficiency" filter, and basically means good quality. However, a better measure for the effectiveness of a filters is its Minimum Efficiency Reporting Values, or MERVs, which is a filter's ability to capture air borne particles. Horizon School Division has increased the MERV rating of our filters to that of hospital laboratories where possible. We always match the filters to the design of the equipment to ensure proper functioning of the system. Putting filters that do not meet the flow rating of the machinery will end up staving the ventilation system of clean outside air and cause worse indoor air quality as sufficient clean outside air is not delivered to the classrooms.

Horizon School Division follows the manufacturer's recommendations on maintenance and we replace the filters approximately every 3 months. Horizon School Division utilizes a Building Management System to monitor ventilation systems to ensure they are functioning properly. We have increased the flow of air in all of our ventilation systems and a HVAC Technician monitors and routinely checks systems as well as school caretaking staff who check daily for any concerns that need to be addressed.

Shifting to at-home learning

In light of the changes to available data from AHS, Horizon will no longer be sending letters home to parents about school-based cases as AHS is no longer informing us of such cases. The province will no longer be reporting school based outbreaks on their websites and the previous directive to shift to at-home learning based on AHS case numbers no longer applies.

Should we encounter situations where we can no longer keep our schools open, the decision to shift to at-home learning will be based on our ability to have staff available to operate in-school classes, and large student absences. We will communicate such decisions as quickly as possible. We will strive to limit shifts to at-home learning to classrooms as opposed to entire schools and limit such shifts to the minimum number of days possible (e.g. less than 2 weeks).

e-Tutoring Hub

An e-Tutoring Hub is being launched next week to help students catch up on skills and learning they may have fallen behind on because of the pandemic. Initially, students in Grades 4 to 9 will be able to access pre-recorded video tutoring sessions online anytime to build their literacy and numeracy skills.

Extra-Curricular Events

Given the more transmissible Omicron variant schools have been instructed where possible, to avoid large gatherings of students and staff. As such, school events such as school wide assemblies, performances, field trips, and school community events will be postponed for the time being.

Schools will be allowed to continue with extra-curricular school-based athletic practices and intra-school-based games, but we will be suspending opportunities for spectating at school performance and sporting events to reduce potential exposures to COVID-19 at this time

Inter-school games, competition, and tournaments will be suspended for the next week to allow us to determine the extent of impact of Omicron. We will review this on a weekly basis to see if we are able to resume some of these practices.

General Health Guidelines and daily screening

The Government of Alberta website has being updated <https://www.alberta.ca/k-12-learning-during-covid-19.aspx> and we will continue to share updated information as it becomes available.

An updated daily screening tool for parents and staff is available at

<https://open.alberta.ca/publications/covid-19-information-alberta-health-daily-checklist>.

I have included some Q&A in the attachment for further information.

The safety of students and staff remains our main concern. If you have further questions, please contact your school.

Sincerely,



Superintendent

Resumption of student learning – January 2022

Question and answer guide for school authorities

General Guidance Documents

[What are expectations of schools to provide masks and rapid?](#)

Students will return to in-person learning with the added safety of access to rapid tests and millions of medical-grade masks. These will be distributed to schools to lower the risk of in-school transmission of the Omicron variant of COVID-19. Masks are required for grades 4-12 and recommended for ECS-gr. 3. Rapid tests and masks will be provided for all ECS-12 students and staff. Rapid test use is optional. Rapid tests are to be administered at home.

[What data will be available regarding COVID-19 in schools?](#)

COVID-19 case data will no longer be available to support the previous approach to public reporting on COVID-19 in schools. However, the departments of Health and Education are working together to determine what might be feasible.

[Has there been an update to the guidance for schools regarding extra-curricular activities and field trips?](#)

The guidance documents have been updated and extra-curricular activities and field trips are not being recommended at this time.

Masks

[Will the provision of masks result in changes to mask guidance for K-3 students? Are there changes to in class/school wearing of masks such as wearing masks at all times or can they be removed when facing forward, for example?](#)

Masks are strongly recommended for K-3 students. Due to transmissibility of Omicron, it is recommended for students and teachers to wear masks at all times, including when seated or facing forward. Masking along with physical distancing will help reduce transmission.

[Is there a requirement to use the medical-grade masks that are being supplied to schools?](#)

There is no requirement to use the medical masks and reusable non-medical masks are also protective, but if the medical masks are available they should be used as well. It is important that the mask fits well to be protective. Masks for K-3 are strongly recommended.

[Is there information about the types of masks that will be distributed? What do the levels mean?](#)

Adult masks are Level 3 and child masks are Level 2. Level 3 masks have greater than 98% filtration efficiency and protect against heavy levels of aerosols, spray and/or fluids. Level 2 masks have greater than 98% filtration efficiency and protect against low to

medium levels of aerosols, spray and/or fluids. Students up to gr. 6 will get child masks, students grade 7-12 will get adult masks.

Rapid Tests

Is there guidance on how often to use the rapid test?

The rapid test should be used twice per week, 72 hours apart (e.g. Sunday and Wednesday or Monday and Thursday). Additional information is available [online](#).

Is there a requirement to report rapid test results to Alberta Health or employers?

Is this different for staff vs students?

There is no requirement for parents/students to report a positive rapid test result, although they are required to stay home. Staff with positive tests are required to enter the absence in our absence management system

How will the rapid tests be packaged when they come to schools? Will they be packaged for individual distribution to students and staff? How many tests will be in each box?

The rapid tests come in a box of five. Each ECS-12 student and staff will be given one box for each

distribution that will provide them with enough tests for 2.5 weeks.

Is there a video or instructions on how to use rapid tests?

A how-to video and a rapid test program fact sheet translated into multiple languages offers tips on how to use the rapid test kits. Both are available online at <https://www.alberta.ca/k-12-learning-during-covid-19.aspx> and may be useful for your school communities.

Mask and Rapid Test Shipments

Are there specific storage requirements for rapid tests?

Rapid tests should be stored between 2 degrees and 30 degrees Celsius. The BTNX tests should not be frozen. If they are accidentally frozen they can be thawed for 30 minutes to room temperature and then can still be used.

School Shifts

Why did you change the shift period to 10 calendar days?

The shift to at-home learning will be due to operational reasons, not due to an individual positive case. A 10-day shift reduces the need to have extensions to the length of shifts which results in uncertainty for students, parents and staff. This also aligns with the maximum isolation period