

COVID-19 Protocols for  
First Nations School Administrators:  
Management of School-Associated Activity  
DRAFT January 14, 2022



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## Introduction

The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) advises that the emergence of the more transmissible Omicron variant of COVID-19 necessitates changes in public health management and administrator responsibilities for cases of COVID-19 impacting schools. This resource is intended to provide First Nations school administrators with information on roles and responsibilities in managing school-associated COVID-19 activity.

This document is an adaptation of [a resource developed by BCCDC and BC Ministry of Education](#). The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA) adapted this resource in consultation with the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA). FNESC and FNSA published a previous edition in September, 2021.

FNESC and FNSA fully respect the authority of individual First Nations to make decisions about the operation of First Nations schools in the best interests of their students, schools, and communities. This includes the authority to decide if and how to use this guidance to inform planning, and if and when to reopen their schools. We recognize that First Nations may have additional requirements and processes beyond those described in this document and may adapt this resource consistent with local needs and priorities. FNESC and FNSA understand that First Nations-specific protocols may supersede the guidance included in this document.

For additional guidance and details, FNESC and FNSA recommend that First Nations and First Nations schools contact their respective Regional Health Authority (RHA). A list of [key contacts](#) is provided on page 8 of this document.

First Nations and First Nations schools may wish to incorporate the guidance included in this document within their school plan. FNEESC and FNSA's [First Nations Schools Reopening Considerations and Template](#) includes a planning template.

Definitions for terms used in this document are available in [Appendix A](#). Details on public health management of COVID-19, including [advice for individuals](#) and up-to-date data is available from the [BC CDC](#).

**IMPORTANT:** The information within this resource is not legal advice and should not be interpreted as such. First Nations are encouraged to seek independent legal advice, as required, to address their particular circumstances and concerns.

### What is Different – Omicron Variant

At this time, the Omicron variant is the most commonly circulating variant of COVID-19 in BC. This variant is more infectious and is resulting in higher numbers of infections, and there is risk of exposure in all settings. Emerging data from around the world indicates that the Omicron variant is causing less serious illness, especially in highly immunized populations like in BC.

### What is Different – Management of School-Associated COVID-19 Activity

Public health has determined that with higher levels of community transmission, a shorter virus incubation period, and the increased use of rapid antigen testing, contact tracing and close contact notification by public health is not effective to minimize the spread of COVID-19. As such, public health management practices (including guidance for K-12 school-associated COVID-19 activity) have transitioned to established practices for other circulating viral illnesses with similar transmission characteristics. This includes individual self-management (i.e., individuals care for themselves, engaging with health care providers when needed), with public health focused on identifying and responding to larger clusters and outbreaks.

The Ministry of Education is requiring public and non-First Nations independent schools to closely monitor school attendance data to determine if they have met a public-health determined potential activity signal.<sup>1</sup> See the [School and Education Authority Responsibilities](#) section on page 4 for details about activity signals and thresholds. When met, the school will notify public health and the school community. Public health, led by Medical Health Officers, will continue to lead investigations to determine if additional measures are needed. Public health will also monitor provincial and regional data and will connect with schools if they identify further investigation is needed. This process is outlined below.

Public health advises that COVID-19 is going to continue to circulate in our population, and there will continue to be exposure to the virus in the community, irrespective of school attendance. More information is available from [BCCDC](#).

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<sup>1</sup> A potential activity signal is a threshold that indicates further investigation is warranted by public health to determine if additional actions are required.

# School Management

## Roles and Responsibilities: School-Associated COVID-19 Activity

### Staff and Student (or their Parent/Caregiver) Responsibilities

- Completing a daily health check, regularly monitor for symptoms of illness and stay home when sick.
- Completing any reporting tool provided by public health if they test positive for COVID-19 (regardless of test type), including providing all school-related information requested.
- Specifying that the absence is illness-related when notifying their school of an absence.
  - As supported by public health, students and staff do not need to disclose if their absence is specific to COVID-19, however those who test positive for COVID-19 should be diligent in ensuring their school is aware their absence is illness-related.
- Continuing to follow public health guidance and recommendations.

### School and Education Authority Responsibilities

The following guidance was developed by the BCCDC and Ministry of Education. FNESC and FNSEA understand that individual First Nations may adapt these guidelines consistent with local needs and priorities.

- Continuing to track attendance rates (staff and students away), identifying illness-related absenteeism.
- Comparing current attendance rates to the previous year(s) to determine if any **potential activity signals** related to attendance have been met.
  - Current public health-identified potential activity signals<sup>2</sup> are:
    - If school attendance is 10% below historical normal (e.g., the previous years),
    - If fewer than 75% of students in a grade are in attendance, OR
      - For smaller schools (e.g., student population under 100) where large fluctuations in school absenteeism rates can be due to small numbers of students away, schools should contact public health if they determine an abnormal number of students are away due to illness over 2-3 days,
    - A functional school closure is being considered or implemented (the definition of a functional school closure is provided on page 5).
- When a potential activity signal is met:
  - Notify local First Nations leadership and the Regional Health Authority.
- Notify the grade or school community (depending on which potential activity signal is met). An example notification is included as [Appendix B](#) and see the section of this document [Communications and Protecting Personal Privacy](#).

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<sup>2</sup> Regional health authorities may identify specific potential activity signals for an individual school, a grouping of schools, or for all schools within their region.

- Work with local First Nations leadership and the Regional Health Authority to support the distribution of public health information (e.g., notification of increased COVID-19 activity to grades or to the school community) and/or to take additional actions (e.g., testing guidance and support, implement additional measures, etc.) when directed by public health and/or local First Nations leadership.

### **Regional Health Authority Responsibilities**

- Monitoring provincial COVID-19 reporting tool data for region-specific school-associated potential increased activity.
- Providing advice and guidance to school and school district administrators when they are notified by a school, or they identify based on regional or provincial data, a potential activity signal.
- Working with First Nations school administrators, others at school, and local First Nations leadership when they determine additional actions are recommended (e.g., disseminate notification to identified grade or school related to identified increased activity, provide testing guidance and support, implement additional measures, distributing public health information, etc.).

### **BCCDC and Ministry of Health Responsibilities**

- Monitoring provincial COVID-19 reporting tool data for school-associated activity.
- Monitoring provincial data, evidence and trends, and providing situational updates on COVID-19 in BC K-12 schools.
- Ensuring the Public Health Guidance for K-12 Schools recommends prevention measures to be implemented provincially to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading in K-12 schools.

### **Rapid Response Teams**

- Rapid response teams continue to support schools impacted by COVID-19. Their specific role will be determined regionally.
  - First Nations have the option of contacting their regional Rapid Response Team for support. This decision should be made by local First Nations leadership. See [the FNESC/FNSA April 22, 2021 update](#) for details.

A flow chart outlining administrator roles is included as [Appendix C](#).

### **Functional School Closures**

A functional school closure is the temporary closure of a school due to a lack of staff to provide the required level of teaching, supervision, support, and/or custodial to ensure the health and safety of students. This would likely be due to a high number of staff or certain employees away who are required for a school to function, and the inability to temporarily replace them.

Schools should work closely with their local First Nations leadership when considering or implementing a functional school closure. As determined by local First Nations leadership, notifying the Regional Health Authority may be appropriate.

## Role of Rapid Antigen Tests

Public health continues to direct how rapid antigen tests are best utilized as part of the provincial pandemic response, including when and how they are deployed for school-specific use.

To date, rapid antigen tests have been utilized in K-12 schools when determined necessary by the responsible Medical Health Officer as part of the public health response to clusters and outbreaks. As more supply becomes available, rapid antigen tests will increasingly be available for use in K-12 schools to support continuity of learning and keeping schools open, under the continued direction of Medical Health Officers.

## Communicable Disease Plans

The BCCDC and Ministry of Education require public schools and non-First Nations independent schools to continue to adhere to the standards, guidelines and protocols from the BCCDC and [WorkSafe BC](#), including ensuring they have a communicable disease plan in place that adheres to the [Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines for K-12 Settings](#).

## Communications and Protecting Personal Privacy

School administrators and local First Nations leadership should work with their Regional Health Authority when a potential activity signal is met to determine if specific communications are warranted (e.g., notification to the broader school community).

Public health has encouraged schools to routinely communicate to the school community the need to follow public health measures, always self-monitor for symptoms (including completing a daily health check before coming to school), and to stay home when sick. An example is included below in [Appendix D](#).

Recent public health guidance recommends that those who [test positive for COVID-19](#) notify those whom they live with, or who they've had intimate contact with. While those who test positive do not need to notify the school or others at school, individuals may still contact a school for this purpose. To protect personal privacy, the BCCDC and Ministry of Education's resource states that public and non-First Nations independent schools cannot release individual contact information for the purpose of an individual (staff, student or parent/caregiver) seeking to notifying others of their test result. Schools should also not notify others on an individual's behalf.

If an individual contacts a school requesting they facilitate notifying others at school, school administrators (or staff, if directly contacted) can share the following:

- *Anyone who has tested positive using a rapid test<sup>3</sup> should complete the online reporting tool provided by public health and/or your Community Health Centre and provide all school-related information requested.*
- *Public health does not require students or staff to notify our school if they have tested positive for COVID-19, or to notify other individuals at school.*
- *To protect personal privacy, we are unable to provide personal contact information for the purpose of notifying others of a test result.*
- *We continue to follow public health guidance, including monitoring school absenteeism to help determine if there may be increased school-associated COVID-19 activity.*

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<sup>3</sup> Health authorities directly track school-associated cases from PCR tests, so completing the provincial reporting tool is not necessary for individuals who received this type of test.

Media requests regarding COVID-19 activity within a school should be directed to the Regional Health Authority and local First Nations leadership for a response, or as directed by First Nations leadership. See the [key contacts](#) on p. 8 for health authority contacts.

Schools should promptly inform local First Nations leadership of significant events (e.g. confirmed exposure or outbreak) and associated communications to school communities related to COVID-19. Communications should not include personal information associated with the exposure.

FNESC and FNSA recognize that individual First Nations may have different expectations and processes regarding notifications and communications than those set out by the BCCDC and Ministry of Education. We recommend discussion of all parties involved to determine plans for specific communities and cases.

## Records Management

Schools continue to be encouraged to maintain up-to-date records of the administrative groupings (e.g., classes, sections, etc.) that individuals are a part of.

## Protocol if a Student/Staff Develops Symptoms of Illness at School

The [BCCDC and Ministry of Education's resource](#) sets out the following protocol for public schools and non-First Nations independent schools in the event that a student or staff member develops symptoms at school:

- Provide the student/staff with a mask if they don't have one (exceptions should be made for students and staff who cannot wear masks for health or behavioural reasons, or if the person is experiencing gastrointestinal symptoms and are at risk of vomiting).
- Provide the student/staff with a space where they can wait comfortably that is separated from others.
  - Younger children must be supervised when separated. Supervising staff should wear a non-medical mask and face shield if they are unable to maintain physical distance, avoid touching bodily fluids as much as possible, and practice diligent hand hygiene.
- Make arrangements for the student/staff to go home as soon as possible (e.g., contact student's parent/caregiver for pick-up).
- Clean and disinfect the areas the student/staff used.
  - Staff responsible for facility cleaning should clean and disinfect the surfaces/equipment which the person's bodily fluids may have been in contact with while they were ill (e.g., their desk in a classroom, the bathroom stall they used, etc.) prior to the surfaces/equipment being used by others.
  - Cleaning/disinfecting the entire room the person was in (a "terminal" clean) is not required in these circumstances.
- Requested that the student seek guidance regarding [testing for COVID-19](#), and stay home until symptoms have improved and they feel well enough to participate in all school-related activities (see the [Return to School](#) section on page 7 for more information).

First Nations may choose to take additional precautions in the event of a suspected case of COVID-19 within the school community.

## Return to School

When a student, staff or other adult can return to school depends on the type of symptoms they experienced, if a COVID-19 test is recommended and the result of their test. See [Appendix A: COVID-19 Symptoms, Testing & Return to School](#) in the Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines for K-12 for specific guidance.

First Nations may set additional requirements or implement more stringent measures for students returning to school consistent with local priorities.

## Key Contacts

Medical Health Officer Contact Information by Regional Health Authority:

- Fraser Health, email [COVIDSchoolHub@fraserhealth.ca](mailto:COVIDSchoolHub@fraserhealth.ca)
- [Interior Health](#)
- [Island Health](#)
- [Northern Health](#), email [healthyschools@northernhealth.ca](mailto:healthyschools@northernhealth.ca)
- [Vancouver Coastal Health](#)

For additional inquiries or additional supports, including First Nations-specific guidance, please contact the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA):

- FNHA Communicable Disease Public Health Team, [cdmgt@fnha.ca](mailto:cdmgt@fnha.ca) or 1-844-364-2232 Services are available Monday-Friday, 8:30 AM-4:30 PM.

## Appendix A: Definitions

### **Potential Activity Signal**

A potential activity signal is a threshold that indicates further investigation is warranted by public health to determine if additional actions are required (e.g., disseminate notification to identified grade or school related to identified increased activity, provide testing guidance and support, implement additional measures, distributing public health information, etc.).

### **Functional School Closure**

A functional closure of a school is a temporary closure due to a lack of staff to provide the required level of teaching, supervision, support, and/or custodial to ensure the health and safety of students. This would likely be due to a high number of staff or certain employees away who are required for a school to function, and the inability to temporarily replace them.

### **Transportation Closure**

A transportation closure is a lack of staff able to provide the required level of transportation services for students. This would likely be due to bus drivers and/or mechanics being away and the inability to replace those absences.

### **Public Health Closure**

A public health closure is the temporary closing of a school by order of a Medical Health Officer when they determine it is necessary to prevent the excessive transmission of a communicable disease (e.g., COVID-19).

## Appendix B: Example Notification When Potential Activity Signal Has Been Met

Dear school community,

Based on review of attendance patterns, we've determined we have met a COVID-19 potential activity signal. A potential activity signal is a threshold based on school attendance. When met, it means public health may investigate further to determine if additional actions are needed. Because people are absent for many reasons, we do not know if there is increased COVID-19 activity at our school.

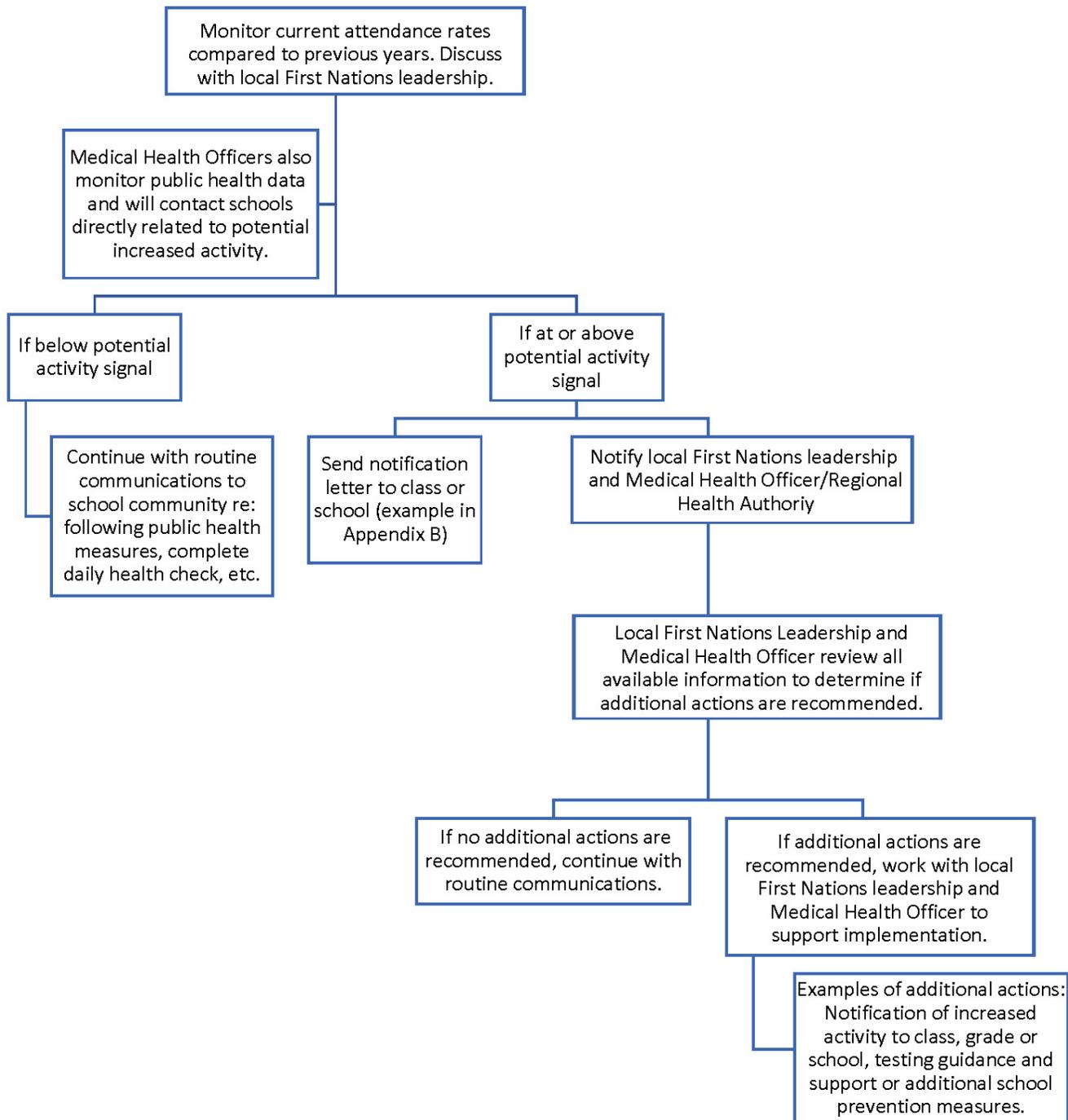
We are following up with our local First Nations leadership and public health and will share back with our school community if they recommend that any additional actions should be taken.

We strongly encourage everyone to complete a [daily health check](#) and continue to attend school if they are not sick.

Public health continues to recommend everyone stay home when they are sick, and to seek testing when recommended. More information is available from [BCCDC](#).

## Appendix C: Administrator Actions - School-Associated COVID-19 Activity

The following outlines a process for schools, working with local First Nations leadership and public health, to monitor for and respond to potential increased COVID-19 activity in a school. First Nations have authority to make changes to this process as appropriate.



## Appendix D: Sample routine messaging to school community re: continuing to follow public health guidance

Dear school community,

As COVID-19 continues to circulate in our community, we encourage everyone to follow public health guidance to help reduce the risk of COVID-19 in our school. This includes:

- Completing a daily health check before you come to school. You can use the [BC COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool](#).
- Monitoring yourself regularly for symptoms of illness. If you are sick, stay home. [Seek testing when recommended](#).
- Following [provincial restrictions in place](#).

The [BC Centre for Disease Control \(BCCDC\)](#) continues to provide information about COVID-19, including how to protect yourself, your family and the community and what to do if you suspect you have the virus.

While we all continue to navigate disrupted routines and changes as the pandemic continues, it's important we look after our mental health and well-being. Please don't wait to reach out. A listing of resources for supporting the mental health and well-being of First Nations youth is available from the [First Nations Education Steering Committee/First Nations Schools Association](#) and additional mental health resources are available from the [BCCDC](#) and [ERASE](#).