

## Updated Provincial COVID-19 Health & Safety Guidelines – Q&A

*Q1: How should the mask requirements in schools be enforced? If someone refuses to wear a mask should they be sent home?*

- All staff, students and visitors are required to follow the mask guidelines for schools, except for those who meet one of the two exceptions below:
  - a person who cannot tolerate wearing a mask for health or behavioural reasons; or
  - a person who is unable to put on or remove a mask without the assistance of another person
- Those who can wear masks can also remove them temporarily in the following circumstances:
  - for the purposes of identification;
  - to engage in an educational activity that cannot be performed while wearing a mask (e.g. playing a wind instrument, engaging in high-intensity physical activity, etc.);
  - while eating or drinking;
  - if a person is behind a barrier; or
  - while providing a service to a person with a disability or diverse ability where visual cues, facial expressions and/or lip reading/movements is important.
- In circumstances where someone cannot comply with a specific safety measure due to health or behavioral reasons, schools are expected to work with these individuals (and their parents/caregivers, if applicable) to explore other measures to ensure their safety and the safety of others in alignment with the parameters outlined above.
- Staff, students and visitors are not required to provide a doctor's note if they cannot wear a mask.
- Schools and school districts are expected to support students and staff to follow the provincial guidelines in ways that are not punitive or stigmatizing. This can include:
  - Having staff model these behaviours.
  - Sharing reliable information, including from the BC Centre for Disease Control and the Office of the Provincial Health Officer, to parents, families and caregivers.
  - Promoting the required safety measures in the school with visual aids like floor markings and signage.
- Students must not be prevented from attending or fully participating at school, in person, if they do not wear a mask.
- The strengthened mask guidelines are one of many K-12 health and safety protocols in place to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in schools. These include physical distancing between learning groups, enhanced cleaning and disinfecting procedures, and frequent hand hygiene. Those students and staff who cannot wear a mask must still follow all other health and safety measures in place while at school.
- All students and staff must continue to be asked to complete daily health checks and to stay at home if they feel unwell. This includes students and staff who cannot wear a mask.

*Q2: Why does the updated BCCDC guidance on mask requirements say "should" and the K-12 Health & Safety Guidelines say "required"? Which one are schools supposed to follow?*

- Since the beginning of the pandemic, the approach of the PHO and the Ministry has been to provide direction to the K-12 system through policy and guidance, not through legislative order. This allows for a more flexible and nimble approach and supports the direction to be

implemented in a positive (not punitive) manner.

- Recent changes to the mask guidelines are consistent with the approach taken since September. The BCCDC guidance on masks has always used the language “should”, whereas the Ministry’s K-12 Health & Safety Guidelines have strengthened the language to make it an operational requirement for schools. This decision was made in collaboration with K-12 partners and has been applied consistently throughout the updates of the health and safety guidelines.
- It is also important to note that both the BCCDC and Ministry guidelines on masks have exceptions for students and staff who cannot wear masks for health or behavioural reasons.
- The K-12 Health & Safety Guidelines have been developed to complement the BCCDC guidance, and the two guidance documents are largely aligned. However, in the case of any variance between the two guidance documents, schools and school districts must follow the Ministry’s K-12 Health & Safety Guidelines. For more information, see the Key Principles section of the [guidelines](#) on page 5.

*Q3: Are staff or students able to remove their mask when they are alone in a room (e.g. office, bathroom)? Are custodians able to remove their mask when they are alone in a hallway or common space after hours (e.g. evening custodian)?*

- Yes, in these circumstances the person can remove their mask. The walls of the room/space qualify as a barrier when the person is alone.
- However, if another person enters the room or space, both parties must wear masks.

*Q4: What about split classes (e.g. 3/4)?*

- Students in Grades 4 and above must wear masks in classrooms, regardless of whether it is a split class or not.
- Schools can encourage students (and their families) in Grades K to 3 to wear masks in classrooms shared with students in Grades 4 and above, in an effort to create more consistent safety measures in that class.
- However, mask use ultimately remains a personal choice for students in Grades K to 3. In addition, exceptions to mask use for health and behavioural reasons apply to all K-12 students (see Q2 above for more information regarding mask exceptions).

*Q5: How do the changes impact music programs and activities?*

- Music programs can continue to be delivered in K-12 schools, in alignment with the guidance on p.38 of the [K-12 Health & Safety Guidelines](#).
- The key changes for music programs is that masks must be worn at all times by K-12 staff and students in Grades 4 to 12 when indoors, but can be temporarily removed to engage in educational activities that cannot be performed while wearing a mask (e.g. playing a wind instrument). Masks must be worn by K-12 staff and students in Grades 4 to 12 while singing.
- These mask requirements for K-12 staff and students in Grades 4 to 12 apply both within and outside of learning groups, and regardless of whether staff and students are able to maintain physical distance (2M).
- Masks requirements are in addition to, and not a replacement for, physical distancing requirements (2M) between learning groups.

*Q6: How do the changes impact PHE and school sports? Do all high intensity activities need to take place outside now?*

- The key changes for PHE and school sports are:
  - K-12 staff and other adults (e.g. volunteer coaches) are required to wear masks when they are indoors, and a barrier is not present. The updated mask requirements no longer allow staff/adults to remove their mask while maintaining physical distance of 2M.
  - Programs and activities for students in grades 4 to 12 (*formerly middle and secondary students*) must follow specific guidance for high intensity and low intensity activities. Students in these grades must wear masks during low intensity activities when indoors and a barrier is not present - both within and outside of their learning group, and regardless of whether or not they are able to maintain physical distance (2M).
- High-intensity physical and sport activities should be taken outside whenever possible, but are allowed to continue indoors in alignment with the guidance for PHE and school sports on p.38-42 of the [K-12 Health & Safety Guidelines](#). Wearing masks during high intensity activities (stationary or with movement, indoors or outdoors) remains a personal choice for students.

*Q7: Do the new mask requirements in schools end on April 19<sup>th</sup>?*

- The updated BCCDC mask guidance is time limited, with an intention for it to be reviewed after April 19<sup>th</sup>. This is in line with other [time-limited extensive measures](#) recently announced by the Provincial Health Officer.
- The updated K-12 Health & Safety Guidelines do not have an expiry date.
- The Ministry will work with the Office of the Provincial Health Officer (PHO), BCCDC and the K-12 Education Steering Committee up to and after the end of the “circuit breaker” on April 19<sup>th</sup> to assess and evaluate impacts of these changes, and consider if further updates to the K-12 Health & Safety Guidelines are required.