

A Safe and Sustainable Return to Publicly Funded Public Schools



Background information

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As teachers, we want nothing more than to be back with our students; educating children and youth to the best of our ability in person, face-to-face, to assure they receive the best quality publicly funded public education possible. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has posed unprecedented challenges to teaching and learning, around the world and in every community across Canada. The results of the CTF/FCE pan-Canadian survey of teachers clearly shows that many children and youth struggled with online learning. From a lack of access to wifi or devices, to learning styles and needs, the jump to online education fell too far short on quality and exacerbated inequities. The same survey shines a spotlight on other significant concerns teachers have about the negative impact that remote learning has on many students: teachers note very real concerns about their students' mental health and well-being, access to nutritious meals, and physical safety. In order to make a return to school buildings as safe as possible, teachers and staff need to be given time to return to work in advance of students to be able to prepare classrooms for the new COVID-19 regulations. This delayed or staggered start to students' return to classrooms is necessary to ensure protocols are working as intended and to allow more time for crucial upgrades, such as improvements to ventilation systems.

Almost 6-months into this pandemic, as school buildings re-open, and knowing that we must be patient until a COVID-19 vaccine is developed, let alone widely available, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE) believes the safe and sustainable reopening of school buildings is both a moral and an economic imperative in order for Canada to continue weathering this storm.

In brief, we believe national standards need to be put in place so that students and teachers can learn and teach safely for the foreseeable future:

1. Masks/Face shields
2. Physical distancing
3. Clean environment (including sanitization and ventilation)
4. Screening and protocols in the event of confirmed cases

Details on each of these are provided below, along with the resourcing we suggest is necessary to ensure the most effective teaching and learning can restart and continue with the most minimal risk possible to the health and well-being of students, teachers, and education workers.

1. Masks/Face shields

As of August 2020, the wearing of face coverings such as cloth masks or face shields have become mandatory in most indoor public spaces in Canada, and in numerous other countries that have successfully flattened the COVID-19 curve. Places in which masks need to be worn without exception include grocery stores, hospitals, public transport, and government buildings. The reason for this is proven – masks can greatly reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in indoor spaces where physical distancing can be a challenge by reducing the accumulation of airborne pathogens.

In order to best protect students and their teachers and to ensure that schools successfully reopen and remain open the CTF/FCE urges:

- That the wearing of masks or face shields be mandatory for students, teachers, and education workers from K-12 inside public school buildings and on school buses at all times;
- Provinces and Territories to:
 - a) Provide teachers and education workers with an unlimited supply of medical grade face masks.
 - b) Provide students with a minimum of 3 reusable face masks and an unlimited supply of disposable face masks.

2. Physical distancing

Physical distancing was quickly identified as an essential measure to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring, and there has been mounting evidence that keeping people at least 2 metres apart has helped stop the transmission of COVID-19 in communities. Countries, such as the US and Israel, that have eased these measures prematurely have seen a rapid increase in infections and are unable to reopen schools as a consequence. Canada should avoid making the same mistake of relaxing physical distance regulations for school buildings and transportation.

Measures must be taken to allow for physical distancing of 2 metres in schools. Such measures could include many, or all, of the following depending upon specific school and community context:

- Reducing classes sizes to a maximum of 15 students; additional staff will need to be hired to accommodate an increase in the number of classes

- A staggered start to the school year
- Avoiding larger gatherings of students and/or staff, such as assemblies, lunches, team sports, field trips, or extracurricular activities where physical distancing cannot be maintained
- Staggering recess and lunches
- Installing sinks in all classrooms
- Installing barriers or screens where appropriate (reception, cafeteria, etc.)
- Use available alternate public spaces that are currently not used or used infrequently for schooling, consider commercial options such as convention centres as well, including:
 - ✓ Universities
 - ✓ Churches
 - ✓ Community Centres
 - ✓ Government buildings
 - ✓ Convention centres
- Buses should not service multiple schools (or school boards) to avoid the intermingling of different student populations, additional routes may need to be added.

3. Clean environment

Schools need to be kept as clean as possible in order to reduce the risk of community transmission of the virus. Frequent cleaning of high touch surfaces is necessary to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. This is especially true for areas that will be shared by multiple students and teachers. This task cannot fall to teachers who will already be navigating a completely new classroom dynamic and supporting many students who have endured very difficult situations since school buildings were closed. Consequently, funding will need to be made available to hire sufficient custodial staff to ensure that the additional cleaning required is maintained. Concretely, the CTF/FCE urges:

- Increasing frequency of cleaning, especially washrooms, cafeterias or food service locations and high touch surfaces or equipment (for example, pencil sharpeners, knobs and push buttons, doorknobs, faucet handles, water fountains, toys, electronic devices, school bus hand rails and seats, books)
- Increasing frequency of cleaning of commonly touched objects/surfaces unique to setting for example, desks, science lab surfaces / equipment, computers / electronic devices

- Regular cleaning and disinfecting of essential shared equipment before and after use (for example, electronic devices)
- Avoiding shared communal equipment/supplies as much as possible
- Ensure proper ventilation by updating, repairing, or purchasing ventilation systems to ensure compliance with the minimum measurable standards for ventilation in schools where this is a potentially lethal airborne pathogen and to address other known ventilation issues in school, including, but not limited to:
 - Installing and maintaining High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) or better filters in each classroom and throughout the school and other buildings in use for schooling, and to assess and provide for other filtration and air circulation options as needed;
 - Upgrading existing heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems;
 - Stipulating the air exchange rates, e.g. HVAC systems;
 - Providing for alternative measures for air circulation and filtration in buildings with no HVAC systems, e.g. those that rely on hot water heat;
 - Providing for alternative measures for air circulation and exchange in buildings with no windows that open or with inadequate windows; and
 - Assessing air flow/circulation in each classroom and throughout the school and other buildings in use for schooling and developing a plan for ensuring optimal air flow and filtration locally, considering how air flow will interact with other preventative measures such as Plexiglas barriers.

4. Screening and protocols in the event of confirmed cases

Adequate screening for the COVID-19 needs to be implemented for students, teachers, and education workers. And, well ahead of any cases let alone outbreaks, clear protocols need to be in place for when students or staff test positive for COVID-19. In keeping with the [Public Health Agency of Canada's \(PHAC\) guidance for schools](#), the CTF/FCE recommends funding and resources be provided to help ensure the following :

- Culturally safe [active and / or passive screening](#) for all those entering the school is followed
- Accessible signage that includes messaging about staying at home when exhibiting symptoms of/or after exposure to COVID-19 to children/youth, families, staff, volunteers in languages/formats appropriate for age

- Children/youth as well as school personnel are made aware, in non-stigmatizing age and disability-appropriate language how to identify symptoms of COVID-19 and instruct them to speak to a staff member immediately if they are experiencing symptoms
- Children/youth, staff and volunteers stay at home if ill with [symptoms of COVID-19](#) until criteria to discontinue isolation have been met, in consultation with the local public health authority (PHA) or healthcare provider
- Individuals who have symptoms of/or have had exposure (in last 14 days) to COVID-19 be prohibited from entering schools.
- Immediate school closure of approximately 48 hours to allow for intensive cleaning, adequate contact tracing, and appropriate communication.