

RETURN TO SCHOOL 2021-2022

With the availability of vaccines, Alberta is lifting health restrictions and getting back to normal. Children and youth in care should be returning to in-person school this fall. Any exceptions will continue to be addressed on a case-by-case basis, must be based on what is in the child's best interest and must follow the process outlined in previous Practice Guidance. (Attachment 1)

Alberta Education provides the most current information on the 2021-2022 return to school at: <https://www.alberta.ca/k-12-learning-during-covid-19.aspx>. This includes the [2021-22 School Year Plan](#) and the [2021-22 Parent Guide](#) and a letter from the [Chief Medical Officer of Health on returning to school for fall 2021](#).

Consistent with the extended timelines for easing COVID-19 measures, the following actions will continue:

- students and staff should screen daily for symptoms using the [Alberta Health Daily Checklist](#)
- [isolate](#) if they have core [COVID-19 symptoms](#) or test positive
- follow best practices to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses.

School authorities continue to have the ability and the corresponding accountability to put in place local measures, such as physical distancing, cohorting, and masking requirements that may exceed provincial guidance. There may also be individual school procedures to follow as well. It will be important to be in contact with both your School Division and your local schools to understand how the return to school will proceed.

Regardless of the school board specific processes and protocols, it will be important to continue to practice good hygiene. Routine measures to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses in schools will continue to include:

- promoting and facilitating hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette,
- staying home when sick,
- maintaining ventilation, and ensuring regular cleaning, and;
- disinfection of high traffic/touch areas.

In the case of an identified outbreak of COVID or any other influenza-like illness at a school, it will be important to know and follow the school's expectations and procedures and any direction from the Medical Officer of Health (MOH). Additional measures may be considered or recommended if a school experiences a COVID-19 outbreak.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM ALBERTA EDUCATION:

The [Parents' Guide 2021-22 School Year](#) contains information for parents and guardians. Implementation of the [2021–2022 School Year Plan](#) is subject to change with direction from the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Expectation is on normal return to school, with in-class learning for the majority of students in fall 2021. The following four principles apply:

1. The safety of children, students and staff comes first.
2. Children and student learning will continue.

3. Provincial funding is still flowing to schools.
4. School authorities have flexibility to do what is best for their community.

Alberta Health Services may recommend additional measures if a school experiences a COVID-19 or other respiratory illness outbreak. Examples include active health screening with questionnaires, increasing frequency of cleaning and disinfection, maintaining classroom cohorts, mask recommendations, and/or limiting extra-curricular activities. Localized rapid testing may continue to be available for emergent situations that arise.

Extra-Curricular Activities

School authorities continue to have the flexibility to offer extra-curricular activities to students.

Children and Students Who Require Specialized Supports and Services

Individualized and/or specialized supports and services are available to students who require additional support.

Internet/SuperNet Connectivity for First Nations and Rural/ Remote Communities

Alberta Education is aware of the challenges in accessing internet/SuperNet in some First Nations, Métis Settlements and rural/remote communities. Special considerations will continue to be given to strategies for maintaining learning in communities that do not use learning technology (e.g. Hutterite and Mennonite communities).

Celebratory Events

A return to normal is anticipated and events must follow public health measures that may be in place.

Attachment 1

POSSIBLE EXCEPTION TO IN-PERSON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

School divisions may provide students with a range of options for at-home learning in the 2021-22 school year. ***Any exception to children and youth in care physically returning to school requires a manager's approval.***

Steps Necessary Prior to Manager Approving an Exception

Step 1 – A request is made by the caregiver, bio-parent or other guardian to the caseworker to exempt a child or youth in care from physically attending school.

Step 2 – The caregiver, bio-parent or other guardian sets out *in writing* (point form is fine) their worries or concerns for the specific child if the child returns to in-class learning. Caseworkers may complete a three-column Signs of Safety® mapping to assist in identifying worries, what's working well and next steps. It is important to both hear and acknowledge the worries and perspectives of caregivers as well as parents or guardians. Mapping with the family will help to organize thoughts and clarify feelings as it makes these more concrete and therefore able to be responded to appropriately.

The caseworker's role is to assist caregivers, parents or guardians in managing their concerns sufficiently to ensure children receive the schooling they require and are entitled to receive. In their delegated role as members of a multi-disciplinary team caregivers support the planning needs of children.

Step 3 – A respectful and thorough discussion of the specific worries that result in the requested exception is necessary. The voices of all concerned or involved parties should be heard as part of this discussion when it is developmentally appropriate to do so. Where biological parents have voiced a concern, their perspectives also need to be considered. The child's caregiver(s), parent(s) or guardian(s) provide their perceptions and opinions, as may other members of child or youth's support network, any other guardians, as well as the school and teacher(s). The child's medical doctor, mental health practitioner or other healthcare or professional support practitioner *may* be engaged by the caseworker, if required. Workers should be mindful of their own biases and / or paradigms during these conversations and present only unbiased and evidence-based information.

Some things to consider (there are others!) if a caregiver, parent or guardian requests a child do at-home learning:

- What are the barriers to the child returning to in-school learning?
- What is the specific risk for the child in physically returning to school?
- What part of that risk is not adequately addressed through the guidance provided by CMOH and the school board?
- Who has determined that the risk has not been adequately addressed?
- How will the child's social, emotional, mental and physical well-being be supported?
- What time-period is being considered for at-home learning? How frequently does the school division permit a shift from in class to at home or vice versa? (Full year? Quarterly? Other?)
- What supports would the child need to be successful in at-home learning?
- How would caregivers support that?
- What capacity to support at-home learning do the caregivers have?

- What are the caregivers' expectations for other supports? For themselves? The child?
- Are there any extra costs associated with in-home learning?
- How will those costs be covered?
- How specifically will the well-being of both the caregiver(s) and the children be supported?
- When does this decision need to be made and communicated to the school?
- When and how often will this decision be reviewed?

It is important to remember with at-home learning that children do not have the benefit of a definitive break between home and school. This definitive break often allows them to process their day and learn to deal with good or bad experiences. Caregivers also benefit from the separation of the recognized time-periods for different activities. It is important that caregiver well-being be supported as a method of supporting children in care and preventing placement breakdown.

Step 4 – What actions can be taken, and by whom, to mitigate these worries about this child? For a specifically compromised child, we will want to confirm with the child's physician that the approach being taken by the local school board cannot protect this child.

Step 5 – Caseworker reviews the request for an exception with the caregiver, parent or guardian. After considering the best interests of the child and mitigating the concerns raised, does the caregiver, parent or guardian still wish the child to participate in at-home learning?

Step 6 – Caseworker documents the content and results of their discussion with the concerned or involved parties in the electronic information system. Attach any supporting documentation and refer to the manager for a decision on the exception request.

Manager's Considerations

As always, decisions will need to focus on the overall well-being and safety of the child. Following these discussions among the concerned or involved parties, the *manager* will review the request for an exception to allow at-home learning. The manager will then decide based on all the information whether to grant the exception allowing the child or youth to participate in at-home learning. The manager will document this decision in the electronic information system.

Caregiver, parent or guardian Disagrees with Manager's Denial of Exception

As these are complex decisions and have impacts on the child(ren) and the caregiver and their family, it is important to ensure that caregivers, as impacted parties, have the ability to elevate their concerns. The following is the process to use if a caregiver, parent or guardian is in disagreement with the manager's refusal to allow at-home learning.

Process:

- If a manager denies a request for an exception, the caregiver may ask that an Associate Director reconsider the request.
- The Associate Director's decision will be considered the final decision.
- Caregivers, parents or guardians can file an Administrative Review of the Associate Director's decision.

Caseworker and/or Caregiver Support Worker Role in the event of Disagreement (Priority Response Required)

As those managing the day-to-day lives of children in care, caregivers are in a good position to assess how those children have responded so far to at-home learning. In the event a caregiver continues to choose to pursue at-home learning for the children in their care, the caseworker or support worker is expected to assist the caregiver to navigate through the resolution and decision making process.

This assistance will entail forwarding the request for reconsideration of the manager's decision to the Regional Associate Director (AD), along with the caseworker's notes and any supporting documentation. The Associate Director will make a final decision on a caregiver's request for an exception to allow in-home learning. The caseworker will immediately relay that response to the caregiver. The caseworker will then advise the caregiver of the AD's decision.

If the caregiver decides to file for an Administrative Review of the AD's decision, the caseworker will assist the caregiver in filling out the Request for an Administrative Review of a Director's Decision [CS1625] form. This will ensure that the process is both timely and efficient.

Child or Youth Disagrees

If a child or youth disagrees with either the approval or denial of at-home learning, they may contact the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) for assistance. Young people who are receiving services under CYFEA and PSECA may contact the OCYA *at any point in time* to discuss issues or concerns and seek advocacy supports. The OCYA ensures that the young person's rights, viewpoint, and choices are considered at a time when decisions are made on their behalf. Contact: Toll-free: (800) 661-3446 or Email: ca.information@OCYA.alberta.ca
NORTHERN ALBERTA - Call: (780) 422-6056; SOUTHERN ALBERTA Call: (403) 297-8435