

For immediate release

19 January 2022

Comox Valley Schools are open, well attended and prepared for closures

COMOX VALLEY B.C. – Students, teachers and staff are back in classrooms throughout SD 71 and attendance levels are similar to previous years. However, Comox Valley Schools is prepared to close schools if needed and a school closure protocol has been developed based on direction school districts received from the Provincial Health Officer and the Ministry of Education. So far, no schools in SD 71 have had to close since the January 10 return to in-person learning.

SD 71 and public health are monitoring attendance data and will investigate higher than normal rates of student illness related absence. In the event a school's illness absence data is 10% higher at average over historical data, a letter will be sent home indicating that an Activity Signal (related to attendance) has been met and further work with Island Health will begin to determine next steps.

“So far daily absence rates due to illness have fluctuated between 2%-5%, which is close to normal levels for this time of year,” said Tonia Frawley, Board Chair for Comox Valley Schools. “The current state is extremely challenging, and we are committed to providing the safest environment for our students and staff, but we are also prepared if schools need to close for a variety of reasons.”

There are new protocols that outline the types of school closures that may occur.

Health Closure

A Health Closure may be determined for a school by the local health authority due to unusually high student absence rates.

Functional Closure

A Functional Closure of a school is determined by the school district due to a lack of staff to provide the required level of teaching, supervision, support, and or custodial care to ensure the health and safety of students. This would likely be due to high absenteeism of staff or certain employees required for a school to function and the inability to replace those absences.

Transportation Closure

This type of closure would occur if the bus provider indicated that due to high absenteeism, they are not able to replace drivers. Schools would remain open and operational however those that normally take the bus would need to find their own way to and from school.

Schools are reinforcing existing safety measures, including:

- Using all available space to maximize space between people.
- Making use of different common spaces and changing classroom and learning environment configurations where applicable.
- Ensuring everyone is wearing a mask while indoors, except those individuals who have a mask exemption.

Schools are also using enhanced safety measures, such as:

- Applying strategies that prevent crowding during class transition times.
- Holding many school gatherings and events virtually. If they must be in-person, limit the number of people to no more than 50% operating capacity.
- Holding staff-only gatherings virtually whenever possible.
- Limiting visitors in our buildings.
- Pausing extracurricular sports tournaments.

If anyone is feeling unwell or experiencing any sickness related symptoms, they should not go to school. Anyone entering a school must ensure they have completed a daily health check.

Public health has changed the contact tracing and notification process and schools are not sending out exposure notifications. Public Health will notify those individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19. Schools will not be receiving any information regarding individual exposure events. Schools cannot release individual contact information for the purpose of an individual (staff, student, or parent/caregiver) seeking to notify others of their test result. As well, schools will not send notification to others on behalf of individuals, or parents/caregivers even if they have given consent to share this information.

Our schools continue to play a critical role for children and families. We remain committed to continuing to work through these latest challenges together with public health, our students, staff and families in the Comox Valley.

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SD 71 has created a detailed graphic explaining the functional closure process in our district: <https://www.comoxvalleyschools.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/School-Closure-Process-1.pdf>

See the addendum to the Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/safe-caring-orderly/k-12-covid-19-health-safety-guidelines-addendum.pdf>

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