

Ey Swayel everyone

It's February 8th and as we look ahead we wanted to bring you up to speed on the new health guidelines and what they mean for you and your child.

On February 4th, the Ministry of Education and the BC Centre for Disease Control released a significant update to the Public Health Guidance for K-12 Schools. Again, the intent of this message is to talk about those changes and what is significant.

For many people, the biggest change is about masks. I'm going to walk you through the new language and tell you what it means for us.

First, it's important to know that in the previous guidelines, it was stated that masks should be worn by middle and secondary students in common areas, when students are outside their cohort, and when physical distancing cannot be practiced.

Staff were also required to wear masks when working across cohorts and when physical distancing could not be maintained or when they were in a staff or break room again when physical distancing cannot be maintained.

In this new release, there has been a significant shift in the language around masks. These changes have increased the requirements for masks for all staff and students in our schools and there are significant changes for elementary children.

First, the CDC wants to reaffirm the importance of masks as part of the hierarchy of controls. They state: "Masks have a role to play in preventing the spread of COVID-19. They provide some protection to the wearer and to those around them. Masks do not prevent the spread of COVID-19 on their own. They should not be used in place of physical distancing or any other preventative measures."

Specifically to children in elementary schools, the previous guidelines stated: "masks are not recommended for elementary-aged students."

We have been constantly learning about the virus, about how it moves and spreads and in this update, we see reflection on what the CDC has learned and the new guidelines state that: Masks can be safely worn by school age children."

This is a significant shift and it is also underscored by the comment "Elementary students' mask use should be based on their personal or family/caregiver's choice."

For our families and for our schools, masks are safe for elementary aged students, they can play a part, and it is your choice as a family whether or not your child should wear a mask.

The new guidelines also have significantly changed the requirements for masks for secondary students and adults in the building. The guidelines say:

K-12 staff should wear a mask indoors at school except when:

- Sitting or standing at their seat or workstation in a classroom or learning space,
- There is a barrier in place,
- Eating or drinking.

K-12 middle/secondary students should wear a mask indoors at school except when:

- Sitting or standing at their seat or workstation in a classroom or learning space,
- There is a barrier in place,
- Eating or drinking.

What does this mean? Eating and drinking and behind a barrier makes sense but what is a “workstation” and what do we do with children who are at tables, not desks and the many other seating arrangements that we have?

When you read the guidelines and insert what we know about the virus, this is about physical distancing. Any time you cannot practice physical distancing, you should be wearing a mask. This is now inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom. In your cohort and outside your cohort.

But what does “middle school mean?” – In Langley, Abbotsford, Coquitlam, Chilliwack and many other places in BC, this means students in grades 6,7 as many middle schools are configured as grades 6-8. Surrey, like many other school districts is configured K-7 and has no middle schools. Our grade 6 and 7 students are in elementary school. So how do we figure this out? Here are some key guidelines:

- 1) Once again, masks are not a replacement for physical distancing. This sentence is repeated at least three times in the new guidelines. Masks are one part of a package of things you can do to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- 2) Once again, the updated guidelines have changed the language from “masks are not recommended for elementary aged students” to “masks can be safely worn by school age children.”
- 3) CDC is also saying ““Masks have a role to play in preventing the spread of COVID-19. They provide some protection to the wearer and to those around them.”
- 4) The decision to wear a mask for elementary students is based on personal and family/caregiver choice.
- 5) Some students, for a variety of reasons, personal or health/medical may be unable to wear a mask. Choice and personal circumstances must be respected and no student should be excluded from activities due to an inability to wear a mask.

This message is intended to update you on the new guidelines and there are many more changes that are about schools, the district and our processes. Our district joint health and safety committee is examining all changes so that we can work to implement as quickly as possible. We are just trying to bring you up to speed on the changes and to know what’s new.

In the meantime, as we continue to learn more about COVID-19, and with the new guidelines we know that we are making progress and we know that whether you are an adult or a student, there are 4 things you can do to keep yourself and others safe at school:

- 1) Keep your distance;
- 2) Wash your hands;
- 3) Watch for symptoms and stay home if sick; and
- 4) When you're on the move, wear a mask.

Thank you so much for your ongoing understanding and vigilance. As we work to digest the rest of the new guidelines we'll have more information for you in the coming weeks.

Please stay safe and stay well.

Hy'ce:pka.