

# How B.C.'s schools adapted to a pandemic <sup>[1]</sup>

From a complete shut-down to plans for a full return this fall, here's how B.C. schools tackled COVID-19

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

The novel coronavirus has upended daily life for billions of people around the world.

As the outbreak of the novel coronavirus began sometime in December 2019, governments around the world began to adopt measures to stop the spread of the respiratory illness by limiting crowds and everyday social interactions.

Schools were among the institutions that faced massive change during this time. Here's how schools in B.C. have adapted to the global pandemic.

### Jan. 28 | First case of novel coronavirus in B.C.

Health officials announce the first confirmed case of novel coronavirus in B.C., a person who returned from Wuhan, China, on a business trip.

Throughout January and the early part of February, there were few cases of the novel coronavirus, mainly from people returning from international travel.

### Feb. 22 | Schools in Fraser Health region warned of possible exposure

While still in the early stages of the pandemic, health officials in B.C.'s Fraser Valley say contacts of a person with a presumptive coronavirus case, a woman in her 30s who recently returned from Iran, may have attended school in the area, but that there is no public health risk in the region.

### March 4 | School trips abroad cancelled

Schools across B.C. begin cancelling international spring break trips due to concerns about the global spread of the novel coronavirus.

The cancellations include a Vancouver School Board trip to France and Italy with 20 students from Point Grey and Prince of Wales secondary schools. About a week later, on March 12, the entire country of Italy is shut down due to the pandemic.

### March 9 | Concerns over upcoming B.C. spring break

B.C.'s 2020 spring break was scheduled for March 16 to March 27, but concerns about the novel coronavirus prompts a private school in West Vancouver school to start spring break early.

In the meantime, on March 12, Ontario announces an extension of its March break, saying public schools will remain closed until April 5 in order to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry says the province has no immediate plan to close schools after the two-week break beginning on March 16, but will be reviewing the situation daily over the holiday and could change that decision.

### March 16 | B.C. spring break begins

### March 17 | B.C. K-12 schools suspended indefinitely

Education Minister Rob Fleming said the suspension of classroom instruction could last for some time, although he promises every student will receive a final grade. Officials start looking at new methods for online learning.

### March 18 | Provincial state of emergency begins

The federal government announces the Canada-U.S. border will be closed to non-essential travellers like shoppers and tourists as the number of cases continue to increase across the country.

On March 21, the B.C. Ministry of Health orders personal service businesses, such as barber shops, hair salons, nail parlours and tattoo shops, to shut down immediately.

### **March 30 | Teachers return to work, post-spring break education plans unclear**

At the end of the spring break, teachers are back at work, but students are not expected back in class as remote learning options are created.

B.C. hasn't put forward a concrete plan for a return to school, like its neighbours Alberta and Washington state, leading to anxiety and confusion.

The Ministry of Education asked individual school districts to have learning opportunities in place no later than mid-April. The province launches a website called Keep Learning BC to outline how it plans to continue to deliver its curriculum to students virtually.

### **April 8 | School for children of essential workers open**

At least 19 school districts open programs for elementary-age children whose parents are working in essential sectors including health care, law enforcement, emergency response, transportation and food production.

Many daycares remain open throughout.

### **April 14 | Education minister says schools to re-open before end of school year**

Health officials confirm just 45 new cases in a 48-hour period, marking the lowest increase in daily cases since March 6.

Education Minister Fleming says it is possible schools will re-open before the end of the school year. Opposition critics say B.C.'s online learning options have lagged behind other jurisdictions.

### **April to early May | More schools re-open for students**

As the education system moves online, some parents express frustrations that their children are falling behind due to specialized learning needs or lack of technology.

The Vancouver School Board opens in-school instruction for students with "exceptionally high learning needs," although attendance is voluntary.

In some parts of the province, teachers return to classrooms. For example, in Prince George, teachers are expected back on-site as of May 11.

### **May 7 | Province details return-to-school plan**

The province releases a five-stage plan detailing the steps to a full school re-opening.

### **May 15 | Province announces part-time voluntary return to class for June 1**

B.C. Premier John Horgan and Minister Fleming says some children will return to classrooms on a part-time, voluntary basis beginning June 1.

The gradual reopening will apply to all students from kindergarten to Grade 12.

Some parents are lukewarm about the possibility.

### **June 1 | School re-opens partially**

Thousands of students return to class for the first time since the pandemic forced schools to close in March. B.C. is among the only provinces staging an in-class school return.

The Ministry of Education says more than 157,000 kindergarten to Grade 12 students — or nearly 30 per cent of all students in those grades — went back to school.

### **June 18 | Independent school suspends classes after case of COVID-19 confirmed**

After a staff member at an independent school in the Fraser Health region tests positive for COVID-19, the school ends in-person classes for the rest of the school year as a precaution.

Dr. Henry says that children are unlikely to pass COVID-19 to each other, but should still keep social interactions limited to small groups.

### **June 25 | Last day for students before summer**

As summer begins, questions remain about what school might look like in the fall, and what other logistics — like after-school child care for example — need to be finalized.

Premier Horgan says parents should prepare for a full return to classrooms this fall, but also have a backup plan in case the COVID-19 pandemic forces further closures.

### **July 29 | Back-to-school plans announced, most students expect to return in fall**

The education minister announces most B.C. students from kindergarten to Grade 12 will return to school in the fall, divided into cohorts or "learning groups. The provincial government is putting up \$45.6 million to help ensure safety measures.

### **Aug. 11 | B.C. shifts to phased-in school restart**

Beginning on Sept. 8, school staff will meet with their schools' joint health and safety committees to get instructions on plans to prevent transmission of COVID-19. Students are expected back in the classroom by Sept. 10. The staggered start time is to allow teachers to prepare logistics before students return.

#### **Aug. 17 | B.C. school mask policy revealed**

Amid concern from parents and staff about the use of masks — after provinces like Alberta and Ontario issued their own mandatory mask policies — the provincial government announces all staff and students in B.C. middle and secondary schools will have to wear masks in areas where physical distancing cannot be maintained.

In-class mask use is not mandatory, nor is mask use for elementary school students.

Two days later, the B.C. Teachers' Federation calls for smaller class sizes and stricter face mask regulations when schools start up again next month.

#### **Aug. 26 | Final school district plans revealed**

Aug. 26 marks the deadline for all 60 school districts in B.C. to have their return-to-school plans available to parents. Fleming says he is impressed by the "thoughtful, innovative approach" many districts were taking in addressing concerns.

Surrey, the province's largest school district, reveals a quarterly semester system for older students whose learning group cohorts will change every 10 weeks.

In the meantime, some parents argue for an option to allow students to work online from home without losing their spot in the school they are enrolled in.

**Region:** British Columbia <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** school system <sup>[4]</sup>

health and safety <sup>[5]</sup>

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