Going to School during COVID-19:

Frequently Asked Questions

Purpose

This document answers common questions about going to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a resource for:

- Teachers, school administrators and school authority leaders
- Staff who work with schools e.g. community health nurses, environmental public health officers, health promotion facilitators, etc

This document aligns with guidance and health measures for K-12 schools from the Government of Alberta. If this document differs from Government of Alberta documents, the Government documents should be followed. Questions regarding the information in this document can be emailed to: sac.cdemergenciesab-urgencesmtab.isc@canada.ca

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COVID-19 symptoms and school

1. What happens if someone going to school has symptoms of COVID-19?

Anyone who is experiencing symptoms MUST NOT enter a school

Parents/guardians are required to assess students daily for symptoms of COVID-19 before the start of the school day.

School staff and any visitors are also required to complete a daily health check before coming to school.

Daily health checks for children and adults are available here: https://open.alberta.ca/publications/covid-19-information-alberta-health-daily-checklist

2. What happens if someone develops COVID-19 symptoms while they are at school?

The symptomatic person must be masked and isolated immediately (ideally in a separate room). They must be picked up from school as soon as possible.

All surfaces or items they touched need to be cleaned and disinfected or stored away from others for 72 hours, and any isolation space they used must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

3. What if someone has COVID-19 symptoms that can be explained by a pre-existing medical condition, like allergies? Can they still go to school?

They should stay home and be tested at least once for COVID-19 to confirm that the virus is not the source of their symptoms. These symptoms will then be considered as part of their baseline health status and they can continue to go to school as long as their symptoms do not change. Repeat testing is only needed if symptoms change (e.g., a chronic cough worsens) or new symptoms develop.

It is not necessary for a physician to confirm in writing that someone's symptoms are due to chronic illness. Schools should document underlying health conditions that have been brought to their attention

Parent/Guardian Concerns

4. What should parents/guardians do if they are concerned about COVID-19 at their child's school?

Students may continue to attend school if they are well, unless notified that they are a close contact of someone who tested positive for COVID-19.

Schools will communicate to parents/guardians if there is a case of COVID-19 at the school. Community public health staff will identify and notify all close contacts of the person who tested positive for COVID-19.

Parents/guardians are encouraged to watch their children for symptoms and can call their primary

care provider, the local Health Centre, or Health Link at 811 if they have questions about their child's health.

Parents/guardians should talk to the teacher or school administrator if they have questions about specific health measures in the school.

COVID-19 cases and outbreaks at school

5. What happens when a school student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19?

Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) Medical Officers of Health (MOH) are informed of positive results directly by the provincial laboratory or AHS Zone MOH. The FNIHB Communicable Disease Control staff will then notify the community public health staff at the local Health Centre. The staff member or student (and/or their parent/guardian) is informed of their positive test result, and provided with guidance, by community health staff.

The positive case is required to isolate at home. They cannot attend school or attend any public place until they have completed their isolation.

6. How will schools be notified when staff or students test positive for COVID-19?

First, the community public health staff notifies the positive individual and collects information to help identify any close contacts.

Next, the school will be notified if the positive case attended school while they were infectious or if the positive case likely acquired COVID-19 from the school. The school will be asked to help identify any students or staff that may have been exposed at school so community public health staff can notify them. All other staff, students and parents/guardians will be notified of the case or outbreak by the school.

If the positive case did not attend school while they were infectious or did not likely acquire COVID-19 from the school, the school would not be notified.

7. Can schools access test results for students?

If a school superintendent or administrator reaches out to the local Health Centre or FNIHB, there will not be a disclosure of confidential patient information. The school should not expect to be told a student's test results. General advice and recommendations can be given.

All individuals tested for COVID-19 will be notified of their test results by either text message, autodialer, and/or phone call.

Persons wanting to access their own test results (or those of their child) can get more information about how to find out their results by visiting ahs.ca/testing.

8. What happens if there is one case of COVID-19 in a school?

The school will work with community health staff or the local Environmental Public Health Officer to identify close contacts.

The school will only be notified if the positive case attended school while they were infectious or if the positive case likely acquired COVID-19 from the school. Community public health staff will notify the First Nation school of a positive case as per contact tracing and outbreak management processes. The First Nation school/First Nation school administration will notify Leadership (the Health Director and/or Director of Emergency Management may also be involved in the notification process, depending on the protocol of the specific First Nation).

Please see Appendix A for the COVID-19 school notification process flow diagram.

The school will inform parents/guardians of one case in the school, what actions are being taken to mitigate risk of spread and a reminder to monitor for symptoms (See Appendix B for a sample "Alert" letter).

9. How many cases before an outbreak is declared?

Local community health staff will initiate an investigation when there are two or more cases in a school.

The following terminology will be used in describing school cases:

- Alert (1-4 cases)
- Outbreak (5+ cases)

In the event of an outbreak, a FNIHB MOH will provide the school a letter to send to parents/guardians/staff to notify them of the outbreak in the school, what actions are being taken to mitigate the risk of spread and a reminder to monitor for symptoms (See Appendix C for a sample letter).

10. When does an investigation for an outbreak end?

Typically, an outbreak is declared over after 28 days with no cases, but Medical Officers of Health will work with individual schools to declare an outbreak over. When an outbreak has been declared over, schools should notify parents/guardians (See Appendix D for a template letter)

11. Will the school be closed if there are multiple cases of COVID-19?

When schools have multiple cases of COVID-19, public health measures for outbreak management are based on recommendations of the FNIHB Medical Officers of Health. In the majority of situations school closure would not be required to manage the disease control aspects of an outbreak. Extra precautions of group, class or school closures may be taken by the school.

The First Nations School Administration and/or First Nation Leadership will make decisions on the need for alternate instructional delivery plans or school closures. FNIHB Medical Officers of Health are available to provide advice and recommendations to support decision-making.

Close contacts at school

12. How will people know if they are a close contact of someone at school who tests positive for COVID-19?

The community health staff at your local Health Centre will work with schools to contact students/parents/guardians who have been in close contact with a positive case (e.g. grade-level cohorts or other class groups), and to determine which school staff members are close contacts.

Community health staff at your local Health Centre, or an Environmental Public Health Officer will request schools to provide a list of close contacts of a case, and then community health staff will notify students (or their parents/guardians) and staff who are identified as close contacts.

13. Who is considered a close contact in a school?

Generally, the entire classroom is considered to be close contacts of someone who tests positive for COVID-19. This is a cautious approach to identifying close contacts in order to minimize the risk of transmission. Close contacts will be determined by a Public Health investigation.

In addition, a close contact is also anyone who:

- has been within two metres of the case for more than 15 minutes (cumulative) while they are infectious and without consistent and appropriate use of PPE.
- shared food or drink or had contact such as hugging or kissing

Parents/guardians will be notified by community public health staff when students are identified as close contacts.

Teachers/staff are assessed on a case by case basis by community public health staff.

- Teachers who regularly interact within 2 metres with the students in their class would be considered as part of the cohort. If there was a case of COVID-19 in the classroom, the teacher would be considered a close contact and required to quarantine as they are part of the classroom cohort.

- If a teacher or school staff member can confirm that they were not within 2 metres of their students for more than 15 minutes cumulative during the COVID-19 case's infectious period, they would not be considered part of the classroom cohort. This teacher or school staff member is not a close contact of the case and does not require quarantine.

- If the teacher or staff member tests positive and can confirm they were not within 2 metres of any of their students for more than 15 minutes cumulative during their infectious period, the students would not be considered close contacts.

14. Who is considered a close contact on a school bus?

A close contact on a school bus is anyone seated within three rows of a person who tests positive for COVID-19. This includes those seated in front of, behind or beside the person who tests positive, on both sides of the aisle.

If students move around the bus, do not stay in their seats or if the bus does not have a seating plan, then everyone on the bus would be considered a close contact.

More information about busing can be found on the Alberta One Health Portal – COVID-19 Update website at https://www.onehealth.ca/ab/ABCovid-19

15. Are students or staff still considered close contacts if they were wearing masks?

Yes, mask use does not change the identification of close contacts. Masks are helpful in preventing the spread of COVID-19 with small amounts of contact (e.g., standing beside each other for a short time), but they do not guarantee prevention of the spread of COVID-19 among people in close contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19

16. What is an EI number? Do close contacts need an EI number to book a COVID-19 test?

An EI (Epidemiological Investigation) number is a way that public health identifies cases that may be connected to each other. FNIHB CDC team will provide an EI number to community health staff at the local Health Centre when it is applicable (for example, when there are two or more cases in a school). Not everyone has an EI number.

An EI number is requested but not required when booking a COVID-19 test. People can help make contact tracing more efficient by providing the EI number when they have one.

Staying home from school (Isolation and Quarantine)

17. What is the difference between isolation and quarantine?

Both isolation and quarantine are about reducing contacts with other people, staying home and avoiding situations where the virus could spread.

- Isolation is when people who are sick with COVID-19 symptoms or who have tested positive for COVID-19 stay home and away from others to avoid spreading illness.

- Quarantine is when people who might have been exposed to COVID-19 stay home and away from others in case they become sick or are able to spread illness to others.

More information about isolation and quarantine can be found at ahs.ca/isolation

18. When do students and school staff need to isolate?

People who test positive for COVID-19 are legally required to isolate for at least 10 days. More details are available at ahs.ca/isolation

Students or staff members with symptoms of COVID-19 should not go to school or any public

place. More information about specific symptoms and isolation requirements is available at https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17260.aspx

The AHS Parent COVID-19 Guide also provides information about isolation for students based on specific symptoms of COVID-19.

Ahs.ca/results provides isolation instructions based on COVID-19 test results

19. When do students and school staff need to quarantine?

Students and school staff need to quarantine when:
- They have been identified as a close contact of someone who tests positive for COVID-19
- They have travelled outside of Canada

They must stay in quarantine for 14 days from the date of last exposure to a person who tests positive for COVID-19, or the date of return from travel. They cannot go to school or any public place. **Even if they test negative for COVID-19, they must stay in quarantine for 14 days.**

People who have been immunized may have different quarantine requirements. See Quarantine for Immunized Close Contacts for more information.

20. Why do close contacts need to quarantine for 14 days, even if they test negative for COVID-19?

When someone is exposed to COVID-19, it may take up to 14 days for symptoms to develop,or for a positive test result. The reason someone needs to stay home even if they test negative for COVID-19 is because they are at a higher chance of being infected with COVID19 and may spread the virus even if they do not have symptoms.

People who have been immunized may have different quarantine requirements. See Quarantine for Immunized Close Contacts for more information.

If a close contact develops symptoms after testing negative for COVID-19, they should be tested again.

More information about quarantine can be found at ahs.ca/isolation.

21. What should schools do if someone who is a close contact has questions about quarantine requirements based on their own health history?

People who have questions about quarantine requirements based on their own health history (such as previously testing positive for COVID-19) can call Health Link at 811, or speak to a community health nurse at the local health centre. A nurse will provide specific advice based on the person's circumstances.

People who have been immunized may have different quarantine requirements. See Quarantine for Immunized Close Contacts for more information.

Returning to school after COVID-19 symptoms, testing or cases

22. When can a student or staff member who had COVID-19 symptoms return to school?

Anyone who is feeling unwell should stay at home.

Anyone who enters a school is required to complete a daily health check. Daily health checks for children and adults are available at https://open.alberta.ca/publications/covid-19-information-alberta-health-daily-checklist

Anyone required to isolate must complete their isolation period prior to returning to school.

The AHS Parent COVID-19 Guide provides information about when students can return to school based on specific symptoms of COVID-19, if they have been tested for COVID-19 and whether they have been identified as a close contact.

A staff member with symptoms who tests negative for COVID-19 can return to school when their symptoms resolve except if they have been identified as a close contact.

Proof of a negative COVID-19 test result is not necessary for a student or staff member to return to school.

23. When can a student or staff member who is identified as a close contact return to school?

Anyone identified as a close contact can return to school after they have completed their required quarantine period unless they develop symptoms, receive a positive COVID-19 test result, or have an additional exposure to another person who tests positive for COVID-19. If any of these occur, the quarantine period will be adjusted.

24. If a student or staff member is required to stay at home (isolate or quarantine), how will the school know when it is safe for them to return?

When a student or staff member is required to stay home, that person (or their parent/guardian) is responsible for following instructions from Public Health and not going to school or any public place. It is up to that person to follow the isolation or quarantine requirements, and to communicate with the school about when it is safe for them to return.

Siblings, family and household members

25. If someone has COVID-19 symptoms, can their household members go to school?

Yes, household members without symptoms can continue to go to school, **unless**:

- The person with symptoms tests positive for COVID-19.
- The person with symptoms is also a close contact of someone who tested positive for

COVID-19 (in which case, the household members should all quarantine until the person receives a negative COVID-19 test result)

26. If someone does not have symptoms but is identified as a close contact of someone who tests positive for COVID-19, do others in their household need to quarantine (e.g., siblings, other family members)?

No. Household members of close contacts do not need to quarantine as long as the close contact does not have symptoms

COVID-19 variants of concern and school

27. What is a COVID-19 "variant of concern"?

Variants of concern are strains of COVID-19 that appear to spread more easily than others. Learn more about COVID-19 Variants.

28. If someone is sick with a COVID-19 variant of concern, does it change the response in schools?

No. The public health measures taken by the school remain the same.

29. If someone tests positive for a COVID-19 variant of concern, when can their household close contacts return to school?

People who live with someone who tests positive for a COVID-19 variant of concern can return to school when they have completed their required quarantine period, as advised by Public Health, unless they develop symptoms, receive a positive COVID-19 rest result, or have an additional exposure to another person who tests positive for COVID-19. Details about quarantine requirements for household contacts are available here: COVID-19 Variants.

Masks exceptions

30. Who is eligible for an exception from wearing masks? Is proof of an exception needed at school?

The vast majority of staff and students are capable of wearing a mask at school.

Family physicians can provide advice when a student or staff member has a medical condition that may require an exception from wearing a mask. Discomfort is not a good reason to avoid wearing a mask. We all share accountability for creating a safe school environment. This includes doing the right thing to protect ourselves, our children and each other.

General masking advice is available from Alberta Health here: alberta.ca/masks.
Refer to the Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) Order on Mask Use in Schools for more information.

First Nation leadership, school authorities and/or individual schools may have additional requirements.

Schools, mental health and COVID-19

31. What can families do to prepare if they are worried about the possibility of someone in their household testing positive for COVID-19?

Families can visit A Practical Guide to Support Family Stress after a Positive COVID-19 Test for tips on how to prepare for when someone has to isolate or quarantine.

32. Where can families and school staff members find support if they are concerned about their mental health and/or mental health of their child(ren)?

The Hope for Wellness Help Line offers immediate help to all Indigenous peoples across Canada. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to offer counselling and crisis intervention. Refer to hopeforwellness.ca or call 1-855-242-3310.

The Mental Health Helpline is a 24 hour, seven day a week confidential service that provides support, information and referrals to people in Alberta experiencing mental health concerns. Call toll-free at 1-877-303-2642.

Refer to ahs.ca/amh for links to important phone numbers, mental health programs and services across the province. The page also includes information for parents and guardians of school-aged children.

Help in Tough Times has links to helpful information, resources and services for dealing with challenging situations, including resources for children and youth.

School staff can also ask their school or school authority about workplace wellness programs.

COVID-19 vaccine

33. Where can schools and families learn more about the COVID-19 vaccine?

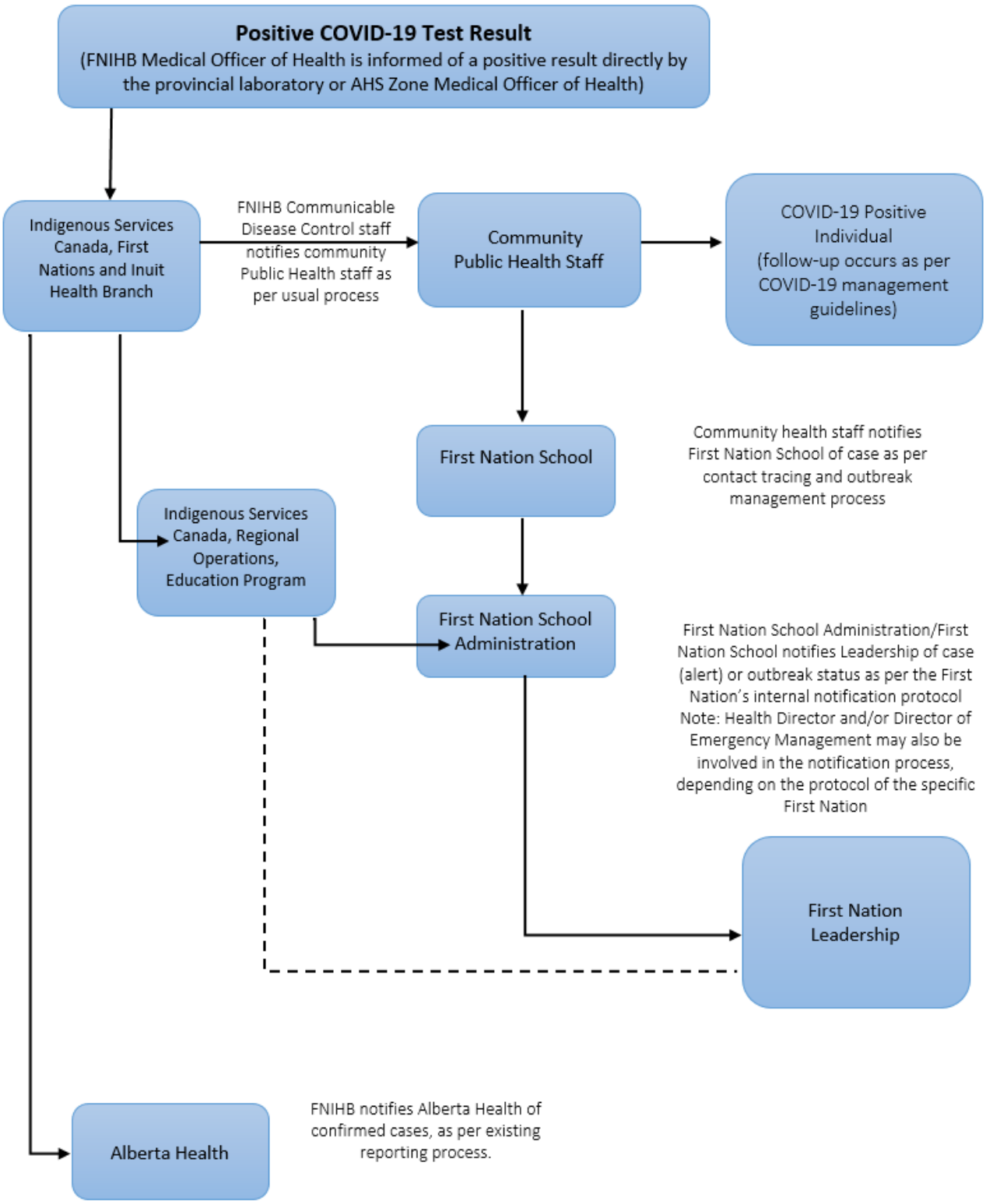
Information about the COVID-19 vaccine can be found at ahs.ca/covidvaccine and Frequently Asked Questions - COVID-19 Vaccine, or by calling your local Health Centre.

Details on the phases of vaccine distribution are available at COVID-19 vaccine program.

Individuals looking for general COVID-19 information are encouraged to visit https://www.onehealth.ca/ab/ABCovid-19 , ahs.ca/covid , or alberta.ca/covid19.

Adapted from Alberta Health Services *Going to School During COVID-19: FAQ*
https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17212.aspx

Appendix A: COVID-19 First Nations School Notification Process Diagram



Appendix B: Sample Parent/Guardian Alert Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian,

This letter is to notify you that a case of COVID-19 has been diagnosed in an individual from [Insert School Name]. We are working closely with local health staff and Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch to ensure necessary measures are in place to protect all students and staff.

Community health staff will be contacting parents/guardians, as well as any staff/visitors/volunteers who may have been in close contact with the case.

We remind parents/guardians, as well as any staff/visitors/volunteers, to monitor for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19.The Alberta Health daily checklist can be found here. Please remember to complete the checklist with your child and family each day prior to attending school.

As a reminder, if you/your child has any of the symptoms of illness listed on the Alberta Health daily checklist, please fill out the online Alberta Health Services COVID-19 self-assessment , call Health Link at 811, or call the local Health Centre and stay home/keep your child at home.

We will continue to provide additional information to parents / guardians as it is available. The health and safety of students, families and staff continues to be our priority.

Sincerely,

[First Nation School/School Administration Contact]

Appendix C: Sample Letter - COVID-19 School Outbreak Notification to Staff, Students and Visitors

Date
To:

RE: Notice of COVID-19 to Staff, Students and Visitors in [name of school and location]

[INSERT NAME OF COMMUNITY HEALTH DEPARTMENT] are investigating cases of COVID-19 at [name of school]. The virus is passed from person to person by large, respiratory droplets, like from a cough or sneeze. This means that a person would need to have direct contact with droplets from a sick person or surfaces that they have recently touched. The risk of the general population in the school becoming infected because of these cases is low.

If staff or students have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case, local community health staff will contact them directly for follow-up. If staff or students have not been identified as a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case but develop symptoms as listed on the daily screening tool, they are required to self isolate at home and complete the online assessment tool or call Health Link at 811 or your local Health Centre as soon as possible to arrange for COVID-19 testing. If you or your child require medical attention, please call ahead to your health care provider or call Health Link at 811 to help guide you to the right care provider and make appropriate arrangements to care for yourself or your child safely.

If this is an emergency and you or your child require urgent attention, call 911 and tell them that you or your child may have been in contact with COVID-19 so that they can make appropriate arrangements to care for you or your child safely.

To help minimize spread of any respiratory virus we always recommend the following:

- Make sure everyone in your household washes their hands with soap and water often. If soap and water are not available, you can use alcohol-based hand sanitizer if hands are not visibly dirty.
- Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands.
- Use a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw it in a garbage bin lined with a plastic bag. Wash your hands immediately after that. If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into your sleeve.
- Stay home if you're sick. If your kids are sick, keep them home from school.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces that are used often and shared by everyone in your home such as door knobs, light switches and bathroom taps.
- Practice physical distancing outside the home (at least 2 metres) and wear a mask in public spaces if physical distancing is not possible.
- Ensure your child's immunizations are up to date, including their annual influenza immunization.

For further information regarding COVID-19, please call Health Link at 811, and/or visit the Alberta Health Services website for COVID-19:

Sincerely,
(Medical Officer of Health).

cc: Chief and Council

Appendix D: Sample Letter- Parent/Guardian Notification Outbreak Closed

Dear Parent/Guardian,

This notification is to inform you that the outbreak at_____school has been declared over by the Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch Medical Officer of Health.

We remind parents/guardians of students, as well as any staff/visitors/volunteers to continue monitoring for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 as part of their routine daily practice. The Alberta Health daily checklist can be found here. Please remember to complete the checklist each day prior to attending school.

As a reminder, if you/your child has any of the symptoms of illness listed on the Alberta Health daily checklist, please fill out the online Alberta Health Services COVID-19 self-assessment , call Health Link at 811, or the local Health Centre, and stay home/keep your child at home.

Thank you for your support and continued collective efforts in protecting our school community

Sincerely,

[First Nation School/School Administration Contact]