



January 12, 2022

Dear Pacific Rim families,

Thank you for your patience and understanding as school districts dealt with the *Winter Break Extension Order* and the mandated phased return to school. We are pleased to be back in session after an extended winter break and hope there a few, if any, unscheduled interruptions for the remainder of the school year. My purpose in reaching out today is to share how we are addressing revised COVID-19 protocols in schools, including our planning relating to a school's functional closure, and to communicate changes in public health's approach to contact tracing and exposure notification.

COVID-19 Protocols for Schools and Functional Closure

During the week of January 4-7, district staff amended *SD70's Communicable Disease Prevention Plan* while school staff reviewed changes to COVID-19 Protocols for Schools. Once again, schools are emphasizing the importance of recommended personal health practices, wearing masks, conducting daily health checks, and staying home when sick. Schools are also revisiting previous strategies of staggering breaks and start/dismissal procedures, avoiding crowding in highly congested areas, and limiting outside guests to schools. All of this is intended to minimize COVID-19 in schools and to keep schools functioning.

One of the larger tasks also facing the school district last week was to develop plans for the 'functional closure' of a school due to COVID-19. A functional closure is when a school shifts from in-person learning to at-home learning due to unusually high student absences or staffing shortages that make it impossible for a school to function as usual. For more on the district's *Functional Closure* plan [click here](#).

Contact tracing and exposure notification

Public Health has also informed school districts that the emergence of the more transmissible Omicron variant of COVID-19 has necessitated changes in public health management. With higher levels of community transmission, a shorter virus incubation period, and the increased use of rapid antigen testing, contact tracing and close contact notification by public health is no longer effective to minimize the spread of COVID-19. Instead, public health has transitioned to individual self-management (ie. individuals care for themselves, engaging with health care providers when needed), with public health focused on identifying and responding to larger clusters and outbreaks.

As part of this change in approach, **individuals who test positive are to notify those who they live with or have had intimate contact, but they do not need to notify the school or others at school.** Thus, public health has ceased its previous practice of working with schools to investigate individual test-positive cases, conduct contact tracing, and provide close contact notifications because they do not believe it is effective in minimizing the spread of the new COVID-19 variant. This change also means that school officials will not have the same insight into the case-specific presence of COVID-19 in schools and will need to rely on other information to assess the overall health of their school community.

Practically, then, a school's awareness of COVID-19 will be generally measured through student attendance rather than knowledge of individual cases. Using raw student attendance data can be misleading, though, so schools and public health will collaborate to monitor student attendance and will work together to investigate higher than normal rates of student absence. Separating COVID-19 related illness from other student absences will be crucial to accurately meeting public health's "activation thresholds" that may trigger consideration of a functional closure for health reasons.

When informing your child's school of an absence, please understand that any question relating to the nature of your child's absence is simply to help identify COVID-19 related illness, so we don't mistakenly associate every absence with COVID-19. It is not about being nosy, but rather about being precise with our data. If we need to functionally close a school for health reasons, we want to make sure it is an informed decision based on actual COVID-19 related illness.

It is probably an over-used statement, but we continue to find ourselves in unfamiliar, uncharted territory and we continue to adapt to our ever-changing circumstances. We remain committed to in-person learning and sincerely hope we do not need to functionally close a school. We also know students will be absent due to COVID-19 and will work to provide continuity of learning during these absences.

With respect,
Greg Smyth

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Smyth". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Superintendent of Schools