



September 2020

Welcoming Our Students Back: Supporting Students with Special Needs and Students at Risk as They Return to School

Note: Given the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and transmission within our communities, guidance may change based on emerging circumstances and information from public health officials.

Manitoba Education emphasizes the importance of an inclusive, balanced approach to re-opening schools, while continuing to follow public health advice for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Manitoba Education continues to work closely with Public Health, the Department of Families, and education and community stakeholders to welcome back and support all students as schools resume in-class learning in September. Our planning emphasizes the importance of getting students back in classrooms for in-person learning while focusing on safety and health. *Welcoming Our Students Back: Restoring Safe Schools: K-12 Guidelines for September 2020* supports this goal with protocols for screening, enhanced hand hygiene, physical distancing, the use of non-medical masks, the use of cohorts, and outbreak management, which are paramount in keeping as many students as possible safely in schools this fall and throughout the pandemic.

Welcoming Our Students Back: Restoring Safe Schools: COVID-19 K-12 School Settings Practice Guidance and Protocols aligns with the province's *Restoring Safe Services: Manitoba's Pandemic and Economic Roadmap for Recovery*, putting student and staff safety first, and highlighting key guiding principles:

- Safety, health, and well-being for all students, staff, and families is a priority.
- High quality learning and assessment continues for all students.
- Accessible, trauma-informed resources and supports for students, parents, and caregivers are provided.
- Consistent, reliable, and appropriate connection to school learning and belonging is provided for every student, regardless of location, needs, or challenges.
- System-wide communication and collaboration promote consistent approaches throughout the province.

Considerations for Students with Special Needs and Students at Risk

School is going to be different for everyone in the fall of 2020, including students with special needs and students at risk. School division and school plans include considerations for students with special needs and students at risk, consistent with inclusive and appropriate educational programming. Teachers will be teaching all students how to behave in ways that are compliant with the public health measures included in the *Restoring Safe Schools: Practice Guidance and Protocols* document and other information provided by Manitoba Education and Public Health.

Students with special needs and students at risk may require additional supports, as well as consistent and more frequent collaboration and planning, strong communication, flexibility, and creativity within the student support team. This will ensure shared decision making, the most inclusive learning environment possible, and a cohesive approach to learning and belonging within the school community. The following key elements need to be considered as student support teams facilitate the inclusion of students with special needs and students at risk as schools re-open this fall.

Full-Time In-Class Learning Prioritized for Students with Special Needs

Restoring Safe Schools: Practice Guidance and Protocols states that in-class learning will resume on September 8, 2020, for all students in public and funded independent schools across the province.

- Kindergarten to Grade 8 students will return for five days of full, in-class instruction per week.
- Students in Grades 9 to 12 will return for up to five days per week of in-class instruction if high schools can effectively implement physical distancing and the use of cohorts. Students should expect some remote learning, along with in-class instruction.
- Students with special needs in all grades will return for five days of full, in-class instruction per week.

According to *Appropriate Educational Programming in Manitoba: Standards for Student Services* (2006), students with special needs are those who require specialized services or programming when deemed necessary by the in-school team because of exceptional learning, social/emotional, behavioural, sensory, physical, cognitive/intellectual, communication, academic, or health-care needs that affect their ability to meet learning outcomes.

As always, the best interests of students would be at the forefront and individual student needs would be addressed through the student-specific planning process as outlined below.

Attendance and participation in learning is considered appropriate educational programming, and all students are expected to participate fully, including when remote learning is required. Students will be assessed on their work, reflective of their performance and learning. However, a student's support team may consider alternative attendance options, depending on a student's unique needs and situation. Students who are at risk of disengagement from school may require student-specific planning to develop and implement strategies to re-engage them; therefore, these students may be prioritized for in-class learning five days a week, where possible.

Recording of participation in remote learning may be necessary for those students who will require some measure of remote learning and adapted timetables as part of their plan. Assigning educational assistants (EAs) to support the work of professional staff, such as teachers and clinicians, may be part of a student-specific plan.

Students with special needs in Grades 9 to 12 may require specialized timetabling and use of cohorts to facilitate full-time attendance at school. Student-specific learning needs may be met within a small group context supported by specialized timetabling and experiential learning and linked whenever possible to classroom learning. For example, a high school student who is typically fully included in classes but experienced difficulty navigating online learning may benefit from attending school in person daily for full days. This would allow the student to attend all classes with peers, as well as join their class online from school rather than from home, with appropriate educational and technological support provided by school staff. This experience may result in increased independence with remote learning in the future. It is important to identify the cohort(s) and balance this with in-class learning within the safe, inclusive larger school community.

Additional Planning within the Student-Specific Planning Process

Student-specific planning for students with special needs and students at risk is already in place in schools. This process will be even more critical at this time, in order to support a smoother transition to school. Going back to school after a prolonged period at home may be more difficult for some students than others. As school teams plan for the resumption of in-class learning, it will be important to continue effective practices for transition planning, as outlined in the transition protocols on the Manitoba Education Student Services website:

- www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/publications/protocol_early_childhood_transition.pdf
- www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/policy/transition/bridging_to_adulthood.pdf

As always, school teams will work in collaboration with families and related agencies/ organizations that support children, youth, and their families. Planning would take into account particular timelines, responsibilities of each partner, and key practices across environments, to ensure appropriate educational programming is in place for school re-entry. It will also be important to collect the most current information about the student, including their experiences with remote learning during the spring of 2020.

Student-specific plans (e.g., adaptation plans, modification plans, individual education plans, behaviour intervention plans, health care plans, personal transportation plans) are key in supporting students with special needs and students at risk as they transition back to in-class learning. Student-specific plans may need to be reviewed and adjusted more frequently to ensure effective supports, strategies, and services are maintained or adjusted as the school year gets underway. The standards outlined in *Appropriate Educational Programming in Manitoba: Standards for Student Services* (available at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/specedu/aep/pdf/Standards_for_Student_Services.pdf) and school division policy will continue to be followed, along with guidelines related to COVID-19. Parents/caregivers, teachers, and the students themselves, where appropriate, are encouraged to discuss the impact of spring 2020 remote learning on student-specific plans and develop collaborative ways to support learning and confidence during this time of transition. As always, goals, strategies, and timelines will be adjusted to meet current needs and contexts. Programming for students with special needs is a dynamic, interactive process that requires problem solving, teamwork, and trust among educators, students, and parents.

Case management: As school and division teams coordinate student support services in the context of COVID-19, it is important that there be an established case manager to coordinate communication and planning within the student support team. Effective case management helps to ensure that instructional decisions are based on current student information and public health guidelines. It also helps to ensure that appropriate supports are provided in the context of in-class, blended, or remote learning. More information about case management can be found at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/covid/support/rssn_docs/case_manager.pdf.

In the classroom: Everyone has a role to play in the provision of appropriate educational programming during the transition back to in-class learning.

Classroom/course teachers continue to fulfill various roles and responsibilities within the team planning process, such as implementing student-specific plans, assessing student outcomes, and even acting as case manager for some students. When an **educational assistant (EA)** is assigned to support the student-specific plan, their role will be determined by the strengths and needs of the student within the shared decision-making process of the student support team, including parents and the student where possible. As always, the principal, teacher, or other professional under whose supervision they work directs the day-to-day activities of the EA. Having EAs provide support to one or more classes is an inclusive practice that is respectful of student strengths while addressing needs.

Health and Safety Considerations

The **mental health and well-being** of Manitobans continues to be a shared priority of Manitoba Education and the Department of Families.

Social-emotional learning, including self/co-regulation, response to trauma, and support for dealing with anxiety, will continue to be addressed in the classroom and/or through student-specific planning as appropriate. A comprehensive list of suggested mental health

resources for students, educators, and families, under “Mental Health Supports,” is available online at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/covid/support/rsssn.html.

Case managers and student support teams are reminded to invite student-specific service providers (e.g., Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services through Health Sciences Centre and Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre) to participate in planning meetings remotely or in person as appropriate.

A layered approach using public health fundamentals helps reduce the spread of COVID-19. Routine practices consist of several public health measures outlined on the “Latest COVID-19 Education News” web page and include the following:

- Stay home when sick.
- Screen for symptoms.
- Minimize visitor access.
- Physical distance as much as possible.
- Limit exposure to others by using cohorts.
- Increase ventilation.
- Increase frequency of cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing.
- At this time, **non-medical masks** are required in schools for students in Grades 4 to 12 when physical distancing of two metres is not possible. Parents and caregivers will continue to choose whether younger students should wear a mask in school. Masks will be required on school buses for bus drivers, students, and any other passengers.
- Schools will have masks available for those who do not have a mask or for those who have forgotten to bring a mask to school.

Manitoba Education will continue to work with Public Health to monitor the situation and adjust direction accordingly. For the most up-to-date information regarding mask use, please see *Guidance for Mask Use in Schools*, which can be found at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/covid/docs/mask_guidance.pdf.

Students who live with complex medical needs or other special needs may require specific types of **intervention that must be delivered in close physical proximity** for an extended period of time.

For more information on how to safely provide this type of support, please refer to *Guidelines on Supporting Students Who Require Interventions or Supports That Cannot Be Delivered from a Distance* at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/covid/reopening/supports_non_distance.html.

This online information describes the personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements that match different levels of risk. These guidelines are intended to be used in conjunction with other COVID-19–related provincial guidance and protocols related to school re-opening. Please note that these (and other) guidelines will be updated as needed, in accordance with any new public health direction.



Educators who provide **clinical supports** and services need to be aware of the requirements of their professional regulator or college related to PPE. As provincial regulatory bodies, such organizations provide requirements that are expected to align with public health guidance related to the use of PPE. There may be rare occasions when the regulator information and employer requirements do not match. Clinical educators and employers need to work together to find the best solution to comply with both the school division's and their regulator's direction.

When a school division is contracting clinical services, the school division is expected to inform their contract services of the school division requirements if they are in addition to those of the professional regulator.

Students who are **medically advised to not participate** in in-person learning for a period of time due to COVID-19–related risk factors will be supported through remote learning. Necessary planning would occur through the student-specific planning process as outlined previously. Not all supports are transferable to a remote, online learning environment. The remote learning approach will require parent involvement and support. Parents/guardians/caregivers must commit to supporting their child at home and be able to supervise student synchronous (online, real-time, teacher-led) and asynchronous (offline, independent) work.

Respite

Respite remains an important short break from the unique demands of caring for a child with disabilities. It is available for caregivers of children who are eligible for supports from Children's disABILITY Services (CDS). For children who have lifelong complex medical needs, respite can be provided by a registered nurse or licensed practical nurse through the local regional health authority. Respite is not intended to replace academic learning. Respite can be provided in or out of the child's home.

Employment support may be available for families who are working outside of regular school hours when children are age 13 years or older and are not able to safely remain at home unattended. Parents who must stay home for 14 days to care for a family member may also wish to check available benefits at www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/ceerb-application.html.

If a child accessing CDS is told by Public Health to self-isolate for 14 days and families require support, they should contact their community service worker to discuss their individual needs.

Additional Information

As we plan for the safe and successful return to school for students with special needs and students at risk, it is important that students and families work with their student support team within the student-specific planning process. It is also important that teams use a strong case management process to ensure shared decision making and planning. These systems and processes involve all stakeholders, including parents, the student, classroom teacher(s), and outside agencies and supports (e.g., Children's disABILITY Services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services through Health Sciences Centre and Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre).

Manitoba Education will continue to work closely with Public Health, education and community stakeholders, partner departments, school divisions, independent schools, parents, caregivers, and students to problem solve and enhance plans over the coming school year.

More information on Manitoba Education's COVID-19 response, including resources, planning documents, and frequently asked questions, can be found on the "Latest COVID-19 Education News" web page at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/covid/index.html.

Information specific to children with special needs and educational planning can be found at "Resources Supporting Students with Special Needs" at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/covid/support/rsssn.html.

Manitoba Education's website includes *A Guide for Parents, Caregivers and Students: What to expect when welcomed back to school* at www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/covid/index.html.