

Educator Guide

A Healthy and Safe Return to School

Introduction

As we prepare to welcome students back to class following the winter break, the ministry has prepared this guide to support educators in providing a refresher for all students. This guide includes tips and strategies to support a consistent provincial approach to safe and healthy practices that help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and can be used to:

- develop classroom activities and conversations that support mental health and well-being; and,
- remind students of safe and healthy practices that should be followed to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

It is important to note that as the pandemic response evolves, guidance may change accordingly. Educators must ensure that any additional directives provided by their board or public health offices are communicated with students.

Mental Health and Well-being Supports

The [Mentally Healthy Return to School Toolkit](#) developed by School Mental Health Ontario includes many resources and tips about mental health and well-being that still apply to students returning to school after the winter break. Items from the [First 10 Days of School](#) might be helpful to revisit.

The return-to-school toolkit includes a series of modules for school and board leaders that are intended to help educators foster a positive school climate and a welcoming, inclusive and safe return to school that prioritizes mental health and well-being, addressing inequity,

relationship-building and a sense of belonging for students, staff and families. As many students are learning at home, sharing mental-health and well-being resources with parents and families can help to reinforce these ideas.

Importance of Self-Care

It is important that educators prioritize time for their own self-care. Consider how to model and promote self-care for colleagues, students and their families, support connections and relationships, and model flexibility and empathy.

Take care of yourself first. If you are well, you will be in a better position to support your students.

Resources like [Self-Care 101](#) and [Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#) may be helpful to support both you and your students.

Diverse Backgrounds and Communities

Consider the realities faced by different communities. What is needed? What are they telling us? What can be done? Supporting all students begins with self-reflection and examination of the classroom climate, instructional strategies, personal bias, and systemic barriers that students may be facing. This will help build a classroom and school climate where all

students feel a sense of belonging and value.

These School Mental Health Ontario resources can support learning for all:

- [Class conversation starters](#)
- [Supporting Mentally Healthy Conversations about Anti-Black Racism with Students](#)
- [Allyship and Equity social media packs](#)

Supporting Student Mental Health and Well-being

Supporting student mental health can begin by modelling behaviours and coping strategies for students. Several helpful stress management strategies that can be introduced at any age include:

- Breathing strategies (e.g., 4-square or circle breathing)
- Muscle relaxation strategies (e.g., tensing and relaxing muscle groups)
- Distraction strategies (e.g., doing something enjoyable to take a break)
- Visualization strategies (e.g., taking a mini-vacation in your mind)
- Noticing strategies (e.g., paying attention to everyday heroes and good news)
- Thought-changing strategies (e.g., challenging negative unfounded thoughts)

Providing students with opportunities to work cooperatively, feel empowered and assist others can also support mental health and well-being. It is fundamentally important to create a space where students feel seen, valued, safe and comfortable to voice their concerns, challenges and needs.

An important aspect of your role as an educator is to notice the [signs and symptoms of mental health concerns](#) and not to diagnose or treat. If you are concerned about a student's mental health, please follow your school's protocols in seeking help for a student.

The [Kids Help Phone](#), [Black Youth Helpline](#), [LGBT Youthline](#), [Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres](#) and [School Mental Health Ontario resources](#) can be shared with students and families to support mental health and well-being.

There are school boards resources available when students are in need of additional mental health support. All school boards have a Board Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan led by a Mental Health Leader

and Superintendent with responsibility for Mental Health.

The ministry has also developed a variety of educator webinars, including a series on mental health and well-being. For information on how to register and access webinars, please visit:

<https://ontario.educatorwebinars.ca/>.

Reflective Questions for Students

- Think about things that make you feel well (activities, routines, people, places, pets, etc.). What can you do today to fit in time for these things?
- What strategies do you use now to help you to feel better when you are stressed or sad? Write down one thing that helps you that might help someone else in the class.
- Asking for help is a skill, what could you say to a trusted adult if you were feeling overwhelmed and needed help? (e.g., "I'm not feeling well these days, can I talk to you about it?")

Refresher on COVID-19 Health and Safety Protocols

The following section highlights key health and safety protocols to refresh with students. For each protocol, consider the sample strategies and reflective questions that can be used to engage with students on these important topics. Developmentally appropriate modifications should be made based on the needs and ages of students.

Overall Health and Safety Protocol Reflective Questions for Students

- What is personal responsibility and why does it matter in the context of a global pandemic?
 - How could one individual's actions related to COVID-19 health and safety protocols impact a community?
 - What actions are we taking to stop the spread of COVID in our school?
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Daily Screening

Goal: Students are aware of the need to screen for symptoms of illness every day before attending school and know who to talk to if they are feeling sick during the school day.

What we know

- Screening and staying home when you are sick is one of the most important ways to stop the spread of COVID-19. Students must self-screen every day before coming to school using the COVID-19 school screening tool. Schools boards may have their own screening tools or solutions based on local context.
- If students are experiencing [symptoms of COVID-19](#), they must stay home from school and should follow the advice in the [Ontario school screening tool](#).

Strategies and Examples

- Have students create their own posters in your classroom to help remind them to screen for COVID-19 symptoms of illness every day before they attend school.
- Remind students and parents to use Ontario's screening tool for schools.

Reflective Questions for Students

- How do you remind yourself to screen before leaving for school?
- How do you remember what symptoms are important to look for? Let's review the symptoms from the screening tool together.
- Who is it important to tell if you are not feeling well?

Hand Hygiene

Goal: Students are aware of the importance of hand washing or hand sanitizing to remove or kill the COVID-19 virus.

What we Know

- Hand washing and hand sanitizing is an effective way to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Hand hygiene should be conducted frequently and thoroughly with soap and water, particularly if hands are visibly dirty.
- If soap and water are not available, use a hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol (60-90% recommended in community settings).
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Tissues and lined, no-touch waste baskets should be accessible to limit interaction with germs.

Strategies and Examples

- Establish regular hand washing times for students within a classroom schedule (i.e. washing hands before eating food, before and after using technology/equipment in labs or technical education classrooms).
- Share a hand washing video or display a [poster](#) in classrooms to show how to wash your hands or have students create their own ([Video example](#); [Poster example](#)).

- Have conversations with students about practices that support good hand hygiene (e.g., washing hands for 15 seconds, carrying hand sanitizer).
- Demonstrate the effectiveness of proper handwashing. With rubber gloves on, use paint to simulate soap and demonstrate the steps of the handwashing process. By the end, the gloves should be completely covered with the paint. Show what happens with the paint if you do not follow the proper steps.
- To ensure the time needed for effective hand washing, students could hum to a song that takes 15 seconds.
- Younger students could develop a comic about the importance of handwashing, including the proper steps.
- Consider referring students to Public Health Ontario's guide on how to [perform proper hand hygiene](#).

Reflective Questions for Students

- Why do you think there is so much importance being placed on good hand hygiene right now?
- What are good hand hygiene practices?
- How can these practices be used throughout the school day?
- What strategies do you use to ensure you're washing your hands properly?

Masking

Goal: Students are aware of how to properly use a mask.

What we know

- Students from Grades 4-12 are required to wear their own non-medical or cloth mask indoors in schools and on school buses.
- Students from Kindergarten to Grade 3 are encouraged to wear masks in indoor spaces and on school buses.
- A non-medical mask is intended to protect others from your germs and prevent other germs from landing in your mouth or nose.
- Your mask should fully cover your nose, mouth and chin.
- Replace your mask when it gets wet or dirty.
- Avoid touching the front of the mask or face covering while wearing your mask.
- Make sure your mask fits snugly to cover your nose and mouth.

Strategies and Examples

- Remind students to properly wash their hands before and after putting on their mask.
- Remind students how to wear a mask properly by sharing this [handout demonstrating the accurate method](#).

Reflective Questions for Students

- How does it make you feel to wear a mask?
- Why is it important to wear a mask?
- How do you properly handle, wear, and dispose of or clean a mask?
- How do you remind yourself to put on a mask before entering the school or bus?
- What times should masks be worn throughout the school day?
- How can you remember to follow proper mask protocols?

Respiratory Hygiene

Goal: Students are aware of how germs are spread and ways to avoid doing so.

What we know

- Covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough, or sneeze is important for stopping the spread of germs.
- To help stop the spread of germs, throw used tissues into the trash. If you do not have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your elbow, not your hands.
- It is important to immediately [wash your hands properly](#) or apply alcohol-based hand rub after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing. Refer here to a [list of hand sanitizers authorized by Health Canada](#).

Strategies and Examples

- Display this [“Cover your cough” poster](#) in your classroom for students to view or ask students to create their own.
- Share [this short-video clip about COVID-19 Hygiene for kids](#) with your class to prompt a discussion.
- For younger grades, have students create a storybook about how to protect themselves and those around them from spreading germs.

Reflective Questions for Students

- Why is it important to cough or sneeze into your elbow instead of your hand?
- How do you remember to cough or sneeze into your elbow?
- What do you do if you accidentally cough or sneeze into your hand?

Physical Distancing

Goal: Students are aware of the importance of maintaining physical distancing and their classroom cohort.

What we know

- COVID-19 is spread mainly from person to person through close physical contact.

- Close physical contact means being less than two metres away in the same room, workspace, or area.
- The use of student cohorts can support effective contact tracing for COVID-19.

Strategies and Examples

- Review strategies to avoid crowded spaces, including keeping two metres apart when entering and exiting the school, using hallways, playgrounds and bathrooms.
- Ask students to brainstorm ways to connect with friends and families outside their household, such as using phone calls and video calls.
- Revisit activities that allow physical distancing, such as new desk arrangements
- Encourage new ways for students to greet each other (i.e. waving as opposed to high-fives or hugs).
- Remove unnecessary furniture and place desks with as much distancing as possible.
- Create unidirectional flow in schools to support physical distancing in hallways.

Reflective Questions for Students

- How are the social/physical distancing rules impacting your behaviour with your friends? How do these rules make you feel?
- Why is it important to practice physical distancing in school and at home?
- What does physical distancing look like in the classroom, school, or playground?
- What is public health telling us about social distancing rules outside of school? Why is it so important that we follow these rules outside of school

For up-to-date information on everything related to COVID-19 in Ontario, visit

<https://covid-19.ontario.ca>