



# **RETURN TO SCHOOL SPORT GUIDELINES**

## **BC SCHOOL SPORTS**

September 8, 2021

## Purpose

The purpose of this document is to support the 440+ member schools around the province in safely restarting school sport activities in alignment with Provincial Health Orders and the Ministry of Education's [Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines for K-12](#).

## Dynamic Response to the Pandemic

As we have seen over the past 17 months, predicting the future trajectory of the pandemic is nearly impossible. While BCSS had utilized a Stage model last year, BCSS recognizes the introduction or changing of regional or provincial orders or recommendations may have incremental effects and may not line up with pre-established stages. Moving forward, BCSS will simply be providing clarity on the orders, recommendations and guidelines that are in place, as well as some context around their real-world application as it pertains to school sport. BCSS and its member schools will be required to adapt in real-time to the introduction, change or rescinding of various provincial, regional or local orders and guidelines.

## Current Status of School Sports in BC

On August 24, 2021, the Ministry of Education with the support of the Provincial Health Officer announced the guidelines to be utilized this year across schools. The Ministry of Education guidelines, in combination with the applicable Health Orders, create the foundation for the guidelines in this document.

The Ministry's [K-12 guidelines](#) (p.28) address school sport specifically and state:

- Intra- and inter-school programs, activities (e.g., intramurals, sports team practices, games), sports academies and events can continue in alignment with the following guidance:
  - Requirements of relevant local, regional and provincial public health recommendations and Orders for community gatherings and events.
  - Masks are worn by K-12 staff, other adults and students in grades 4 to 12 when they are indoors, and a barrier is not present.
    - Students are not required to wear masks during high-intensity sport activities (e.g., stationary bike, weightlifting, basketball, soccer); mask use during these activities is left to the student's personal choice. Staff are encouraged to move high-intensity sport activities outdoors whenever possible.
    - For low-intensity sport activities (e.g., stretching, golf), students are required to wear masks when they are indoors and a barrier is not present.

- As a general rule, high-intensity sport activities involve sustained heavier breathing and elevated heart rates - most people engaged in these activities cannot say more than a few words without having to catch their breath. In contrast, most people engaged in low-intensity sport activities can carry on a conversation without having to catch their breath.
- Use all available space to spread students and staff out as much as possible.
- Shared equipment can be used, provided it is cleaned and disinfected as per the guidelines in the Cleaning and Disinfecting section of K-12 Guidelines.
  - Students should be encouraged to practice proper hand hygiene before and after using frequently touched pieces of equipment (e.g., before and after a sports game using a shared ball), as well as proper respiratory etiquette.
  - Equipment that touches the mouth (e.g., water bottles) should not be shared unless cleaned and disinfected in between uses.
- Sport activities should be held outside whenever possible.
- See the Visitor Access/Community Use section (p.14) for more information on protocols for spectators.

Regional prevention measures for K-12 schools may be recommended by public health during times of increased community transmission of COVID-19 and within communities with low vaccination uptake. These prevention measures are in addition to the Ministry of Education guidelines and should be followed, where applicable to school sport. Additional Information will be available on Regional Health Authority websites.

## **Training and Competition**

Ultimately, under the current guidance and orders, school sport, including inter-school competition may resume immediately within schools. Unless specifically included in additional local, regional, or provincial public health recommendations or orders, the current K-12 guidelines do not restrict types of practice or competition that can take place, nor do they require modified playing rules or maintaining strict physical distancing. Educational cohorts/learning groups are no longer being used, and therefore no longer influence which students can interact with other students from a school sport perspective.

BCSS Provincial Sport Championships are being planned as normal but must adhere to the COVID guidelines and requirements implemented at each venue. This may

limit the number of participants or spectators permitted at an event. BCSS will adapt the format, size, length or structure of championships as required.

## **Masks**

As per the K-12 guidelines, masks are mandatory for all students in grades 4 and above, staff, and visitors when indoors at a school or school event. There are exceptions, including when a student-athlete is engaged in high-intensity activity. During high-intensity activity, wearing a mask is a personal choice for each individual student-athlete. We acknowledge that nearly all of our 19 activities would be classified as high intensity, except for golf (masks are not required when outdoors), and perhaps curling. It should be noted that at the recent Tokyo Olympics, some participants chose to wear masks during high intensity activities during indoor competitions. If they can be worn by athletes at the highest levels of competition, we should certainly respect the choices of those student-athletes who may choose to wear them while playing or participating in school sport.

When indoors, student-athletes in grades 4 and above must wear masks while preparing for the game or practice (e.g., changing, preparing equipment). In a practice environment, there may be sustained periods of low-intensity activity, such as stationary skill-work, or static stretching as a component of cool-down. During these periods, student-athletes are required to wear masks while indoors and no barrier is present. In indoor competition, those who are not actively playing (substitutes) must be wearing masks when off the field of play.

Coaches, managers, minor officials and others involved in the delivery and supervision of the sport, must wear masks at all times when indoors. Officials that are required to use a whistle, are not required to wear a mask.

Outdoors, masking is not required by student-athletes or coaches. For coaches, masking is not required when outdoors but is recommended when working closely with athletes.

## **Travel**

Travel for school sport should follow any applicable public health Orders or recommendations. Currently, there are no restrictions on travel provincially. The decision to allow teams to travel will rest with the school or school district. Teams travelling should follow all the applicable K-12 Guidelines, as well as any further guidance provided by their school or district.

## **Vaccinations**

Currently, there is no vaccination requirement to participate in school sport.

BCSS **strongly encourages** all student-athletes, coaches and officials who are eligible to follow the guidance of public health and get fully vaccinated (i.e., receive 2 doses) as soon as possible for the safety of themselves, their teammates, and the school sport community.

Teams attending tournaments or other events may encounter venues (e.g., post-secondary institution, municipal facility) where they have a vaccination requirement for entry to a building. Coaches and athletic directors should check with the hosts of the events they are scheduled to attend regarding any applicable requirements for participation.

BCSS Zone and Provincial Championships are currently being planned to go ahead as usual. BCSS is awaiting further clarity on the vaccine passport requirements for events. Depending on the event and its location, teams in the championship, coaches and spectators may be subject to vaccination requirements. We will be sure to communicate the requirements, if any, well in advance.

## **Spectators**

Spectators are permitted, provided they meet applicable provincial and regional public health orders and recommendations, including the Provincial Health Officer Order for [Gatherings and Events](#).

While the order doesn't translate perfectly for school sport settings, through discussion with representatives from public health, the understood intention is as follows:

For any indoor event, the limit of total persons (this includes student-athletes, coaches, officials, minor officials, spectators) in the indoor space is 50 or 50% of the capacity of the event space (e.g., gymnasium, pool). For example, if a gymnasium has a capacity of 500 persons, this means that 250 people are permitted to be in that space. If the event is a volleyball match between two teams with 30 athletes, 6 coaches, 2 officials, and 4 minor officials, for a total of 42 participants. This leaves a spectator capacity of 208 persons. It is important for schools to understand what their capacity limits are for their venues. Those who are not directly involved in the event, such as custodial staff, athletic director when providing general supervision, etc., are not counted in the count of persons.

Schools and/or districts may prohibit or restrict spectators within their school(s) at their discretion. Alternatively, a school hosting a tournament, may need to ensure teams that are not currently playing, are outside the competition space to ensure that capacity limits are being met in accordance with the Gathering and Events order.

For outdoor events, the limit of total persons is 5000 (including student-athletes, coaches, officials, minor officials, spectators) or 50% of the venue capacity. Except for a handful of events, it is unlikely many school sport contests will be impacted due to lowest maximum persons count being 5000.

## **GOVERNANCE & DECISION MAKING**

### **Governance Permissions: School & School District Discretion**

Schools and school districts in consultation with their health and safety officers, or their applicable regional health authority may restrict activities or put in further protocols above and beyond those that are in these guidelines.

It is recommended that each school district, in collaboration with their District Health and Safety Office review these guidelines. BCSS has worked to ensure our guidelines are consistent with those provided by the Ministry of Education, however, should a discrepancy exist between the BCSS Return to School Sport Plan and a district or school's Health and Safety Plan, the Health and Safety Plan will take precedence.

The application and delivery of school sport experiences must fit into the overall health and safety plan of each school. This cannot be considered a stand-alone document or be implemented without consideration of the wider impact. Athletic directors must work with their administrators to ensure the safety protocols are being met and they are consistent with the school's safety plan.

### **Responsibility for Adherence to the Guidelines**

BC School Sports operates on the foundation of self-governance and self-regulation. There is a strong history of BCSS member schools ensuring the approved policies of BCSS are followed to ensure their adherence to the rules.

COVID-19 guidelines are no different. It is the responsibility of districts, school administrators and athletic directors to ensure their school is adhering to the COVID-19 policies and guidelines approved by the Ministry of Education and BC School Sports, as well as any applicable public health orders or recommendations. After 17 months with no school sport, we are all excited to return to the field of play and by adhering to the recommended prevention measures, we help ensure the safe return to school sport for everyone.

The role of the athletic director has never been more important in a school than right now. The continual education and communication that will be required with coaches and student-athletes, while constantly updating and working with school

administration to ensure safety protocols are being met will be critical. BCSS recognizes these are unusual times and there are fiscal challenges across the province, but we strongly encourage districts to maintain all support for athletic directors. Additionally, we ask administrators to empower their AD's to take a hands-on leadership role navigating this return to school sport.

## **Management of a COVID-19 Exposure**

Upon notification of a student-athlete testing positive for COVID-19, the coach and/or athletic director will notify the school administrator who will collaborate with public health officials. The school and district remain responsible for liaising with public health officials as required for case management protocols.

If there is a COVID-19 exposure at a zone or provincial championship, BCSS will follow any guidance or direction provided from public health to support communication with participants.

Athletic directors should notify BCSS if a COVID-19 case, cluster or outbreak impacting their teams may impact their ability to participate in zone or provincial championships. No personal information should be disclosed.

As with all school exposures, public health will notify close contacts directly. Those who are not contacted by public health can continue to attend school and participate in their regular activities. If deemed necessary, public health will provide additional guidance to schools related to school sports. Additional guidance may also come from the school administrator and/or school district administration.

## **GENERAL SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS FOR ALL BCSS RETURN TO SCHOOL SPORT STAGES**

**Hand Washing Stations or Hand Sanitizer:** Schools should ensure that student-athletes have easy access to handwashing/sanitizing stations. Washing/sanitizing your hands is recommended whenever touching common surfaces or shared equipment. Student-athletes are required to wash or sanitize with Alcohol-Based Hand Rub (ABHR), their hands before and after any school sport activities.

**Masks:** Student-athletes and coaches must follow the guidelines for mask-wearing as stated in the K-12 Communicable Disease Guidelines. This requires a mask at all-time indoors for adults and students in grades 4 and above, except when a student-athlete is participating in high-intensity activities. Outdoors, masks are not required, but student-athletes may still wear them at their discretion.

**Shared Equipment:** Sharing equipment is permitted. All equipment is subject to the cleaning and disinfecting protocols for frequently touched surfaces.

**Physical distancing:** The K-12 Guidelines state to use the maximum space available. Physical distancing is not required, but as per the guidelines, by using the maximum space available, it helps reduce crowding.

**Number of Participants:** The K-12 Communicable Disease Guidelines do not limit the number of participants for any activities. Limits should follow any applicable regional or provincial public health orders or recommendations.

**Spectators:** Spectators are permitted at events at the discretion and requirements of the host school, district, or facility, and in compliance with regional and provincial Orders and guidelines.

**Locker Rooms/Change Rooms:** Each Member School will determine if the locker rooms can be used. While clothing and textiles are low-risk items, we encourage programs to ask their student-athletes to arrive for any school sport as prepared as reasonably possible. Where the use of locker rooms may be required, ensure the timing of student entry and exits are coordinated.

## RESOURCES

[Provincial COVID-19 Communicable Disease Guidelines for K-12](#) (Aug 2021)

[BCCDC Public Health Communicable Disease Guidance for K-12 Schools](#) (September 2021).

[BC Government Restart Plan](#)