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January 21, 2022

Dear Post-Secondary Institution Presidents:

Thank you for your continued collaboration with Public Health for a safe return to campus this winter. I appreciate the challenging circumstances many of you are navigating and I commend you for addressing the educational needs of students as well as safety and business continuity considerations at your institutions. As we have discussed, it remains important that we continue to guide our pandemic response based on the epidemiology of SARS-CoV2 and to balance the risk of COVID with the negative impacts of public health measures.

Our [post-secondary guidance](#) reflects this need to implement effective prevention measures and avoid ineffective measures that provide little health benefit, and may cause significant disruption as well as adversely affect health and well-being. The rapid spread of the Omicron variant to become dominant in BC was associated with changes in the epidemiology including a shorter incubation period. At the same time, this variant is associated with a significantly reduced risk of serious illness and hospitalization particularly in people vaccinated with two doses of vaccine. Much, however, remains the same in terms of risk settings and measures to prevent spread and we continue to see lower risk in structured seated settings. Given as well the disproportionate adverse impacts of the pandemic on our young adults in the context of a highly vaccinated population, I urge you to prioritize on-campus instruction whenever possible.

Our advice strongly recommending the continuation of on-campus instruction at post-secondary institutions is rooted in the goals of pandemic response, which are to reduce serious illness and death, protect the health care system and minimize societal disruption. Vaccination continues to be proven to be the single most effective intervention for reducing the burden of illness related to COVID-19. Epidemiological data from BC shows that being unvaccinated is the strongest risk factor for severe illness requiring hospitalization or critical care. We see an impressive 27-fold reduction in rates of critical care admissions in the fully vaccinated compared to the unvaccinated populations. Analyses of BC's hospitalization data further demonstrate that the vast majority of the post-secondary community, including faculty and staff, are at a very low risk of hospitalization due to COVID-19.

We continue to see lower rates of COVID-19 incidence in the post-secondary population, and this reflects the high vaccination rates and comprehensive safety measures in place. In contrast to the controlled nature of classrooms and offices, SARS-CoV-2 transmits most efficiently in homes and unstructured or informal social settings. Public Health investigation has found that when a post-secondary student or employee has been diagnosed with COVID-19, the exposure was most often associated with their home or social setting, and they have not generated forward transmission in the classroom or office environment. Indeed, spending fewer hours in structured settings may paradoxically increase time spent in unstructured settings

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that are at higher risk of transmission. Therefore, we recommend that non-educational and social gatherings that bring staff and students together outside of educational activities follow current public health guidance.

The vast majority of post-secondary students and staff have stepped up and received their vaccinations. While transmission can occur in any setting, high immunization rates and sector-wide measures such as masking in the post-secondary communities have enabled a lower risk environment in support of in-person instruction. The primary concern with the Omicron variant is the potential for faculty, staff, and students to be absent for short periods of time due to illness. Therefore, it is important for your institutions to periodically review and update your business continuity plans.

Limiting on-campus instruction, on the other hand, has been associated with [significant negative consequences for post-secondary students](#), who reported significantly poorer and worsening mental health outcomes and greater negative impacts than other British Columbians. Students and families are concerned about missing out on enriching experiences of post-secondary education. Indeed, many are distressed during this key developmental stage in their lives.

The experience post-secondary institutions across BC have with successfully returning to on campus learning in the fall of 2021 should guide our return in 2022 and indeed 17 institutions have resumed on campus learning already. We have the tools to effectively manage cases and outbreaks of COVID-19 if and when they occur and to continue to provide the essential educational and research experiences that students, staff and faculty need.

Public health remains committed to providing evidence-informed advice to manage COVID-19. We expect that COVID-19 will transition from a pandemic to an endemic state over the coming months. Our epidemiological data shows that we are past the peak of the current wave in terms of community transmission, and hospitalizations are plateauing. New variants will undoubtedly emerge as SARS-CoV-2 continues to circulate globally. We will continue to monitor for emerging evidence and continue to offer a preventive approach that supports the best public health outcomes for students, staff, and faculty. I encourage you to promote vaccination and other prevention measures outlined in the [COVID-19 Return-to-Campus Guidelines](#) as well as your institutional communicable disease prevention plan among your faculty, staff, and students. These measures have been effective at preventing COVID-19 in a wide variety of post-secondary settings and will continue to support successful on-campus instruction.

Thank you again for the ongoing collaboration with Public Health and your efforts to enable on-campus education. I am grateful for the tremendous contribution from your membership to the economic, social, and cultural well-being of our province, and the health and wellbeing of our young generation in particular.

Sincerely,



Bonnie Henry  
MD, MPH, FRCPC  
Provincial Health Officer

Cc Honourable Anne Kang, Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training  
Shannon Baskerville, Deputy Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training  
Max Blouw, President Research Universities' Council of BC  
Ruth Wittenberg President, BC Association of Institutes and Universities  
Colin Ewart, President BC Colleges  
Honourable Adrian Dix, Minister of Health  
Stephen Brown, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health  
Chief Medical Health Officers, Regional Health Authorities  
Chief Medical Officer, First Nations Health Authority  
Deputy Provincial Health Officers