

# 10% Absenteeism in Schools

Schools are an important partner in monitoring and preventing the spread of illness. The COVID-19 pandemic has required that changes be made to the way symptoms of communicable diseases are managed in schools. Below are important changes to AHS processes for absenteeism in schools.

## Outbreak identification: Typical process before the COVID-19 pandemic

Prior to the 2020/21 school year, an outbreak may have been suspected in a school when student absence due to illness was equal to or greater than 10%. School administrators were asked to report these instances to their local public health team, or the data was shared automatically through ARTSSN\*. AHS would then provide information and recommendations to assist school staff in preventing spread of illness, assess if any testing was needed, decide if an outbreak should be opened, and send letters of information to staff, students, and parents/guardians, if relevant.

## Outbreak identification: Processes during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the 2020-21 school year, students and school staff are asked to complete a daily health screening and stay home if they are ill. Therefore, it is less likely that unknown illness will be identified through school attendance records.

## How should school administrators report student illness equal to or greater than 10%?

- **Schools on the ARTSSN\* system** should follow their regular process. They do not need to call AHS.
- **Schools not on the ARTSSN\* system:** In new instances of student absence due to illness equal to or greater than 10%, school administrators should call the Coordinated Early Identification and Response (CEIR) phone line at **1-844-343-0971**.
  - For absence due to illness that extends consecutive school days, it is not necessary to make repeat calls to the phone line.

## What should school administrators do if they consistently have more than 10% absenteeism?

- There are many reasons why children may not attend school, including isolation and quarantine related to COVID-19.
- If the school administrator believes that students are absent for COVID-19 related reasons, there is no need to call the CEIR unless additional support is required.
- If school administrators do not know the symptoms that students are experiencing, they should still call the CEIR for information and support.

- School administrators are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the [Alberta's K to 12 School Re-entry Guidance](#) for the most up to date information on the management of COVID-19 symptoms and cases in schools.

#### What will happen when school administrators call the CEIR phone line?

- A health professional will ask about the symptoms that are most common in students, if known.
    - If symptoms are primarily respiratory, the school administrator will be asked to encourage testing for COVID-19 and given advice about other disease prevention strategies.
    - If symptoms are related to nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea, Environmental Public Health support may be offered to minimize the risk of spread or illness.
    - If illness is related to rash, Communicable Disease Control support will be offered to minimize the risk of spread or illness.
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#### \*What is ARTSSN?

- The Alberta Real Time Syndromic Surveillance Net (ARTSSN) is a public health disease surveillance system.
- The main purpose of the school absenteeism data in ARTSSN is to act as an early warning signal that an outbreak may be occurring. The information can also be used for routine monitoring, or during an outbreak investigation to answer questions such as when the outbreak began or started tapering off, or whether other nearby schools are also affected.
- There are more than 800 Kindergarten to Grade 6 (K-6) schools from across Alberta that provide data to ARTSSN.
- Schools that participate in ARTSSN do not have to notify AHS of absenteeism because the data is transferred automatically from the school each day.
- Schools interested in joining ARTSSN can email [AHS.publichealthsurveillance@albertahealthservices.ca](mailto:AHS.publichealthsurveillance@albertahealthservices.ca).