



Reopening NWT schools safely

Planning for the 2020-2021 school year

Protecting the health and safety of residents and communities of the Northwest Territories is the highest priority of the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT).

In order to ensure the health and safety of our students and educational staff during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, schools will be required to meet the recommendations of the NWT Chief Public Health Officer (CPHO) and the requirements of the Worker's Safety and Compensation Commission (WSCC) while supporting the learning and well-being of all NWT students.

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) is assisting all NWT education bodies and the Northwest Territories' Teachers Association (NWTTA) with coordinated, system-wide planning for the upcoming school year, based on the detailed criteria provided by the CPHO on how to safely reopen schools in [Emerging Wisely: Path to Eased Public Health Restrictions](#).

Based on the continually evolving situation of COVID-19, the upcoming 2020-2021 school year will not be a return to normal for educational staff and students. Most classrooms will be arranged differently, students and staff will need to use masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE), and there will be new rules to enforce hygiene and physical distancing.

Although teachers and school staff will be doing everything they can to ensure school continues to be a safe, supportive and inclusive environment, it is likely going to look and feel different for everyone. We also recognize there will be challenges for both students and staff in returning to school after a lengthy break from classroom-based learning, and that the social and emotional needs of students will need to be prioritized throughout the transition back into school.

While we cannot control or predict the realities of the pandemic, we are committed to ensuring that learning continues for all NWT students, regardless of the circumstances. Schools are building flexibility into their planning to prepare for a possible second wave of COVID-19, both to ensure that schools are able to remain open as much as possible and that teachers can adapt models of learning to the changing COVID-19 situation.

This plan outlines how we intend to approach continuing education for all NWT students during the 2020-2021 school year while prioritizing the health, safety and well-being of all students, staff and communities.



Our priorities

The GNWT is working diligently with all of our education partners to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students in the 2020-2021 school year and beyond.

Education leaders have agreed on the following priorities for the 2020-2021 school year:

- Maintaining the health and safety of students, staff and communities
- Starting the school year on time
- Maximizing in-person learning, to the degree possible
- Seeking equity across regions
- Maintaining financial supports to schools and the programs they offer
- Supporting JK-12 continuity of learning regardless of how the pandemic evolves

Planning process

Education bodies are required to prepare rigorous reopening plans for each individual school. These plans must be reviewed by the Office of the CPHO (OCPHO) and WSCC forms need to be completed and available on site before schools can reopen. ECE has worked with the OCPHO to develop guidelines, templates and checklists to help education bodies with this planning process, and these guidelines continue to be updated as we adapt to emerging public health information.

The objectives of this planning are as follows:

- Prioritize student, staff and community health, safety and well-being
- Ensure all health and safety measures as required by the CPHO and WSCC are effectively implemented
- Promote practices to reduce transmission of the virus and support our capacity to be responsive and flexible in response to changing health circumstances
- Ensure learning continues for all students, regardless of circumstances

Through the planning process, education bodies are determining areas where additional resources may be needed, such as classroom space, PPE, staffing needs, and capacity for online distance learning, and working together to find solutions.

Education leaders may also develop additional health and safety requirements for all schools to ensure consistency across the JK-12 system. These additions will enhance rather than duplicate OCPHO and WSCC requirements.



What parents and students can expect

All NWT schools have submitted plans for approval by the OCPHO to reopen their doors for the 2020-2021 school year. Schools are striving to provide a safe way for students to receive as much in-person, curriculum-based instructional time in classrooms with teachers as possible, with new health and safety procedures and restrictions in place.

How education is delivered will be different for each school and community, based on factors such as school size and layout, grade levels taught, the number of students and staff, access to technology, and the unique needs of individual students, including those who are at-risk or have complex needs.

To accommodate physical distancing requirements for different grades, some schools will need to use learning spaces other than classrooms, possibly outside of the school. Education bodies have been working with community governments, organizations and agencies to identify appropriate and available spaces for this purpose. Other schools are looking to address space shortages by having students learning in shifts, with some students attending classes in the morning and others in the afternoon, or on alternating days. Changes in attendance will affect bussing schedules, and schools are working to address these arising needs.

While details on specific health and safety measures will vary from school to school, there are some general measures that will be enacted in schools across the NWT to help maintain physical distancing. The following sections outline the various measures that parents, students and communities can expect to see at schools during the 2020-2021 school year.

Continued learning & wellness supports

- Schools will provide full-time in-person learning whenever possible and safe to do so.
- Schools will ensure that opportunities for learning continue at home or on the land for the portion of the school day that students cannot be in school.
- Students who cannot attend school will receive remote learning and ongoing contact from school staff to supplement in-school instruction.
- Counselling programming will continue remotely and potentially in-person.
- Focus will be placed on mental health supports, including for those learning remotely.
- Focus will be placed on self-regulation and social/emotional learning to help students cope with changes in school.
- Food programs will continue to be available with additional health and safety, physical distancing and hygiene measures in place.



- Changes to instructional time and curriculum requirements may be required in light of the continuing COVID-19 situation and the strains placed on teachers, students, parents, guardians and education bodies.

Increased health & safety measures

- Parents will be asked to monitor their children daily for symptoms and not send them to school if they are sick. A screening process will be developed and people who are sick will not be allowed in school. If students become sick at school, they will be quickly isolated, parents will be contacted and the student will be sent home.
- Students will be required to wash their hands frequently, including before coming to school. They will have access to hand sanitizer when hand washing is not available.
- Schools will be disinfected more frequently, including classrooms and high touch areas.
- Schools may stagger drop-off and pick-up times and modify lunch, recess and break times to limit gatherings and promote physical distancing.
- Schools will have designated entrances and exits, and restrict/manage flow in hallways and common areas with floor markings and/or physical barriers.
- Students will be asked to label personal items and not share, including food.
- There will be no assemblies, and there will be limitations on gatherings.
- There will be changes to student transportation, in line with recommendations by the CPHO. Every student must wear a mask on the bus, and there may also be scheduling changes.
- Parents, guardians and visitors will have limited access to schools to reduce potential exposure
- There will be changes to emergency evacuation procedures, fire drills and lockdown procedures.
- Students will get frequent reminders to minimize physical contact with their friends while remaining socially connected.
- Some classrooms and instructional time will also look different, with:
 - Increased spacing between desks and other furniture
 - Physical distancing for Grades 7-12
 - Possibly more time spent learning outside
 - Non-medical masks for students, whenever physical distance cannot be maintained
 - Face shields for teachers and other school staff
 - Changes to school schedules and hours of instruction

Regular communication

Students and their families will be kept informed of any changes and receive ongoing, regular updates from their schools and education bodies. Updates will be made available on school and



district websites, social media and letters home. Details of school-specific reopening plans will be available once approved by the OCPHO. An Education Bulletin for 2020-2021 will also be released outlining any new or adapted processes prior to the start of the school year.

Learning approaches

Schools are building flexibility into their reopening plans to account for the ongoing and evolving challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that students are able to continue learning no matter the circumstances. This means having flexible models of learning that will allow students to access education in a variety of ways, either at home, at school or on the land, while ensuring equity and inclusion.

In order to ensure learning continues for all students, schools will:

- Prioritize full-time in-person learning whenever it is safe and possible to do so
- Ensure distance learning continues for those who require it, in the short or long term
- Allow for a blended learning model that combines in-person with coordinated distance learning

In-person learning

All NWT schools are striving to provide a safe way for students to learn in person at school for the 2020-2021 school year as much as possible. In-person learning ensures that our students will receive as much time as possible in classrooms with teachers, through our usual method of schooling with additional safety guidelines in place.

For Grades JK-6, in-person learning will be easier to provide, as there are fewer rules about physical distancing for younger children. For Grades 7 to 12, there are stricter requirements for physical distancing, which may make full-time, in-person learning more of a challenge to provide. See below for a section on what to expect for different grade levels.

Blended learning

While full-time in-person learning is the priority, in situations where that is not possible, education will be delivered through a blended learning approach. This will mean the student is learning part time in school, as well as part time at home or on the land.

A blended learning model where in-person learning is combined with coordinated distance learning will allow for physical distancing to help reduce the risks of spreading COVID-19, while at the same time allowing some interaction between students and staff, depending on circumstances.



Blended learning may be done in a variety of ways, such as through staggered, alternating or part-time schedules for in-person learning and a virtual platform or paper packages for distance learning.

Example: *A student attends school in the mornings and then returns home in the afternoons to do school work virtually or with take-home paper packages.*

Distance learning

Distance learning happens outside of the school, either at home or on the land. For the 2020-2021 school year, it is expected that only students who are unable to physically attend school (e.g. due to health conditions or because they are 19 years or older) will be full-time distance learning.

While all schools are expected to reopen for in-person or blended learning, if conditions require schools to close or staff/students to stay home, distance learning will be activated. For example, if multiple teachers become sick and cannot enter the school, students will likely need to stay home and learn at a distance for a short time. Students will learn at a distance, either at home or on the land, using one or more of the following methods:

- Online learning
- Telephone/email check in and follow up
- Paper-based learning packages

Recognizing the importance of being able to adapt quickly to a changing COVID-19 situation, the GNWT is looking at ways to increase schools' capacity to support at-home and land-based learning. For example, to support at-home learning, students will be invited to engage in activities that build on the instruction they receive at school through project and inquiry-based learning. To support land-based learning, students will be encouraged to take their learning outside and experience the many lessons the land has to offer through seasonal and traditional skill-building activities with family and Elders.

Scaling up and down

Each school is readying itself to be able to scale up or down to another learning approach if the COVID-19 situation changes and the NWT shifts to another phase of the Emerging Wisely plan.

In smaller schools, it is likely that students will be safely accommodated within the existing space and will not need to rely as much on distance learning. However, larger schools with more staff and students will have a harder time delivering the full extent of educational programming full-time within the school space due to mandatory physical distancing requirements, and may need to focus



more on blended or distance learning for their students. These details will be laid out in each school's reopening plan for the 2020-2021 school year. All schools are working to provide as much in-person learning as possible for all students.

Education delivery by grade level

Recommendations from the CPHO lay out different public health advice and restrictions depending on a person's age. Because young children are seen to be at the lowest risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19, there are fewer physical distancing requirements for elementary students than there are for junior and senior secondary students. Schools must put in place physical distancing requirements for Grades 7-12, but not for Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6 (JK-6).

Students in JK-6 won't have to practice physical distancing while in their classroom 'bubble', but will have to take additional precautions outside of their bubble - for example, in the hallway or on the bus.

While situations will vary from school to school, the following sections explain how education delivery will generally look based on grade/age.

JK-Grade 6

- Full time, in-person instruction
- No physical distancing inside the classroom bubble. Students maintain physical distance of 1-2 metres when outside of the classroom
- Changes to classrooms to maximize safety, such as removal of materials that cannot be easily cleaned (e.g. toys, sand or water-tables), modifications to gathering circles, etc.
- Use of non-medical masks when physical distance cannot be maintained, such as when moving through the hallways to the washroom or riding the bus
- Assigned doors for exit and entrance
- Changes in the school, such as sanitation stations for hand cleaning, additional signage and plexiglass barriers

Grades 7-9

- Full time in-person learning, or blended learning when necessary
- Physical distancing of 1 metre between students and 2 metres between students and staff
- Assigned doors for exit and entrance
- Changes in the school, such as sanitation stations for hand cleaning, additional signage and plexiglass barriers
- Students will be encouraged to keep personal belongings with them to limit locker access



- No communal food or student spares, and staggering of breaks, exits and entry times
- Use of non-medical masks when physical distance cannot be maintained, such as when moving through the hallways to the washroom or riding the bus

Grades 10-12

- Full time in-person learning, or blended learning when necessary
- Physical distancing of 2 metres between students and staff
- Assigned doors for exit and entrance
- Changes in the school, such as sanitation stations for hand cleaning, additional signage and plexiglass barriers
- Students will be encouraged to keep personal belongings with them to limit locker access
- No communal food or student spares, and staggering of breaks, exits and entry times
- Use of non-medical masks when physical distance cannot be maintained, such as when moving through the hallways to the washroom or riding the bus

Students aged 19 years and over

The OCPHO has specified that students aged 19 years and over must learn remotely, for their safety and the safety of others. These students will be supported through distance learning, using one or more of the methods identified above. Alternate learning programs or night classes should only be open to youth aged 18 and under.

Indigenous languages and land-based learning

To make sure education remains accessible, equitable and culturally relevant for NWT students, ECE is collaborating closely with education partners to ensure that Indigenous education and Indigenous languages remain integral components of school programming despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

The *Dene Kede*, *Inuuqatigiit* and *Our Languages* curricula will continue to be taught, whether through distance, blended and in-person learning scenarios. These curricula provide innovative practices for language use and share information on Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, being and believing. In addition to these curricula, the new *Indigenous Languages and Education Handbook* highlights promising practices to help create learning environments that centre, respect and promote Indigenous worldviews, cultures and languages of the community in which the school is located.



Continuity of learning guides have also been provided to help teachers support students and families with language, culture and land-based learning for students receiving education through blended or distance learning approaches.

Ensuring student needs are met

Food programming and counselling will continue to be available to students whether in-person or at a distance. Students who have Support Plans or Individual Education Plans can expect to have these supports continue in the 2020-2021 school year. Support Assistants will continue to work with students using physical distancing and/or personal protective equipment.

Parents can expect to hear from school staff about renewing Student Support Plans and Individual Education Plans following the school's usual schedule. These meetings will likely be held virtually, or by telephone.

Staying flexible in changing circumstances

Although we cannot control the circumstances of the pandemic, which could require a school to close temporarily, ECE will be supporting education bodies to reopen schools and keep them open as much as possible during the 2020-2021 school year. If there are new COVID-19 cases, every effort will be made to keep schools open.

Schools provide benefits that are difficult or impossible to replicate through a distance learning approach. These include important things like social development, support for complex needs, access to healthy food, learning through peer interaction, and the belonging and safety that schools provide for many children and youth. Keeping schools open as much as possible will better support our students, especially vulnerable children and youth and those who need additional structure.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a dynamic situation and plans may need to change as new information or new public health and workplace safety requirements are identified. Education bodies are taking a flexible approach in their planning to account for a potential second wave of COVID-19 in the fall of 2020, which includes measures to ensure schools are able to remain open, to the extent possible, if there are new COVID-19 cases in the NWT and that, regardless of circumstances, students will continue to learn.

Schools are preparing to move between in-person, distance and blended learning at a moment's notice, should the NWT return to a more or less restrictive phase of the Emerging Wisely plan. Parents, guardians, students and communities should be prepared for student learning to change quickly in response to evolving circumstances; for instance, if multiple teachers become ill, if there



is a possible or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak at school, or if we return to the Containment Phase of Emerging Wisely as a territory and rules around physical distancing become more strict.

Should there be a case of COVID-19 in the school, parents should be prepared for their child(ren) to be sent home quickly and for contact tracing to be done before schools can reopen. Should a child develop symptoms at school, they will be isolated safely and parents will be contacted to pick them up. If a number of school staff are impacted by COVID-19, school closure may become necessary.

When schools cannot be open full time to all students, students in JK-6 will be the priority for full-time in-person schooling along with those in Grade 12, to ensure they are prepared for post-secondary opportunities.

For more information

The GNWT is committed to providing regular updates to the public as plans move forward for the upcoming school year. ECE will continue to ensure up-to-date information on JK-12 education is made available to parents and students, both online and through schools and education bodies.

All schools are working to have their detailed reopening plans approved by the OCPHO as soon as possible. The details of these will be made available by schools and education bodies once those plans are reviewed and approved.

For information on COVID-19 related to JK-12 schools, visit the following or contact your local education body:

- [Emerging Wisely: Path to Eased Public Health Restrictions](#)
- [GNWT COVID-19 Response - Child care, school and learning](#)
 - [Information on JK-12 Schools](#)
 - [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Directory of NWT Education Bodies](#)