

COVID and the 2021-2022 School Year:

Schools and Childcare providers fill essential functions in our society including education, child care, provision of nutrition and physical and mental health. Federal and State public health entities have deferred decision making about mitigation in schools to “local health authorities.” As healthcare providers working with schools in our County we present the following as recommendations and healthcare advice to open up schools and childcare centers safely for the 2021-2022 school year.

As opposed to the 2020-2021 school year that offered a tiered structure for reopening schools based on average daily case rates in the community, new evidence supports that schools should be open to in-person learning even at very high levels of COVID-19 transmission provided that schools implement strict strategies of mitigation and infection control.

After review of the latest infectious disease data and consistent with the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics, we recommend the following interventions be in place for schools and childcare centers at the start of the 2021-2022 school year:

- Schools and childcare centers should use metrics of community spread as general points of information, not on-off switches for closure and opening, and should focus their own attention on measuring any in-school transmission and the quality of their infection-control regime.
- All staff, teachers and children should be universally masked, regardless of vaccination status, except when eating or outdoors. This includes transport to and from school on any school-sponsored transportation, including buses, and all indoor extracurricular activities including athletics.
- Schools should provide masks and hand sanitizer for any staff or student who needs them.
- Hand and bathroom hygiene as recommended by the CDC should be in place similar to the prior school year
- When levels of community spread rise above 100 per 100,000 daily new cases as measured by PA DOH, schools should try to maintain consistent, 3 feet of social distancing for young learners (childcare and elementary schools) at all levels of community spread and 6 feet of social distancing for secondary schools.
- School should recommend their staff and eligible students be vaccinated, if eligible, and should provide posted, accurate information on vaccines, and ways to get vaccinated. Staff or parents who have concerns about vaccine safety should be directed to their primary care provider, the CDC information on vaccines or the CHOP Vaccine Education Center: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/safety/safety-of-vaccines.html>
<https://www.chop.edu/centers-programs/vaccine-education-center/making-vaccines/prevent-covid>

- Staff or students who are exposed to COVID-19 and who are fully vaccinated should monitor symptoms closely, and get tested day 2-5 after exposure. They may continue to come to school/childcare unless they develop any symptoms of COVID-19 as long as they are wearing a mask.
- Staff and students who have any symptoms of COVID-19 should stay home, get tested for COVID-19, and return only after symptoms have begun to resolve.
- Staff or students who test positive for COVID-19 should isolate for 10 days prior to returning to school.
- Schools should continue their robust quarantine and isolation policies and in concert with the Pennsylvania Department of Health, make decisions about when to exclude students from in-school and extracurricular activities. Where feasible schools should enact surveillance/screening testing.
- Schools should achieve 4-6 air changes per hour of 'clean' air through any combination of ventilation and filtration (or outdoor classrooms)
- Schools should provide support for students who must stay home due to illness. Attendance policies should not be punitive for parents or students who miss schools due to COVID-19 risk mitigation. Online school-work and make-up opportunities should be provided as well as any other support the student may need due to absence.
- COVID-19 policies, including universal masking, should be reviewed by a designated COVID-19 task force for each district every two weeks. These reviews should consult current Pennsylvania Department of Health and CDC recommendations, local and national disease burden, and any staffing concerns when making decisions to renew, discontinue, or change any policies. School district community members including parents should be updated after each task review. Task force meeting dates/times should be publicized and allow for interested party attendance.
- Student and staff mental health should be of particular concern of school districts. Each district should provide increased support for mental health concerns in their school community, and should incorporate strategies such as increased arts exposure, increased outdoor time, small emotional support groups, and one on one counseling which have been shown to be effective in improving mental health of all ages.

Schools in Lancaster County have shown that through effective mitigation and infection control policies the risk to students, teachers and staff for in-person learning is minimal. Nationally, schools have shown lower cumulative rates of positive COVID-19 infections for in-person students as compared to what is happening in their community. As the more-transmissible Delta Variant surges in our community, we need to continue research proven strategies of mitigation and infection control to keep our children and staff safe from COVID-19 while providing them with the education and mental health support they need.

References:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html>

<https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/SchoolReopeningGuidance/ReopeningPreKto12/CDCGuidanceInformation/Pages/default.aspx>

<https://sites.ed.gov/roadmap/landmark1/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/masks/mask-travel-guidance.html>