Updated CDC Guidance on Reopening Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic

An updated Review of Guidance for School District

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Office of K-12 Outreach
College of Education
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Schooling During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Pandemic Updates

"Everything possible must be done to keep students in schools in-person." The American Academy of Pediatrics[2]

Unfortunately, since our first reopening with mitigation publication, the pandemic has continued to be a constant problem. Since the start of the pandemic, the total number of cases in the US grown to almost 35 million with a total of over 610,000 deaths. In Michigan, there have been over 1 million cases and over 21,000 deaths.[1]

Despite the challenges and threats to public health and safety, returning to school in person is a top priority. The statement at left by the American Academy of Pediatrics reflects the urgency of returning students to classrooms. School benchmark assessment data show significant declines in rates of learning among many groups of students during the pandemic when compared with their peer groups in previous years.[3]

Fortunately, safe and effective vaccines are now available to people 12 years of age and older. The major vaccines in use in the United States (Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson and Johnson) have been shown to be "remarkably good" at preventing serious illness.[4] While vaccination rates grew steadily after shots were first available, rates have now stalled across the country. Across the US, 58.1% of those eligible are fully vaccinated. In Michigan, only 48.8% of the population is fully vaccinated. Across the state, full vaccination rates vary widely from 37.8% in Cass County to76.9% in Leelenau County.[5]

The Delta Variant

The new Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus now accounts for over 80% of all COVID cases in the United States.[6] Initial research shows that is much more contagious than the original COVID-19 virus. Estimates of just how much more contagious Delta is are varying– from an estimate that one infected person will infect up to 6 others to a higher estimate that one infected person can transmit Delta to 9 others.[7] This is likely due to the finding that people infected with the Delta variant carry 1,000 times more virus than those infected with the original COVID virus. COVID virus.[8]

"It is one of the most infectious respiratory viruses we know of and that I have seen in my 20-year career," Dr. Rochelle Walensky, Director of the Center for Disease Control[9]

A person infected with the Delta variant can infect up to 5 to 9 people.[12]

Delta is spreading 50% faster than the original COVID virus.[13]

Further, a study in the Lancet indicated that Delta carried a two-fold increase in risk of hospitalization when compared with the original virus.[10] Further, an internal memo at the CDC provides indication that this new mutation is more likely to lead to hospitalization among unvaccinated people[11] (CDC).

The encouraging news is that early data indicate that the Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson and Johnson vaccines protect not only against infection but also against serious illness, hospitalization, and death.[14] Research is currently being conducted on how these three vaccines protect against the Delta variant. Initial data indicates that Johnson and Johnson might be less effective in preventing severe disease and hospitalization, but more research is needed.[15]

The Need to Reopen Schools

There is no way to guarantee that schools can reopen with a guarantee that transmission of the virus will not occur. However, research over the past year does indicate that schools can be open safely with mitigation to reduce the likelihood of transmission.[16] Studies from three states, North Carolina, Utah, and Missouri showed that when districts layered multiple COVID mitigation strategies, infection rates in schools were lower than those in their communities. Mitigation strategies used included "masking, symptom screening, distancing, improved ventilation, virus testing, handwashing and dividing students into smaller groups."[17]

Further, evidence on the negative impact of the pandemic on student learning is clear. While students attending remote learning did show growth in academic achievement over the course of the year, gains were lower than expected and differences were more acute for the most vulnerable students[18]

These factors contributed to both the CDC and the AAP recommend that districts prioritize in-person learning for the fall.

"***When you have masks and even three-foot distancing, you are not going to see major outbreaks in schools***," Dr. Yvonne Maldonado, Stanford Medicine and Chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Infectious Diseases. (NYT DV in schools)[19]

The American Academy Pediatrics ***"believes that, at this point in the pandemic, given what we know about low rates of in-school transmission when proper prevention measures are used, together with the availability of effective vaccines for those age 12 years and up, that the benefits of in-person school outweigh the risks in almost all circumstances."[20]***

Academic Supports for Students

"If you have one teacher with 33 kids, that is not going to be a recipe for addressing" **students' individual learning needs that resulted from the pandemic."** Dr. Pedro Noguera, University of Sothern California Rossier School of Education[24]

Equity and a strengths-based approach are important foundations for welcoming students back into school. Educators should be careful to avoid making assumptions that staying at home was automatically a negative experience for children of color.[21] And while standardized test scores may have shown differences between children in any given grade last year and their earlier peers, children of all ages learned many things outside of the materials tested by formal exams.[22] Experts are urging that districts use individualized assessments for students to gauge where each child is as they return to school.[23] These results could then provide the foundation for individualized learning for each student, such as small group tutoring.

Given the influx of American Recovery Funds to districts such measures such as individualized or group tutoring may be within districts' reach.

CDC Updates -- Masks

In Classrooms

On July 9, 2021, the CDC updated their guidance on mask wearing. The new guidance, that all people over the age of 2 regardless of vaccination status should wear masks at all times when indoors unless the individual meets stringent criteria for exceptions.[25]

The CDC guidance also covers how to handle exceptions to masking requirements inside of schools. They state, "Exceptions can be made for the following categories of people:

- A person who cannot wear a mask, or cannot safely wear a mask, because of a disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (42 U.S.C. 12101 et seq.). Discuss the possibility of reasonable accommodationexternal icon with workers who are unable to wear or have difficulty wearing certain types of masks because of a disability.
- A person for whom wearing a mask would create a risk to workplace health, safety, or job duty as determined by the relevant workplace safety guidelines or federal regulations."[26]

Outdoors

The CDC highlights that currently research shows most **outdoor settings do not need masks**, unless there are substantial to high levels of community transmission and the outdoor setting is crowded and the vaccination status of all present cannot be known.[28]

"Given new evidence on the B.1.617.2 (Delta) variant, CDC has updated the guidance for fully vaccinated people. ***CDC recommends universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 schools, regardless of vaccination status***."[27]

On School Transportation

The CDC issued a direct order that affects school busing. The order continues to be in effect and states, the "**CDC's Order** applies to all public transportation conveyances including school buses. Passengers and drivers must wear a mask on school buses, including on buses operated by public and private school systems, regardless of vaccination status, subject to the exclusions and exemptions in CDC's Order."[29]

CDC Updates -- Other Mitigation Procedures

While evidence continues to indicate that transmission in school settings is low, the CDC lists promoting vaccination among students and staff as a key strategy to mitigate transmission of COVID in schools. The CDC provides resources to support districts in their communication with their school population about vaccination.[30]

Many aspects of the CDC guidance on safely reopening schools remain the same. Districts are encouraged to work with local health departments to develop layered mitigation approach appropriate for their districts. Factors to be considered in choosing which and how many mitigation strategies to layer include if the district has a COVID screening regimen in place, community transmission levels, and student/staff vaccination rates (CDC guidance).[31]

Mitigation Strategies[32]

- Universal mask wearing
- Physical distancing
- Screening
- Increasing ventilation
- Handwashing/respiratory etiquette.
- Don't come to school sick
- Contact Tracing
- Regular cleaning

Key changes from the CDC on mitigation are:[33]

- Regular disinfection processes are sufficient to control COVID, there is *no need for additional COVID cleaning measures at this point*.
- In cases *where physical distancing measures* cannot be met, districts "*should not exclude students from in-person learning* to keep a minimum distance requirement."
- Given that COVID transmission is unlikely from shared surfaces, *food services* "*do not need to use single use items and packaged meals*."

CDC Updates – School Activities of Special Concern

The CDC suggests that districts consider screening of participants in high risk school activities, defined as those "that involve singing, shouting, band, and exercise that could lead to increased exhalation.[34] Table 1 at right for an overview screening protocols recommended by the CDC. The CDC further suggests, "high-risk sports and extracurricular activities should be virtual or canceled in areas of high community transmission unless all participants are fully vaccinated." The CDC suggests these steps to "avoid jeopardizing in-person education due to outbreaks."[35]

Table 1. Screening Testing Recommendations for K-12 Schools by Level of Community Transmission

	Low Transmission[1] Blue	Moderate Transmission Yellow	Substantial Transmission Orange	High Transmission Red
Students	Do not need to screen students.	**Offer screening testing for students** who are not fully vaccinated at least once per week.		
Teachers and staff	**Offer screening testing for teachers and staff** who are not fully vaccinated at least once per week.			
High risk sports and activities	**Recommend screening testing for high-risk sports[2] and extracurricular activities[3]** at least once per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.		**Recommend screening testing for high-risk sports and extracurricular activities** twice per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.	**Cancel or hold high-risk sports and extracurricular activities virtually** to protect in-person learning, unless all participants are fully vaccinated.
Low- and intermediate-risk sports	Do not need to screen students participating in low- and intermediate-risk sports.[2]	**Recommend screening testing for low- and intermediate-risk sports** at least once per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.		

Image Credit[36]

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Talking Points

Shifting guidance on masking can provide challenges to district leadership in explaining why indoor masking requirements are reappearing. We suggest the following talking points.

- New evidence shows that vaccinated people can transmit the virus to others.[37]
- COVID-19, like most respiratory viruses, enters and exits our bodies through our noses which masks are so effective at preventing spread of the disease.[38]
- Evidence shows that people infected with the Delta variant, even those who have been fully immunized, carry much higher numbers of the virus which is why the Delta variant so much more contagious.[39]
- Since schools will reopen before all school aged children will be eligible for the vaccine, it is especially important to wear masks and layer other precaution measures to COVID transmission.[40]
- Vaccination remains the best way that we can do to reduce the risk of COVID in schools.[41]

The Michigan State University Office of K-12 Outreach

Collective Capacity Building and Leadership Development

The Office of K-12 Outreach, under the leadership of Director Dr. Bryan Beverly, has unmatched experience in developing and implementing customized support for schools and districts in Michigan seeking to turnaround their schools and rapidly improve student achievement. Our unique field-oriented service organization within the university brings a 20-year history of collaboration with schools and districts across the state. K-12 Outreach has experience working with school districts on topics ranging from staff professional development to central office transformations to equity, and it is available in this new environment to help districts plan for school re-opening.

K-12 Outreach is available to help districts plan for school re-opening.

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