

CORONAVIRUS – COVID19

YKHC OFFICIAL ADVISORY — November 18, 2021

COVID-19 Prevention Strategies for Safe In-Person Learning

Summary of recent changes

Schools play critical roles in promoting [equity](#) in learning and health, particularly for groups disproportionately affected by COVID-19– such as people living in rural areas, with disabilities, and who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino. In-person learning is a priority, and together we should make every effort to ensure students can safely return to the classroom.

Although COVID-19 outbreaks have occurred in school settings, multiple studies have shown that transmission rates in these settings are typically lower than or similar to community transmission levels when multiple prevention strategies are in place. YKHC continues to recommend layering numerous prevention strategies to keep transmission rates within school settings low, and to keep children in the classroom as often as possible.

The majority of YKHC’s recommendations for schools comes directly from the CDC in their [most recent update on August 4, 2021](#). Both the CDC and YKHC recommend masking for all students, faculty and staff regardless of vaccination status.

Prevention Strategies to Reduce Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in Schools

Schools will have a mixed population of both people who are fully vaccinated and people who are not fully vaccinated. **Elementary schools** primarily serve children under 12 years of age who are not eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine at this time. **Other schools** (e.g., middle schools, K-8 schools) may also have students who are not yet eligible for COVID-19 vaccination. **Some schools** (e.g., high schools) may have a low percentage of students and staff fully vaccinated. These variations require K-12 administrators to make decisions about the use of COVID-19 prevention strategies in their schools to protect people.

Since schools typically serve their surrounding communities, decisions should be based on the school population, families and students served, as well as their communities. The primary factors to consider include:

- Level of [community transmission](#) of COVID-19.
- [COVID-19 vaccination coverage](#) in the community and among students, teachers, and staff.
- Use of a frequent SARS-CoV-2 surveillance testing program for students, teachers, and staff who are not fully vaccinated.

- COVID-19 outbreaks or increasing trends in the school or surrounding community.
- Ages of children served by K-12 schools and the associated social and behavioral factors that may affect risk of transmission and the feasibility of different prevention strategies.

Multi-layered COVID-19 prevention strategies remain critical to protect students, teachers, and staff who are not fully vaccinated, especially in areas of moderate-to-high community transmission levels. The need for layering specific prevention strategies will vary, and localities might implement different COVID-19 prevention strategies based on community transmission levels, vaccination coverage, and local policies and regulations.

The CDC continues to recommend masking and physical distancing. If a school is considering whether and how to remove particular prevention strategies, it is recommended only one prevention strategy is removed at a time to closely monitor students, teachers, and staff for any outbreaks or increases in COVID-19 cases. Closely monitoring people can be achieved through adequate testing through the school or community.

In this document, YKHC provides guidance on when it might be safer to begin lifting some prevention strategies based on community vaccination rates and prevalence of COVID-19 in communities.

1. Promoting Vaccination

Achieving high levels of COVID-19 vaccination among eligible students, as well as teachers, staff, and household members, is one of the most critical ways to help schools safely resume full, in-person operations. Studies show the vaccine is very safe and highly effective at preventing severe illness and death from COVID-19, including variants of the virus.

To protect those who are not eligible for vaccination at this time, people should get vaccinated as soon as possible while maintaining other non-pharmaceutical interventions like masking and distancing to keep infection levels low.

To schedule an appointment or learn more about the vaccine, YK Delta residents can visit <https://www.ykhc.org/covid-19/vaccine/>.

2. Consistent and Correct Mask Use

YKHC recommends mask wearing for all individuals indoors regardless of vaccination status, including in school settings.

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Under these conditions, schools should continue to require all people older than 2 years of age to wear a mask but should make exceptions 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 accommodation](#) with workers who are not fully vaccinated 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.

When masks are worn by teachers and school staff in the workplace, the masks should meet one of the following criteria:

- [CDC mask recommendations](#)
- [ASTM International Standard Specification for Barrier Face Coverings](#)
- [NIOSH Workplace Performance and Workplace Performance Plus masks](#)

Mask use outdoors

Masks should be worn outdoors by unvaccinated individuals when within 6 feet of people who do not reside in their same household, and in crowded outdoor settings when physical distancing cannot be maintained or vaccination status is uncertain.

In areas that have had a case of COVID-19 in the past 10 days, YKHC recommends everyone, regardless of vaccination status, wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings or during activities that involve sustained close contact with people who are not fully vaccinated.

Mask use during school sports

YKHC recommends masking regardless of vaccination status for all school sports where physical distancing cannot be maintained, including indoor sports like basketball and wrestling. Masks are encouraged for vaccinated individuals who participate in outdoor sports.

Mask use during school transportation

The [CDC's order](#) for mask wearing applies to all public transportation, including school buses. This means passengers and drivers must wear a mask on school buses,

including on buses operated by public and private school systems, subject to specific exclusions and exemptions. Learn more [here](#).

3. Physical Distancing

Because of the importance of in-person learning, schools where not everyone is fully vaccinated should implement physical distancing to the extent possible, but should not exclude students from in-person learning to keep a minimum distance requirement. In general, CDC recommends students who are not fully vaccinated maintain [physical distance](#) of at least 6 feet from other people who do not reside in their same household. However, several [studies](#) from the 2020-2021 school year show low COVID-19 transmission levels among students in schools that had less than 6 feet of physical distance when the school implemented and layered other prevention strategies, such as the use of masks.

Based on studies from the 2020-2021 school year, CDC recommends schools maintain at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms. When it is not possible to maintain a physical distance of at least 3 feet, like if schools cannot fully re-open while maintaining these distances, it is especially important to layer multiple other prevention strategies. Other prevention strategies include indoor masking, surveillance testing, cohorting, improved ventilation, handwashing and covering coughs and sneezes, staying home when sick with symptoms of infectious illness including COVID-19, and regular cleaning to help reduce transmission risk.

Cohorting: Cohorting means keeping people together in a small group and having each group stay together throughout an entire day. Cohorting can be used to limit the number of students, teachers, and staff who come in contact with each other, especially when it is challenging to maintain physical distancing, such as among young children, and particularly in areas of moderate-to-high transmission levels. The use of cohorting can limit the spread of COVID-19 between cohorts but should not replace other prevention measures within each group. Cohorting people who are fully vaccinated and people who are not fully vaccinated into separate cohorts is not recommended. It is a school's responsibility to ensure that cohorting is done in an equitable manner that does not perpetuate academic, racial, or other tracking, as described in the U.S. Department of Education [COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 1](#). The ability to cohort should not outweigh the importance of in-person learning 5 days a week.

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4. Surveillance Testing

In K-12 schools, surveillance testing can help promptly identify and [isolate](#) cases, [quarantine](#) those who may have been exposed to COVID-19 and are not fully vaccinated, and identify clusters to reduce the risk to in-person education.

Weekly surveillance testing is recommended for unvaccinated students and staff. CDC guidance provides that people who are fully vaccinated do not require surveillance testing. However, fully vaccinated individuals may participate in on-going surveillance testing if case numbers are high in the community. All testing policies and procedures should comply with federal HIPPA privacy regulations. Any students or staff, regardless of vaccination status, who develop COVID-19 like symptoms should not be at school. They should isolate and seek testing at YKHC.

If testing is conducted through the school and not a community clinic, please notify YKHC immediately following a positive test to begin contact tracing and identification of close contacts. The State of Alaska must also be notified of all test results, positive and negative.

To facilitate safe participation in sports, extracurricular activities, and other activities with elevated risk schools may consider implementing surveillance testing for participants (including athletes, coaches, and trainers) who are not fully vaccinated 24 hours prior to competitions or events. Examples of other activities with elevated risk are those that involve singing, shouting, band, and exercise that could lead to increased exhalation. High-risk sports and extracurricular activities should be virtual or canceled in areas of high community transmission.

Funding provided through the ELC Reopening Schools award is primarily focused on providing needed resources to implement screening testing programs in schools aligned with the CDC recommendations. Learn more [ELC Reopening Schools: Support for Screening Testing to Reopen & Keep Schools Operating Safely Guidance](#).

5. Ventilation

Improving ventilation is an important COVID-19 prevention strategy that can reduce the number of virus particles in the air. Along with [other preventive strategies](#), including wearing a well-fitting, multi-layered mask, bringing fresh outdoor air into a building helps keep virus particles from concentrating inside. This can be done by opening multiple doors and windows, using child-safe fans to increase the effectiveness of open windows, and making changes to the HVAC or air filtration systems.

During transportation, open or crack windows in buses and other forms of transportation, if doing so does not pose a safety risk. Keeping windows open a few inches improves air circulation.

For more specific information about maintenance, use of ventilation equipment, actions to improve ventilation, and other ventilation considerations, refer to:

- [CDC's Ventilation in Schools and Child care Programs](#)
- [CDC's Ventilation in Buildings webpage](#)
- [CDC's Ventilation FAQs](#) and
- [CDC's Improving Ventilation in Your Home](#)

Additional ventilation recommendations for different types of school buildings can be found in the [American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers \(ASHRAE\) schools and universities guidance document](#).

Funds provided through the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Programs and the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Programs can support improvements to ventilation. Please see question B-7 of the [U.S. Department of Education Uses of Funds](#) guidance for these programs.

6. Handwashing and Respiratory Etiquette

People should practice handwashing and [respiratory etiquette](#) (covering coughs and sneezes). Schools can monitor and reinforce these behaviors and provide adequate handwashing supplies.

- Teach and reinforce [handwashing](#) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Remind everyone in the facility [to wash hands frequently](#) and assist young children with handwashing.
- If handwashing is not possible, use hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol (for teachers, staff, and older students who can safely use hand sanitizer). Hand sanitizers should be stored up, away, and out of sight of young children and should be used only with adult supervision for children under 6 years of age.

7. Staying Home When Sick and Getting Tested

Students, teachers, and staff who have symptoms such as cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, diarrhea, sinus congestion, chest pain, muscle aches should stay home and be referred to YKHC for testing. YKHC and the CDC strongly recommend maintaining symptom-free schools to prevent spread of COVID-19. If a student becomes sick at school

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see [What to do if a Student Becomes Sick or Reports a New COVID-19 Diagnosis at School](#).

CDC guidance suggests that people who are fully vaccinated and do not have COVID-19 symptoms, do not need to quarantine or get tested after an exposure to someone with COVID-19. It is essential that if children are showing signs and symptoms of COVID-19, parents keep them home and get them tested.

8. Contact Tracing in Combination with Isolation and Quarantine: Response to an Exposure at School

If a student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19 through a school-based testing program, YKHC's Contact Tracing team should be informed immediately. Unvaccinated close contacts, as defined below, will be required to quarantine and have two options for duration of isolation: (1) 10 days without testing or, (2) a test-based strategy with two consecutive negative tests on Day 6 and 7, with return to school on Day 8. Symptom monitoring should be performed for 14 days following the last day of exposure by all close contacts regardless of vaccination status.

Close Contact for K-12 Indoor Classrooms

Masks are essential to reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 for children, staff, and faculty. Students within 0-3 feet for more than 15 minutes or unmasked individual within 6 feet would be a considered close contact. An infected person can spread SARS-CoV-2 starting from 2 days before they have any symptoms (or, for asymptomatic patients, 2 days before the positive specimen collection date), until they meet the criteria for ending isolation. The CDC [does not include students within 3-6 feet of infected students inside classroom, if both infected student and exposed student correctly and consistently wore well-fitting masks the entire time](#).

[Fully vaccinated](#) people who were in close contact with someone in a school setting who has COVID-19, but do **not** have COVID-19 symptoms, do not need to quarantine. However, YKHC and the CDC recommend all close contacts, regardless of vaccination, test following an exposure. Vaccinated individuals should test on [Day 5-7 following exposure](#). Unvaccinated individuals should quarantine and test on Day 6 and 7. When unvaccinated close contacts are unable to separate from other household members, YKHC recommends the entire household quarantine. However, household members of close contacts are exempt from the

quarantine requirement in order to attend school. If anyone becomes symptomatic, they should immediately test and isolate.

For fully vaccinated household members with ongoing exposure to an individual with COVID-19, YKHC recommends the individual quarantine for the same length of time the index patient is in isolation. COVID-19 testing should occur on Day 1, followed by repeat testing on Day 3-5 and the end of quarantine. Symptom monitoring should also be performed for a full 14 days, following the last day of possible exposure. Vaccinated close contacts, who are not household members of the individual who tested positive for COVID-19, are not required to quarantine but should test on Day 3-5. Anyone who develops symptoms within 14 days of an exposure (regardless of vaccination status) should immediately self-isolate and seek testing. Local communities may decide to continue a 14-day quarantine for residents. Local travel or quarantine restrictions must still be followed. All persons should check with their local government and employer for further guidance.

YKHC will work with school officials to notify, to the extent allowable by applicable privacy laws, teachers, staff, and families of students who were close contacts as soon as possible (such as within the same day if possible) after they are notified that someone in the school has tested positive. See the [Department of Education's Protecting Student Privacy FERPA and the Coronavirus Disease 2019](#) for more information.

9. Cleaning and Disinfection

In general, cleaning once a day is usually enough to sufficiently remove potential virus that may be on surfaces. Disinfecting (using disinfectants on the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency COVID-19 list](#) removes any remaining germs on surfaces, which further reduces any risk of spreading infection.

For more information on cleaning a facility regularly, when to clean more frequently or disinfect, cleaning a facility when someone is sick, safe storage of cleaning and disinfecting products, and considerations for protecting workers who clean facilities, see [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#).

If a facility has had a sick person or someone who tested positive for COVID-19 within the last 24 hours, clean AND disinfect the space.