

Initial K-12 School Re-Opening Guidance for Families



Letter from Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley

August 21, 2020

Dear parents, caregivers, legal guardians, and families,

We know that the past few months have been incredibly challenging for our families and students. Parents and guardians stepped up in extraordinary ways to fill the gaps caused by the sudden school building closures as we transitioned overnight to remote learning. As we turn toward re-opening schools this fall, there are no easy answers, but I hope the following information will be helpful.

Our goal is to safely bring back into classrooms as many students as possible, following detailed health and safety requirements informed by public health experts. We know there is no substitute for in-person instruction, and we have worked diligently with our districts to develop a comprehensive plan for reopening that addresses three possible learning models based on local context and public health metrics: full in-person, hybrid, and full remote learning. The Department has provided all districts and schools with guidance that includes critical safety measures such as required mask-wearing, social distancing, hand washing breaks, transportation, additional school cleaning, and protocols for responding to COVID-19 cases in school settings.

Over the past several months, Massachusetts has seen rates of infections, hospitalizations, and fatalities fall, even as the virus remains a significant concern. As we all know, the COVID-19 context in Massachusetts is not static, and we will continue to monitor the situation closely. Our guidance about reopening schools this fall assumes health data remain stable, but districts' plans must include being ready to transition to a different learning model as needed based on public health metrics.

Districts were required to submit their plan to DESE, and we have reviewed each to make sure they are using the appropriate measures. Ultimately, it is up to each district to decide which learning model will be used this fall while meeting requirements for student learning time.

We appreciate your partnership and patience as we continue to navigate these difficult times.

Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner

School Re-Opening Guidance for Families

NOTE: Additional guidance shared with schools is available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop.html>

This guidance is the result of close collaboration with health experts and conversations with parents, teachers, school staff, and others, including our Return-to-School Working Group. The full, initial re-opening guidance for districts is posted online at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/return-to-school/>.

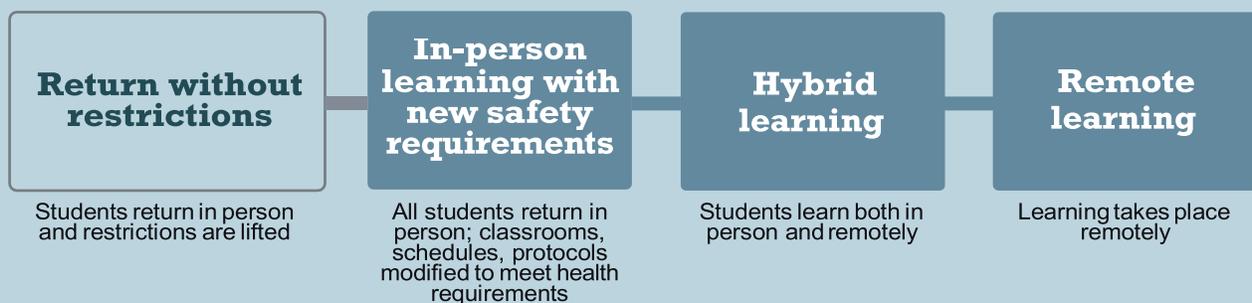
Our goal for the fall is to safely bring back as many students as possible, as soon as possible, to in-person learning.

Massachusetts has worked hard to bring down the rates of COVID-19 infection statewide, and in many cities and towns, the average daily case rates are low enough to allow all students to return to school in person. The Department of Public Health is tracking these rates and posting updates weekly.

Evidence suggests that in general, rates of COVID-19 infection are lower for children than for adults and that if exposed, children may be less likely to become infected with COVID-19. We will continue to track the evolving information on this new disease.

This fall, your child might start school remotely (learning at home), in-person full-time at school, or through a hybrid model that includes both time at home and time at school. Your district will decide which model makes the most sense for your community.

Continuum of Fall Re-Opening Models



Depending on the course of the virus, your school might shift from one form of learning to another over the course of the year. Districts have plans in place for all three types of learning. If the virus rates remain low in your community, we believe students will benefit most from in-person learning, but no matter which model your district chooses, families can choose remote learning if they feel that is best for their child.

Health and safety requirements and related guidance for in-person learning

If your child goes to school in person full- or part-time, they will need to follow new health and safety practices designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Masks:

All students in second grade and above are required to wear a mask, and school staff are required to wear masks. Students in kindergarten and grade 1 are encouraged to wear a mask/face covering.

- Students of all ages are required to wear masks on the school bus.
- Masks should be provided by the student/family, but schools should provide extra disposable face masks for students who need them. Students' reusable masks should be washed daily at home.

Physical Distancing:

Whenever feasible, schools should aim for a physical distance of 6 feet between people, with 3 feet being the minimum allowable distance and all desks facing the same direction.

Handwashing and Sanitizing:

Students and staff must wash hands when they arrive at school, before and after meals, after using the bathroom, after coughing or sneezing, and before dismissal.

- When washing their hands, everyone should use soap and water to wash all surfaces of their hands for at least 20 seconds, wait for visible suds, rinse thoroughly, and dry with a disposable towel.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent ethanol or at least 70 percent isopropanol for 20 seconds.

Student Groups:

Elementary schools should aim to keep students in the same group throughout the day, and middle and high schools are encouraged to minimize mixing student groups to the extent feasible. As part of this, your child might have a different schedule than usual and/or have lunch brought to their classroom instead of eating in the cafeteria.

Building Capacity:

In order to maintain physical distance between students, your child's school might hold classes in spaces that are not typically classrooms, such as in a gym or cafeteria, or even outside.

Families play a critical role in preventing the spread of COVID-19:

- ✓ **Check your children** daily for any COVID-19 symptoms.
- ✓ **Keep children home** from school if they are sick or have had close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19. Have a back-up plan ready in case your child wakes up with symptoms and needs to stay home.
- ✓ **Remind your child** to wear a mask in school and on the bus.
- ✓ **Arrange for transportation** other than the bus whenever possible.
- ✓ **Communicate with teachers and school leaders** if your child's health changes, if they come into contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19, or if you have concerns. Districts have plans in place for when a student receives a positive COVID-19 test or is a close contact of someone who tests positive.

¹ Davies, N.G., Klepac, P., Liu, Y. et al. Age-dependent effects in the transmission and control of COVID-19 epidemics. *Nat Med* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0962-9>

² Wei Li, Bo Zhang, Jianhua Lu, Shihua Liu, Zhiqiang Chang, Cao Peng, Xinghua Liu, Peng Zhang, Yan Ling, Kaixiong Tao, Jianying Chen, Characteristics of Household Transmission of COVID-19, *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, , ciaa450, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciaa450>

³ <http://www.sickkids.ca/PDFs/About-SickKids/81407-COVID19-Recommendations-for-School-Reopening-SickKids.pdf> (if masks are worn incorrectly, they may increase infection risk). See also: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/covid-wkxsf/what-we-know-public-masks-apr-7-2020.pdf?la=en>

⁴ WHO, Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19. (2020, May 10). Available at <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/considerations-for-school-related-public-health-measures-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

⁵ CDC, Hand Hygiene Recommendations. (2020, May 17). Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/hand-hygiene.html>

⁶ CDC, Hand Hygiene Recommendations. (2020, May 17). Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/hand-hygiene.html>

⁷ Kratzel, A., Todt, D., V'kovski, P., Steiner, S., Gultom, M., Thao, T. T. N., ... & Dijkman, R. (2020). Inactivation of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 by WHO-recommended hand rub formulations and alcohols. *Emerg Infect Dis*, 26. Available at https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0915_article