*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley*Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:**  | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:**  | September 18, 2020  |
| **Subject:** | Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families  |

Since our last meeting on June 30, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE or Department) has continued to provide information and support to districts about many aspects of school reopening and related subjects, including guidance on health metrics, a grant for purchasing technology, and guidance around sports and courses that require special consideration, such as music and science.

**Over the Summer: CDs Awarded and Summer Programming**

Over the summer, more than 2,000 students earned their [competency determination](http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/graduation.html) (CD) through the temporarily modified process that the Board approved on April 28. Through that process, seniors who had not passed one or more of the high school MCAS tests were able to earn their CD through successful completion of relevant high school courses. The Department implemented the process once information about students’ course completion was available, and the CDs were awarded on the same timeline as they would have been if students had been able to take part in the usual spring testing opportunities.

Also over the summer, more than 3,000 students with disabilities successfully attended summer education programs.

**Reopening Schools**

As we discussed in June, DESE asked each district to draw up a school reopening plan that included three learning models: in person, hybrid, and fully remote. Based on the advice of medical professionals, we outlined safety measures that would help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and urged districts to bring as many students back to in-person learning as possible.

Districts submitted their preliminary plans to us by July 31, and we offered feedback. We shared [best practices and reminders](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/2020-0806reopening-plans-feedback-memo.docx) *(download)* through a message to districts on August 6, and on August 11, we shared information on how newly released [Department of Public Health (DPH) metrics](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/2020-0811interpreting-covid19-metrics.docx) *(download)* can inform districts’ decisions on which learning model to use. If a community is designated “red” by DPH for several consecutive weeks, students should be learning remotely. If the community has a “yellow” DPH designation for several consecutive weeks, students should be using a hybrid model, or, in some circumstances, learning remotely. If the community has a “green” or “gray” designation for several consecutive weeks, students should be attending school in person, or, in some circumstances, using a hybrid model.

**Remote Learning**

Many students will be learning remotely at least part of the time this school year, and it will be more robust this fall than what many families experienced in the spring. For instance, schools must meet student learning time requirements, and educators must take attendance and give students feedback (such as grades) on assignments. These standards are specified in the amendments to the Student Learning Time regulations that the Board adopted on an emergency basis in June. To help educators provide a more rigorous remote learning experience, DESE has awarded $32.9 million in [Remote Learning Technology Essentials](https://mailchi.mp/doe.mass.edu/press-release-massachusetts-awards-nearly-33-million-in-remote-learning-technology-grants) grants to 253 school districts; provided districts with information on potential partners for remote learning courses, instruction, and learning management systems; and offered [subject-specific resources and professional development](http://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/remote-learning/) to educators.

**Interpreting Health Metrics**

There has been much discussion about COVID-19 health and safety metrics that can be helpful guidelines for when schools re-open this school year. Such metrics should serve as a guide as to whether schools should open using full-time in-person, hybrid, or remote models, and will also support future decision-making if the impact of COVID-19 requires us to switch between educational models throughout the school year.

Each Wednesday, the Department of Public Health releases its [Weekly COVID-19 Public Health Report](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-response-reporting#covid-19-weekly-public-health-report-) that contains critical metrics for each municipality. Effective this week, there will also be a color-coded indication posted for each municipality calculated on a rolling two-week basis.

* **Red** will designate communities with more than 8 COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents.
* **Yellow** will designate communities that have more than 4 and up to 8 COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents.
* **Green** will designate communities that have 4 or fewer COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents.
* **Unshaded** will designate communities with small populations and fewer than 5 cases within the last 14 days.

Based on these updated weekly COVID-19 metrics, DESE’s guidance for how these data should inform each school and district’s learning model is as follows:



It is our expectation that districts’ learning models will follow this color-coded metric unless there are extenuating circumstances identified after consultation with local boards of health. This includes reviewing additional metrics, such as whether cases are increasing or decreasing, the local test positivity rate, and other contextual factors.

**Financial Support for Districts**

In addition to the $32.9 million technology grant mentioned above, districts have several other funding sources to help them address costs related to COVID-19 this school year. These include:

* [$50 million from the federal Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund](https://www.mass.gov/news/baker-polito-administration-allocates-50-million-from-the-governors-emergency-education-relief) (part of the federal CARES Act) for K-12 schools and colleges and universities;
* [$182 million from the Commonwealth’s federal Coronavirus Relief Fund](https://mailchi.mp/doe.mass.edu/press-release-dese-releases-initial-back-to-school-guidance) (up to $225 per student) for schools;
* $502 million from the Coronavirus Relief Fund previously allocated to cities and towns; and
* $194 million in federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund grants (part of the federal CARES Act).

**Students’ Non-Academic Needs**

From the time schools closed, we have been working to address students’ non-academic needs in addition to helping them learn.

* School feeding programs mobilized quickly, continued through the Summer Food Service Program, and are now continuing into the fall with grab-and-go meals available for remote learners in addition to meals for in-person students.
* On August 3, we issued “Creating Positive Learning Environments: Recommendations and Resources to Support the Social Emotional Well-being of Students, Staff, and Families” to help districts prepare for an expected increase in student mental health needs.
* Looking beyond the school day, we worked with the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association, medical advisors, and a variety of stakeholders to provide a modified sports schedule based on guidance from the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

**Mobile Rapid Response Unit:**

On August 20 DESE and DPH announced that local school officials, in consultation with public health authorities, will be able to request a state-sponsored mobile rapid response unit to test a group of students and/or staff when a potential cluster of COVID-19 cases has been identified and transmission appears to have occurred within the school. [This memo](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/mobile-testing-unit-protocol.docx) *(*download) provides schools and districts with an overview of the program, information on protocols for utilizing mobile rapid response units, and considerations regarding student privacy.

**DESE Rapid Response Help Center:**

Based on collaboration with DPH and evolving medical and scientific findings related to COVID-19, DESE issued an [updated version of the protocols for responding to COVID-19 scenarios](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/protocols/) in school, on the bus, or in community settings. The guidance, dated September 14, 2020, includes the following updates and refinements:

* Individuals who test positive for COVID-19 must remain at home at least 10 days and until at least 24 hours have passed with no fever and improvements in other symptoms, without the use of fever reducing medication.
* If a student or staff member has COVID-19-like symptoms, they may return to school after they have tested negative for COVID-19, have improvement in symptoms, and have been without fever for at least 24 hours without the use of fever reducing medications.
* Staff or students who demonstrate any COVID-19 symptoms should be tested and must follow the protocols outlined in the document.

School administrators can contact the DESE Rapid Response Help Center at 781-338-3500 for assistance related to [responding to COVID-19 scenarios](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/protocols/).

We will continue to work with and support districts and families during this challenging time.

Attachments:

* [Guidance/On the Desktop](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop.html) Messages: (selected)
	+ September 14 – Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios (updated, originally issued July 17)
	+ September 11 – Protocol for Requesting Mobile Rapid Response Units
	+ August 31 – Supplemental Guidance for Student Groups and School Events
	+ August 31 – Career/Vocational Technical Education Reopening Guidelines (updated, originally issued July 29)
	+ August 26 – Fall Reopening Frequently Asked Questions (updated, originally issued July 10)
	+ August 21 – Teachers and Critical Support Staff in Remote Learning Districts, Vulnerable Students, Children of Teachers, Regional Calculations, and SOA Deadline
	+ August 20 – Access to Mobile Testing
	+ August 19 – Joint Memo Clarifying Key Health and Safety Requirements for Schools
	+ August 18 – Joint Guidance on Modified Sports Seasons
	+ July 29 – Guidance Memo to Private K-12 Schools
	+ August 11 – Guidance for Districts and Schools on Interpreting DPH COVID-19 Metrics
	+ August 6 – Feedback on Preliminary Fall Reopening Plans
	+ August 4 – Remote Learning Partner Information
	+ August 3 – Adult and Community Learning Services Fall Reopening Guidance
	+ August 3 – Supplemental Information for Science Courses and Laboratory Work
	+ August 3 – Creating Positive Learning Environments: Recommendations and Resources to Support the Social Emotional Well-being of Students, Staff, and Families
	+ July 27 – Additional Staff Training Days this Fall
	+ July 24 – Guidance on Courses Requiring Additional Safety Considerations and Remote Learning
	+ July 22 – Transportation and Facilities Guidance
	+ July 15 – Two-Step Process and Online Form/Template for Fall Reopening Plans
	+ July 9 – Comprehensive Special Education Guidance for the 2020-21 School Year
	+ July 6 – Remote Learning Technology Essentials Grant and Purchasing PPE
	+ July 1 – Comprehensive Summer School Guidance
	+ June 25 – Initial Fall School Reopening Guidance
	+ June 19 – Summer and Vacation Learning Program Grant Posted