*****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:** | October 8, 2021 |
| **Subject:** | Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families |

Since our meeting on September 21, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department or DESE) has continued to inform districts of new developments related to COVID-19 and to support schools and districts as they navigate teaching and learning during the continued pandemic.

On September 24, DESE sent districts a reminder about who is considered a close contact and published a decision tree to help districts through this process. Of note:

* Interactions that occur outdoors do not count toward the definition of a close contact.
* There are individuals who may be exempt from any quarantine or testing protocols in school and who should not be asked to take a test, to quarantine, or to participate in Test and Stay:
  + Asymptomatic, fully vaccinated close contacts
  + An individual who is exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual in the classroom while both individuals were masked, so long as the individuals were spaced at least 3 feet apart
  + Individuals who are masked on buses when windows are open
  + Close contacts who have had COVID-19 within the past 90 days
* If a student tests positive, it is rare that the entire classroom will be identified as a close contact, as most students will not have been within 3 feet of the individual for more than 15 minutes, while masked, or within 6 feet of the individual for more than 15 minutes, while unmasked. In practice, it is likely that **only** the individuals sitting immediately next to the student will be identified as close contacts.

On September 27, consistent with the authority the Board provided in August, and after consulting with medical experts and state health officials, I extended the mask requirement through at least November 1. However, as of October 15, if a school demonstrates a vaccination rate of 80 percent or more of all students and staff, then vaccinated individuals in that school are no longer subject to the state mask requirement. Whether or not a school or district avails itself of the 80 percent vaccination off-ramp is a local decision to be made by school and district leaders in consultation with local health officials.

On September 30, DESE added additional categories to our weekly reporting of positive COVID-19 cases in schools to give more details on the pooled testing and Test-and-Stay testing. That report showed that as of September 26, Test-and-Stay had saved 9,011 in-person school days, and the positivity rate for pooled testing was 0.91 percent. More than 2,000 schools are implementing at least one state-sponsored testing program, and districts are still signing up. The Department continues to work with contractor CIC Health to get testing programs up and running in each school that has requested them.

As students and educators are back in-person with COVID-19 still a public health concern, there is substantial interest in what school districts are doing to improve air quality within their buildings to make them healthier and safer. While DESE does not have an exhaustive or complete picture of the improvements taking place in every school building across the Commonwealth, we have evidence to suggest that many districts, including our largest districts, have used, and/or plan to use, federal relief funding to improve air quality in their buildings. Additional information is included in the attached memo.

The Department continues to hold webinars and release additional resources on COVID-19 testing and other matters. As always, the DESE COVID-19 Help Center remains open and available for consultation with districts and schools.

Attachments:

* [Important Reminders When Identifying Close Contacts in School Settings](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/close-contact-reminders.pdf) — September 24, 2021
  + [Close Contact Decision Tree](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/decision-tree.pdf)
* [Extension of DESE Mask Requirement](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/mask-requirement-extension/mask-requirement-extension.pdf) — September 27, 2021
  + [DESE Policy on Vaccination Rate Threshold](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/2021-0927vax-rate-guidance.pdf)
  + [80 Percent Vaccination Rate Threshold School Attestation Form](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/vaccination-attestation-form.pdf)

# [Positive COVID-19 Cases in Schools](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/positive-cases/default.html)

* + [Positive COVID-19 Student and Staff Cases in Schools Reported by Districts: September 30, 2021](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/positive-cases/2021-0930covid19-cases.xlsx) *(download)* — Posted September 30, 2021
* Update on School District Ventilation Improvements

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