*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

### 75 Pleasant Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148-4906 Telephone: (781) 338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Relay 1-800-439-2370

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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:**  | April 19, 2022 |
| **Subject:** | Update on Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families |

Since our meeting on March 22, 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 pandemic.

On April 8, we notified districts that DESE and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services are extending the [statewide testing options](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/testing/default.html) currently available to districts and schools past April 22, 2022. The Department and EOHHS will continue to monitor factors related to COVID-19 and may make further adjustments to the statewide K-12 COVID testing options this school year. We anticipate following up with districts later this spring with more information, including next steps for the summer and fall.

On March 24, the U.S. Department of Education issued a letter to educators and parents about schools’ responsibilities to provide safe, in-person learning for students with disabilities. It also reminded districts of students with disabilities’ right to receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The letter summarizes strategies for keeping school communities healthy and for addressing the health needs of individual students with disabilities. Staff from DESE will provide an update on this letter to special education leaders during a meeting on April 14.

On March 18, the U.S. Department of Agriculture approved Massachusetts to provide Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) benefits to eligible students for COVID-19-related absences during the current school year (2021-22). On Wednesday, May 25, eligible households are scheduled to receive a retroactive P-EBT payment for September 2021 through April 2022 for eligible absences. Remaining payments will be issued for the rest of the school year on June 25 (for May) and July 25 (for June). More information is available in the state Department of Transitional Assistance’s [press release](https://www.mass.gov/news/massachusetts-approved-to-provide-families-additional-p-ebt-for-school-year-2021-2022) about the benefits.

On March 15, DESE’s Office for Food and Nutrition Programs sent districts a message about Congress not extending universal free meals past June 30. Starting July 1, all schools will return to the National School Lunch Program. If schools do not participate in the [Community Eligibility Program](https://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/nprograms/nslp/cep-eligibility.html), free and reduced price meals will only be offered to students directly certified for these meals or approved through a household application.

The end of COVID-era meal flexibilities also means that as of now, all 2022 [Summer Eats](https://meals4kids.org/summermeals) sites will be congregate meal sites and will not be allowed to provide grab-and-go meals. Additionally, the eligibility criteria to be a Summer Eats site will return to the pre-pandemic requirements, meaning many sites that served locations with smaller percentages of low-income families during the pandemic will no longer be eligible.

I will continue to monitor these and other issues related to the pandemic. I will also continue to review public health data, consult with medical experts and state health officials, and issue further guidance and/or requirements as needed. As always, the DESE Rapid Respond COVID-19 Help Center remains open and available for consultation with districts and schools.

Attachments:

* [2022-2023 School Meals: What’s Next?](https://us14.campaign-archive.com/?e=5156b507e7&u=d8f37d1a90dacd97f207f0b4a&id=ce7c5ede1a) – March 15, 2022
* [Letter to educators and parents from Secretary Cardona](https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/letter-to-educators-and-parents-regarding-new-cdc-recommendations-03-24-2022.pdf) – March 24, 2022
* [Press Release: Massachusetts Approved to Provide Families Additional P-EBT for School Year 2021-2022](https://www.mass.gov/news/massachusetts-approved-to-provide-families-additional-p-ebt-for-school-year-2021-2022) – March 30, 2022

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