



# New CDC Guidance on Reopening Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic

An Updated Review of Guidance for School Districts

Michigan State University Office of K-12 Outreach  
February 2021

# Schooling During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## CDC Updates

When we created our first [reopening with mitigation publication](#), the pandemic was just unfolding to be a national problem. Since May of 2020, the total number of cases in the US has surged to almost 30 million with a total of over 490,000 dead. In Michigan, there have been over 633,000 cases and over 16,000 deaths. These figures are likely to continue increasing.

In the face of this unprecedented challenge, Michigan schools are working hard to provide education to their students. Data gathered by the Michigan Department of Education show that 50% of districts offered full-time face-to-face instruction in January.<sup>1</sup> Eleven percent of districts offered hybrid models in January.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-five percent of Michigan offered fully online instruction in January.<sup>1</sup> These efforts come at a time when Governor Whitmer is suggesting schools re-open and the new Biden administration is pursuing similar goals.

In this publication, we will summarize the recent recommendations of the Center for Disease Control. Our earlier report in May 2020 outlined issues of equity, which are still of major concern during the pandemic. Here we focus solely on CDC updates.<sup>3</sup> There remain two important caveats for districts to consider as they construct reopening plans. First, there is **no** way to resume face-to-face instruction during the pandemic that will not carry some risk of viral transmission. Second, the CDC notes that with the advent of new strains, especially those exhibiting higher transmission rates, this guidance may shift again. But the CDC also emphasizes that frontline measures such as universal, correct mask wearing and social distancing are crucial to preventing the spread of any new variants.



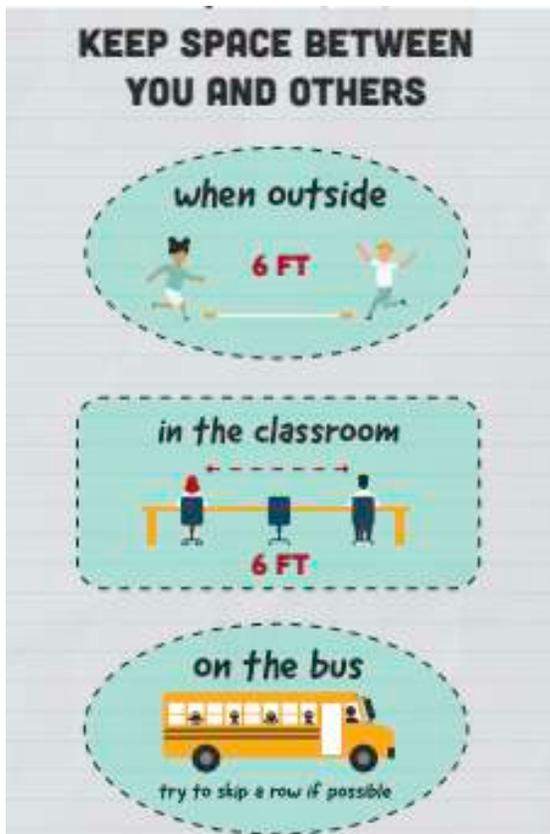
Source: 2

## The CDC's Core Concepts Decisions to Guide Reopening

The CDC has laid out a set of five core concepts upon which they premise their reopening plans:

- Make kids the priority: Schools should be the last entities to be closed and the first ones to be reopened.
- Learning First: Instruction should be prioritized over extracurriculars and school events.
- Younger Students Longer: The lower risk of transmission posed by younger children allows them to be face-to-face longer than their older schoolmates.
- At Risk Options: Families with students of increased risk of disease and those with family members who are at increased risk must be given the option of remote instruction.
- Cohorting Encouraged: Cohorting can help districts maintain face-to-face instruction during transmission levels at or exceeding the moderate transmission category.

The CDC has provided an extensive toolkit for schools to use as they plan for reopening. Their toolkit covers all aspects of mitigation summarized in this document.<sup>4</sup>



Source: 5

# Reopening Schools

## The Use of Mitigation

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that schools plan to layer strategies as they seek to mitigate the risk of COVID transmission in their buildings. They list five key mitigation strategies.

The CDC recommends that all schools planning for face-to-face instruction should prioritize **both**

- Universal use of masks by students and staff
- Social distancing

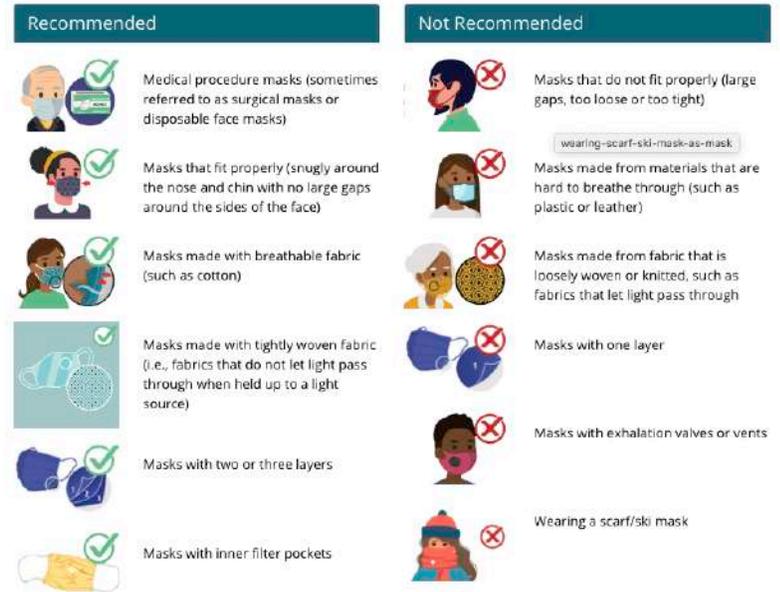
### Mask Usage

The CDC recommends the universal and correct use of masks. This means that all students and staff wear masks at all times, unless:

- Student is under the age of two years old.
- Student or staff is unable to remove their mask independently or for reasons of disability decided on a one-on-one basis.

The CDC notes that the majority of disabled students can successfully wear masks, but that the inability to do so cannot compromise the student's educational rights under the ADA.

Mask wearing does not eliminate the need to also maintain at least six feet of distance.



Source: 6



Source: 7

### Social Distancing

Students and staff should be able to remain at least six feet of distance, with larger amounts preferable. When these metrics are not possible, the CDC recommends one or more of the strategies below:

- Cohorting students into static groups to limit the number of interactions during the school day.
  - Keeping middle/high school students in one classroom all day while having teachers rotate through classrooms.
  - Having smaller groups of students attend on alternating days of the week or times of day.
- Staggering schedules to limit interactions of cohorts.
- Installing physical barriers such as plexiglass to deflect sneezes and separate people from one another.

# Reopening School Mitigation Strategies

## Three Additional Mitigation Layers



Source: 8

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that schools build upon the universal, correct use of masks and social distancing with additional strategies as they seek to mitigate the risk of COVID transmission in their buildings. These three are instituting the practices of handwashing and respiratory etiquette, cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities, and engaging in contact tracing and use of isolation and quarantines in concert with their local health departments.

### Handwashing and Respiratory Etiquette

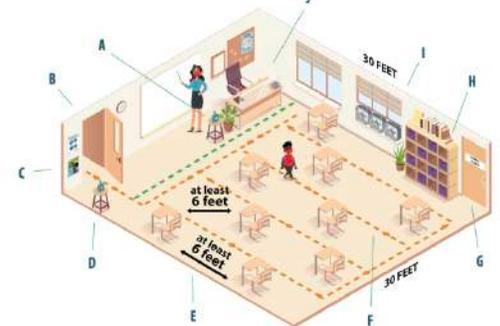
- Teaching and monitoring the practice of handwashing with soap and water (of at least 20 seconds) or the use of alcohol based hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol) for all students and staff.
- Instructing students and staff to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue when they are not wearing a mask and to wash hands immediately afterwards.
- Provide assistance to students who cannot wash their hands independently.
- Ensure the availability of supplies to properly clean and dry hands and dispose of tissues, paper towels.

### Cleaning and Maintaining Healthy Facilities<sup>9</sup>

- Regular cleaning of high-touch surfaces at least daily or more often between uses if possible.
- Reconfigure room layouts to maximize the space between students and to orient all desks/chairs to face in one direction.
- Install barriers and visual guides to support social distancing.
- Discourage the use of shared items.
- Properly restart and check water systems after extended lack of use to prevent the possibility of lead poisoning and/or Legionnaire's disease.
- Close or stagger the use of large communal spaces or repurpose them for use to distance existing classes.
- Eliminate the use of self-service food options and instead provide single-serving portions and disposable utensils.
- Improve ventilation as much as possible within the parameters of existing school safety protocols and plans.
- Consider upgrading ventilation systems to increase the delivery of fresh air and/or
- Decrease room capacities when ventilation cannot be increased.
- For additional information, visit this [CDC webpage](#) for details on ventilation.

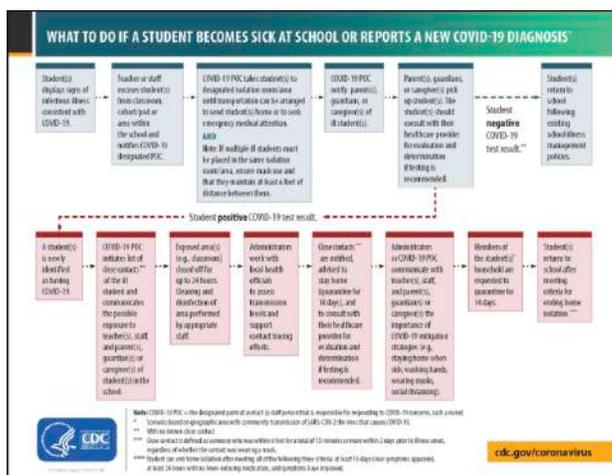
Map A

This map illustrates how to set up a classroom with student desks with attached chairs. This classroom seats nine students and allows for student desks to be spaced out at least 6 feet apart and turned to face the same direction. Other modifications are added to minimize the risk of spread of the virus that causes COVID-19.



- A. A hand sanitizing station is set up near the teacher's desk.
- B. The door is open to increase ventilation and to avoid touching the doorknob.
- C. Signs are posted in the classroom that promote everyday protective measures and describe how to stop the spread of germs.
- D. A hand sanitizing station is set up near the door.
- E. All desks are spaced out at least 6 feet apart and turned to face the same direction.
- F. Walking paths are marked with tape on the floor.
- G. A locked supply cabinet is used to store cleaning and disinfecting supplies.
- H. Each student's belongings are separated from others' in individual cubbies.
- I. The windows are open to increase ventilation, as feasible.
- J. A "teacher zone" is marked around the teacher's desk and in the front of the room. Green tape is used as a physical guide to mark this space. A physical barrier is installed on the teacher desk.

Source: 10



### Contact Tracing Combined with Isolation and Quarantine

- Establish contacts with local health department officials to set communication protocols should staff or students fall ill or be exposed.
- Ensure that all communications with health department officials comply with privacy laws.
- Teach students and staff about when they should remain at home and the parameters for them to safely return to work or school.

Source: 11

# Reopening Schools – Accounting for Phase of Transmission

## Indicators of Community Prevalence

As of February 2021, the CDC has issued new [guidelines](#) for schools to follow based on the CDC categories of disease transmission in their local communities.<sup>12</sup> The indicators of community transmission shown below are copied directly from the CDC documentation to ensure accuracy. Schools are encouraged to use two indicators in assessing the spread of COVID in their communities. First is the number of cases per 100,000 over the previous week. Second is the percentage of positive NAATs (nucleic acid amplification test) over the previous week. NAAT results are considered to be more accurate than rapid tests. For more on the different types of tests for COVID and how they can be used, see this [Food and Drug Administration webpage](#).

**Table 1. CDC Indicators and Thresholds for Community Transmission of COVID-19<sup>1</sup>**

Indicator	Low Transmission Blue	Moderate Transmission Yellow	Substantial Transmission Orange	High Transmission Red
Total new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days <sup>2</sup>	0-9	10-49	50-99	≥100
Percentage of NAATs that are positive during the past 7 days <sup>3</sup>	<5.0%	5.0%-7.9%	8.0%-9.9%	≥10.0%

Notes for Table 1--

<sup>1</sup>If the two indicators suggest different levels, the actions corresponding to the higher threshold should be chosen. County-level data on total new cases in the past 7 days and test percent positivity are available on the County View tab in [CDC's COVID Data Tracker](#).

<sup>2</sup>Total number of new cases per 100,000 persons within the last 7 days is calculated by adding the number of new cases in the county (or other community type) in the last 7 days divided by the population in the county (or other community type) and multiplying by 100,000.

<sup>3</sup>Percentage of positive diagnostic and screening NAATs during the last 7 days is calculated by dividing the number of positive tests in the county (or other administrative level) during the last 7 days by the total number of tests resulted over the last 7 days. Additional information can be found on the [Calculating Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 \(SARS-CoV-2\) Laboratory Test Percent Positivity: CDC Methods and Considerations for Comparisons and Interpretation](#) webpage.

<sup>4</sup>Previously, CDC provided guidance for schools through the Indicators for Dynamic School Decision-Making. The current indicators and thresholds are an update to that document that reflect a focus on the past 7 days, and four (rather than five) categories of community transmission.

## CDC Suggestions for Instructional Modality Based on Community Spread

The CDC offers two sets of guidelines of how districts might adjust their modes of instruction based on both the spread of COVID in their area with whether or not the district is offering screening tests to staff and students. It is important to note that the CDC specifically refers to the use of screening tests in this case as opposed to diagnostic tests. The CDC recommends that all students and staff who have been exposed to COVID and/or show signs of infection be sent for diagnostic testing.

The suggestions in Table 2 on the following page are for districts that implement screening tests for staff and students to catch cases prior to their becoming symptomatic or that may be asymptomatic. Table 3, on page 8, provides guidance to districts that are not able to offer screening testing of students and staff either onsite or in coordination with local health officials. We have copied the two relevant charts and their notes on the following pages to ensure accuracy.

# Reopening Schools – With Screening Testing

## Suggested Instructional Modalities for Each Phase of Transmission

Table 2. Recommended Implementation of Mitigation Strategies and K-12 School Learning Modes by Level of Community Transmission for Schools That Do Not Implement Expanded Screening Testing

Low Transmission <sup>1</sup> Blue	Moderate Transmission Yellow	Substantial Transmission Orange	High Transmission Red
<p><b>All schools:</b> Universal and correct use of masks is required; physical distancing; handwashing and respiratory etiquette; cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities; contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine.</p> <p><b>Diagnostic testing<sup>2</sup>:</b> Symptomatic students, teachers, and staff and close contacts referred for diagnostic testing</p>			
<p>K-12 schools open for full in-person instruction Physical distancing of 6 feet or more to the greatest extent possible<sup>3</sup></p>		<p>Elementary schools in hybrid learning mode or reduced attendance<sup>4</sup> Physical distancing of 6 feet or more is required</p>	<p>Middle and high schools in virtual only instruction unless they can strictly implement all mitigation strategies, and have few cases; schools that are already open for in-person instruction can remain open, but only if they strictly implement mitigation strategies and have few cases<sup>5</sup></p>
<p>Sports and extracurricular activities occur; physical distancing of 6 feet or more to the greatest extent possible<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>Sports and extracurricular activities occur with physical distancing of 6 feet or more required</p>	<p>Sports and extracurricular activities occur only if they can be held outdoors, with physical distancing of 6 feet or more</p>	<p>Sports and extracurricular activities are virtual only</p>

# Reopening Schools – Without Screening Testing

## Suggested Instructional Modalities for Each Phase of Transmission

Table 3. Recommended Implementation of Mitigation Strategies, Testing, and Safe K-12 School Learning Modes by Level of Community Transmission for Schools that Implement Expanded Screening Testing

Low Transmission <sup>1</sup> Blue	Moderate Transmission Yellow	Substantial Transmission Orange	High Transmission Red
<p><b>All schools implement 5 key mitigation strategies:</b> Universal and correct use of masks required; physical distancing; handwashing and respiratory etiquette; cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities; contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine.</p> <p><b>Diagnostic testing<sup>2</sup>:</b> Symptomatic students, teachers, and staff and close contacts referred for diagnostic testing</p>			
<p><b>Screening Testing</b></p>			
<p>Routine screening testing of teachers and staff offered once per week</p>			
<p>No screening testing for students</p>	<p>Routine screening testing of students offered once per week<sup>4</sup></p>		
<p><b>School Status</b></p>			
<p>K-12 schools open for full in-person instruction Physical distancing of 6 feet or more to the greatest extent possible<sup>5</sup></p>		<p>K-12 schools in hybrid learning mode or reduced attendance<sup>6</sup> Physical distancing of 6 feet or more is required</p>	
<p>Sports and extracurricular activities occur; physical distancing of 6 feet or more to the greatest extent possible<sup>7</sup></p>	<p>Sports and extracurricular activities occur with physical distancing of 6 feet or more required</p>	<p>Sports and extracurricular activities occur only if they can be held outdoors, with physical distancing of 6 feet or more</p>	<p>Sports and extracurricular activities are virtual only</p>

# Reopening Schools

## Notes for Tables 2 and 3

### Notes for Table 2--

<sup>1</sup>Levels of community transmission defined as total new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days (low, 0-9; moderate, 10-49; substantial, 50-99; high,  $\geq 100$ ) and percentage of positive tests in the past 7 days (low,  $< 5\%$ ; moderate, 5-7.9%; substantial, 8-9.9%; high,  $\geq 10\%$ ).

<sup>2</sup>Diagnostic testing for SARS-CoV-2 is intended to identify occurrence of SARS-CoV-2 infection at the individual level and is performed on individuals with or without suspected COVID-19 infection in accordance with the test's authorization and labeling.

<sup>3</sup>If physical distancing of at least 6 feet among all students, teachers, and staff within a class, cohort, or pod is not possible at all times, schools should ensure physical distancing between classes, cohorts, and pods.

<sup>4</sup>Hybrid learning or reduced attendance is intended to maximize physical distance between students. Schools may consider hybrid learning models or instructional modes where substantial percentages of students are in virtual only instruction. At all levels of community transmission, schools should provide families the option to participate in virtual learning if a student or family member is at risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

<sup>5</sup>Strict implementation of mitigation strategies refers to policies that require consistent and correct use of masks, physical distancing of at least 6 feet, all other key mitigation strategies.

<sup>6</sup>School officials should implement limits on spectators and attendees for sports, extracurricular activities, and school events as consistent with recommendations for masking and physical distancing for each phase.

### Notes for Table 3--

<sup>1</sup>Levels of community transmission defined as total new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days (low, 0-9; moderate, 10-49; substantial, 50-99; high,  $\geq 100$ ) and percentage of positive tests in the past 7 days (low,  $< 5\%$ ; moderate, 5-7.9%; substantial, 8-9.9%; high,  $\geq 10\%$ ).

<sup>2</sup>Diagnostic testing for SARS-CoV-2 is intended to identify occurrence of SARS-CoV-2 infection at the individual level and is performed when there is a reason to suspect that an individual may be infected, such as having symptoms or suspected recent exposure.

<sup>3</sup>Screening testing is intended to identify infected asymptomatic individuals who may be contagious so that measures can be taken to prevent further transmission.

<sup>4</sup>Schools may consider testing a random sample of at least 10% of students or may conduct pooled testing of cohorts/pods for screening testing in areas of moderate and substantial community transmission.

<sup>5</sup>If physical distancing of at least 6 feet among all students, teachers, and staff within a class, cohort, or pod is not possible at all times, schools should ensure physical distancing between classes, cohorts, and pods.

<sup>6</sup>Hybrid learning or reduced attendance is intended to maximize physical distance between students. Schools may consider hybrid learning models or instructional modes where substantial percentages of students are in virtual only instruction. At all levels of community transmission, schools should provide families the option to participate in virtual learning if a student or family member is at risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

<sup>7</sup>School officials should implement limits on spectators and attendees for sports, extracurricular activities, and school events as consistent with recommendations for masking and physical distancing for each phase.

## Citations

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# Additional Information on Reopening Schools

## Further Updates

### Screening Children at School

The CDC does not currently recommend that schools screen students for symptoms of COVID. However, parents should monitor the children's health at home and students exhibiting any signs of illness should not attend school.<sup>13</sup>

### Music, Choir, and Performing Arts Mitigation

Appendix A of the CDC's *K-12 Schools COVID-19 Mitigation Toolkit* provides detailed checklists that offer options for mitigating risk in music, choir, performing arts, and physical education classes.<sup>4</sup> These instructional areas, with their increased risk of COVID transmission, need additional mitigation strategies as they are resumed in face-to-face settings.

### Frequently Asked Questions about Reopening Schools

The CDC has an extensive *Frequently Asked Questions* document for the use of district leaders and staff.<sup>14</sup>

### Updating Emergency Operating Plans

As part of reopening planning, schools should update their emergency operating programs, designate key staff in each building to serve as conduits for information between the central office and/or the health department, and have specified plans for how to handle a student or staff member who becomes ill at school.<sup>2</sup>

## The Michigan State University Office of K-12 Outreach

### Collective Capacity Building and Leadership Development

The Office of K-12 Outreach, under the leadership of Director Dr. Bryan Beverly, has unmatched experience in developing and implementing customized support for schools and districts in Michigan seeking to turnaround their schools and rapidly improve student achievement. Our unique field-oriented service organization within the university brings a 20-year history of collaboration with schools and districts across the state. K-12 Outreach has experience working with school districts on topics ranging from staff professional development to central office transformations to equity, and it is available in this new environment to help districts plan for school re-opening.

K-12 Outreach is available to help districts plan for a return to face-to-face learning and construction of their Extended COVID-19 Learning Plans.

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