

Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

Fall Reopening Frequently Asked Questions, as of July 10, 2020

Frequently Asked Questions – All Audiences

- 1. What is the overall goal for K-12 education in academic school year 2020-21?**

Our goal is the safe return of as many students as possible to in-person school settings, to maximize learning and address our students' holistic needs.
- 2. Why are DESE and the medical community recommending in-person learning?**

After weeks of discussion with many stakeholders, including members of our [Return-to-School Working Group](#), infectious disease physicians, pediatricians, and other public health experts, and given low transmission rates of COVID-19 in the state, there is a clear consensus that in-person learning is the preferred model. While remote learning has improved over the course of the school closures, there is no substitute for in-person instruction when it comes to the quality of students' academic learning. In-person school plays an equally important role in supporting students' social-emotional needs, including their mental and physical health, and mitigating the impacts of trauma.
- 3. What safety measures will be in place for students and staff?** It is important to note that the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has affirmed that children, particularly younger children, are less likely than adults to be infected with COVID-19. Furthermore, if they become infected, it appears children may not have the same transmission potential as adults. The health and safety requirements for school reopening use a combination of strategies that, taken together, will substantially reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in schools. This combination approach includes masks/face coverings, physical distancing, handwashing/sanitizing, and staying home when sick.
- 4. What are the guidelines for safe distancing requirements between students?**

Medical experts advising DESE have stated the greater the physical distancing the better, but that the minimum acceptable distance is three feet, when in combination with face coverings and other measures. Establishing a minimum physical distance of three feet between students when face coverings are worn is informed by evidence and substantiated by guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization.
- 5. Who needs to wear a mask or face covering, and when do they have to be worn?**

Students in second grade and above, and adults, including educators and staff, are required to wear a mask/face covering that covers their nose and mouth at all times, except for designated breaks, which should occur throughout the day. Breaks should occur when students can be six feet apart and ideally outside or at least with the windows open. Students in kindergarten and grade 1 are strongly encouraged to wear masks or face shields. Masks/face coverings must be worn by everyone on the bus during school bus transportation. Teachers and parents should reinforce mask-wearing.
- 6. Are there exceptions to wearing masks or face coverings?**

Exceptions to mask/face covering requirements must be made for those for whom it is not possible due to medical conditions, disability impact, or other health or safety factors. Face shields may be an option for students with medical or behavioral challenges who are unable to wear masks/face coverings.
- 7. Can parents send children to school without a mask/face covering if they do not have access to one?**

Masks/face coverings should be provided by the student/family, but schools should make available face masks for students who need them.

Superintendent/Principal Frequently Asked Questions

Health and Safety

- 1. When, if ever, should students and staff be tested for COVID-19? Is there routine testing?**
Current Massachusetts Department of Public Health guidance states that anyone who shows any COVID-19 symptoms, even if mild, [should be tested](#). Medical experts recommend close contacts of those who test positive also get tested.
- 2. What are the health and safety guidelines for teachers?**
All adults, including educators and staff, are required to wear a mask/face covering that covers their nose and mouth at all times, except for designated breaks, which should occur throughout the day. Allow adequate space for teachers to ensure safe physical distance from students.

Facilities and Operations

- 3. Is ten students the maximum number in one class in the fall (as provided in the Initial Summer School Guidance issued on June 4, 2020)?**
No, our guidance has evolved since the *Initial Summer School Guidance*. For the fall, there are no required maximums on cohort or group sizes, so long as schools adhere to physical distancing requirements.
- 4. How do we measure how many desks can fit into a classroom?**
When masks are worn, three feet is the minimum distance allowed from “seat edge” to “seat edge.” Desks should face in the same direction. There is no maximum number for group size, so long as schools adhere to the physical distancing requirements. Six feet of physical distance is required between students who are not wearing face coverings, e.g., when eating or taking a mask break. Please see guidance about unmasked kindergarten and first grade students below.
- 5. Can students in kindergarten and first grade who are unmasked sit together on the rug?**
Students in kindergarten and first grade should be encouraged to wear a mask/face covering, or a face shield if masks are not tolerated. Schools should aim to keep kindergarten and first grade students six feet apart but lesser distances are acceptable (but no less than three feet). This is permissible given the lower susceptibility of the age group. Schools should consider reconfiguring space to discourage prolonged close contact and encourage activities that allow children to spread out. Programs may design their own strategies to implement this recommendation – such as spacing chairs at tables, designing games and group activities where children may engage in play that can be spaced apart (for example, by using visual cues, like hula hoops or tape on the floor), and increasing outdoor time.
- 6. When students are in the cafeteria or in classrooms or other spaces to eat, what is the space requirement?**
During meals, because masks are not worn, six feet of physical distancing is required. To provide adequate distancing, there may need to be multiple meal breaks for smaller cohorts of students or enable some students to eat in the classroom and some in other spaces as feasible (e.g., cafeteria, hallways if permitted, etc.).
- 7. Do we have to keep classroom windows open?**
To increase facility ventilation, we encourage schools to keep classroom windows open, if feasible, as much as possible throughout the school year.

- 8. Can we use our cafeteria for meals if we provide adequate spacing in lines and at tables?**
Students must be six feet apart in the cafeteria or any eating space, as it is assumed that masks/face coverings will not be worn during meals. If the cafeteria cannot provide adequate spacing, consider alternative ways (e.g., stagger meal times, have students eat in classrooms instead of the cafeteria, or use common areas) to promote physical distancing during meals. If serving food in the cafeteria, develop staggered schedules that minimize mixing of cohorts, enforce six feet physical distancing protocols, adjust food preparation and service procedures to minimize shared items, and support compliance with health and safety. It is preferred for those without masks not to sit facing each other.

Models of Learning

- 9. Do districts need to create three plans or just the plan they intend to start with this fall?**
DESE is requiring districts to develop one plan that addresses all three models for learning (in-person, hybrid, and remote) this school year. The plan should prioritize getting as many students back to school in-person safely as possible, following a comprehensive set of health and safety requirements. The plan should also describe how the district would implement a remote learning and hybrid school model (a combination of in-person and remote learning). Across each of these models, the district or school also needs to address how special populations, including students with disabilities and English language learners, [will receive necessary services and accommodations](#).
- 10. When are school and district plans for reopening due? Will there be a template to submit the plan?**
Districts and schools will be required to submit a reopening plan to DESE by July 31 that addresses the three models outlined in the previous question. A template will be distributed the week of July 13.

Resources

- 11. What is a “level service plus” budget?**
A “level service plus” budget includes additional funds on top of a district’s projected budget to manage additional costs associated with health and safety preparations. While the FY21 budget is still being developed by the Legislature, the Commonwealth is making additional funding sources available directly to schools and districts to support reopening.
- 12. What federal funding is available to assist districts and schools?**
To date, the following federal grants have been made available to cities and towns for educational expenses related to COVID-19:
- \$193.8M from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to districts, largely based on the Title I formula
 - A portion of the \$502M from the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CvRF) already allocated
 - Additional \$202M from CvRF (\$225 per pupil) to support school reopening, specifically
 - \$25M for remote learning technology grants from CvRF and ESSER
- Moreover, the Executive Office of Education (EOE) and DESE applied for additional competitive federal grants and are waiting determination.

Policies

- 13. Is DESE mandating changes to school days/calendar changes?**
DESE reserves the right to do so, but not at this time. Please move forward with planning accordingly.
- 14. Will there be changes to assessment requirements (MCAS)?**
Not at this time beyond decisions already made. Please move forward with planning accordingly.

15. What should educators and other staff who are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 do when the school re-opens?

Educators and other staff who are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 will want to consult with their health care providers about whether and under what circumstances a return to in-person school settings would be medically inadvisable.

16. How is the guidance different for private schools?

This guidance applies to all public elementary and secondary schools in Massachusetts, including charter schools. Private, independent, and parochial schools may use DESE documents as a guide.

17. What can a district do to avoid disruptions that occur if parents change their mind about whether their child will attend school remotely or in-person?

Many superintendents have surveyed parents/caregivers about their intention to return to school. It is recommended that districts and parents/caregivers continue to be in close communication. When parents/caregivers communicate early that a child is returning to school, it allows for more thoughtful planning by their child's school. More information may follow.

18. Should Pre-K classes follow DESE guidance or EEC guidance?

In general, public preschools should follow DESE guidance. However, if public preschools enroll children whose families receive subsidies administered by EEC, they should seek guidance from [their EEC regional office](#).

19. Are school districts responsible for students who are choosing remote learning?

Yes, school districts are responsible for students who are engaging in remote learning. Remote learning models shall include the following requirements: (1) procedures for all students to participate in remote learning, including a system for tracking attendance and participation; (2) remote academic work shall be aligned to state standards; (3) a policy for issuing grades for students' remote academic work; and (4) teachers and administrators shall regularly communicate with students' parents and guardians, including providing interpretation and translation services to limited English proficient parents and guardians, consistent with [603 CMR 27.08](#).

20. What do I do if I have other questions not answered here?

District/school-based personnel may email reopeningk12@mass.gov.

Frequently Asked Questions by Parents

Models of Learning

1. Can parents choose whether to send their children to school or keep them learning remotely?

Parents/caregivers can choose to send their children to in-person school or keep them at home learning remotely. In-school attendance is highly encouraged to promote student academic progress because there is no substitute for the attention and engagement possible with in-person learning.

2. If my child starts the school year remotely can I send them back to in-person learning?

Yes, parents can choose to send their children back to school to in-person learning if they started the year remotely. Parents and school districts are highly encouraged to be in close communication about any

changes. When parents/caregivers communicate early that a child is returning to school, it allows for more thoughtful planning by their child's school. More information may follow.

3. What is the difference between homeschooling and remote learning?

Remote learning means learning provided by the school district that happens outside of the traditional classroom because the student and teacher are separated by distance. Remote learning may be synchronous or asynchronous. Remote learning may include but is not limited to online learning ([603 CMR 27.08](#)). Parents may also choose to homeschool their children, a type of private education. For a child of compulsory school age, the homeschooling program must be approved in advance by the superintendent or school committee of the [district of residence](#).

Health and Safety

4. After in-person instruction resumes, does a student need to submit a doctor's note if they need to be out for personal health reasons?

State law dictates that school committees set local attendance policy. Given the current health crisis, DESE does not recommend requiring a physician's note for attendance-related purposes for personal health reasons. If the student's parents/caregivers are seeking home or hospital educational services, the regular home/hospital process (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/prs/ta/hhep-qa.html>) must be followed, including the completion of the Physician's Affirmation of Need for Temporary Home or Hospital Education for Medically Necessary Reasons, which requires a physician's signature. Additional requirements for return will be in place for a student or staff who has tested positive for COVID-19.

5. What is the proper handwashing technique?

When handwashing, individuals should use soap and water to wash all surfaces of their hands for at least 20 seconds, wait for visible lather, rinse thoroughly, and dry with an individual disposable towel.

6. What is the proper hand sanitizing technique?

Hand sanitizer should be applied to all surfaces of the hands and in sufficient quantity that it takes 20 seconds of rubbing hands together for the sanitizer to dry. Hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent ethanol or at least 70 percent isopropanol content can be used.

7. Is hand sanitizing an acceptable replacement for handwashing? Is handwashing (not hand sanitizing) necessary?

While handwashing with soap and water is the best option, alcohol-based hand sanitizer (at least 60 percent ethanol or at least 70 percent isopropanol) may be utilized when handwashing is not available. As has always been the case, hands should be washed whenever hands are visibly soiled and after using the bathroom.

8. What do I do if I have other questions not answered here?

Parents/caregivers may email questions to COVID19K12ParentInfo@mass.gov.