



SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN MASSACHUSETTS WITH FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

August 31, 2020

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has worked with medical experts and stakeholders to issue guidance for the safe reopening of schools in 2020-2021. Since the publication by DESE of the [Initial Fall School Reopening Guidance](#) in June 2020, DESE has received inquiries regarding the various educational and schooling options available to parents and students for the upcoming school year. This Question and Answer document outlines the different options available in Massachusetts and highlights approval processes for private options.

This document does not address child care arrangements, referred to as remote learning parent cooperatives, for families involved with remote learning models who want additional adult support for their children’s learning either by sharing responsibilities with other families or by hiring someone to supplement remote learning for a group of students. The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and DESE have collaborated to provide specific policies and guidance for these arrangements. For more information on expanded child care options during remote learning, and how to ensure your child is in a licensed or license-exempt arrangement, please read the “Joint Guidance from the Department of Early Education and Care and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: Childcare Options for Hybrid and Remote Learning Models” (Joint Guidance) available at <http://eeclead.force.com/resource/1598716186000/CareOptions>.

Massachusetts has a compulsory school attendance law, [General Laws chapter 76, § 1](#), that requires all children between the ages of 6 and 16 to “attend a public day school in the town the student resides, or some other day school approved by the school committee.” While the law requires that all children receive an education, it also recognizes the right of parents to choose from among several educational options. These options are further discussed on DESE’s website in “Choosing a School: A Parent's Guide to Educational Choices in Massachusetts” found at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/schoolchoice/choice-guide.html>.

There is a range of public educational choices for families in Massachusetts. The most common option is enrolling children in the public school district in which they live. Other public options include charter schools, vocational technical education programs, inter-district school choice, Commonwealth of Massachusetts Virtual Schools, and the METCO program.

Parents may also choose to educate their children privately, at their own expense. Private schools are not subject to state education regulations unless they are publicly funded placements for students with disabilities. Options for private education include private and parochial schools and parents home schooling their own children. Some private schools are long established, and others are recently formed, such as “microschools” that have been created in some places as a schooling alternative during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under state law, home schooling plans and private



schools require advance approval by the school district if they are educating students of compulsory school age (6-16).

Frequently asked questions and answers regarding these options follow. The questions and answers are organized by public and private options for education.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Public Options for Education

Local School District

1. My child attends public school where we live. What will the school be providing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Because of COVID-19, public schools and districts were required to plan for three possible learning models for the 2020-2021 school year. These models are in-person learning with safety requirements, remote learning, and a hybrid model of the two, as noted in DESE's [Initial Fall School Reopening Guidance](#) issued on June 25, 2020. Each school district is posting its fall school reopening plan on its website.

Schools and districts are required to provide instruction and support services to students that are available during typical school operations. Support services include, for example, implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students eligible for special education and providing accommodations for students with disabilities through Section 504 plans.

As was true before the pandemic, parents may choose to supplement their children's public education with additional teaching or tutoring or other activities at their own expense. Similar to before the pandemic, parents do not need school district approval to supplement their children's public education with additional teaching, tutoring, or other activities.

Charter Schools

2. My child attends a charter school. What will the school be providing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Charter schools are public schools and must meet the expectations noted in the answer to Question 1. More information about charter schools can be found at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/about.html>.

Vocational Technical Education Programs

3. My child attends a vocational technical education program. What will the school be providing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Like traditional public schools and charter schools, vocational technical education programs must meet the expectations noted in the answer to Question 1. DESE issued additional safety guidance for vocational and technical education programs on July 29, 2020 (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop.html>).

Inter-District School Choice

4. My child attends school in another district through school choice. What will the school be providing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The inter-district school choice program under [General Laws chapter 76, § 12B](#), allows parents to enroll their children in a school district in which they do not live. Additional information regarding inter-district school choice can be found at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/advisory/2019-0423glc76s12b.html>. Not all communities participate in school choice. Schools in the school choice program are public schools and must meet the expectations noted in the answer to Question 1.

School districts do not provide transportation for students attending under the school choice program. Parents are responsible for getting their children to and from school. COVID-19 does not change that obligation.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Virtual Schools

5. My child attends a Commonwealth of Massachusetts Virtual School (CMVS). What will the CMVS be providing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

At a CMVS, teachers provide instruction from a remote location using the internet. Students are not required to attend in person. While any student who lives in Massachusetts can apply to attend either of the two CMVSs, there is a maximum number of students who can attend each school. More information regarding CMVSs can be found at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/cmvs/>.

These schools existed prior to COVID-19 and are not the same as the remote or hybrid learning models operated by school districts due to COVID-19. Similar to charter schools and inter-district school choice, once a child is accepted to and begins attending a CMVS, the school district that the child previously attended no longer provides education or services. Similar to charter schools, CMVSs are separate school districts.

METCO

6. My child participates in METCO; does COVID-19 change participation?

Similar to students who participate in school choice, students participating in METCO will continue to be educated by districts they attend in the same way as students who live in those districts. They will receive in-person or remote education or a hybrid of the two. The schools attended are public schools and must meet the expectations noted in the answer to Question 1. More information regarding METCO can be found at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/metco/>.

Private Options for Education

Private and Parochial Schools

7. Does attending a private or parochial school meet the compulsory education requirement for students age 6-16? What will these schools be providing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes, attending a private or parochial school that has been approved by the school district in which the school is located meets compulsory education requirements. School districts focus on whether “instruction in all the studies required by law equals in thoroughness and efficiency, and in the progress made therein, that in the public schools in the same town.” See [General Laws chapter 76, § 1](#). For general information on local approval of private schools, please see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/advisory/100207privateschool.html>. Each school committee in Massachusetts has a policy on approval of private schools; details are available from the school district. Parents may also choose to enroll their child(ren) full-time in a private or public school, including a virtual school, located in another state.

Private and parochial schools have their own admission processes. DESE does not oversee or regulate private schools serving only privately funded students or parochial schools. Those schools determine their own policies, educational models, and reopening plans. For information about what a particular private or parochial school offers, please contact the school.

8. What is the difference between approved private schools for students with disabilities and other private schools? Does enrollment through a school district in an approved private school for students with disabilities meet compulsory education requirements? What will these schools be providing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Approved private schools serving publicly-funded students with disabilities must have approval from the school district in which the school is located, just like other private schools, and from DESE under [General Laws chapter 71B, § 10](#). A student age 6-16 who

attends an approved private school for students with disabilities meets compulsory education requirements. Because state law requires DESE to approve and monitor private schools that serve publicly funded students with disabilities, DESE's [Initial Fall School Reopening Guidance](#) issued on June 25, 2020, applies to these schools.

Home Schooling

9. I would like to home school my child and not have them attend public school or a private or parochial school. What can I expect?

Home schooling is governed by [General Laws chapter 76, § 1](#). For children of compulsory school age (6-16), home schooling requires advance approval by the district in which you live, under the policy that the school committee has adopted. This educational option existed before COVID-19. Home schooling is provided by or at the direction of a child's parent, instead of enrolling the child in a public or private school; home schooling is not remote learning provided by a school district. The requirements that apply to public schools, such as educator licensing or structured learning time, do not apply to home schooling.

Each school committee in Massachusetts has a policy on approval of home schooling plans; details are available from the school district. The school district approves and provides oversight of home schooling, with a focus on whether "instruction in all the studies required by law equals in thoroughness and efficiency, and in the progress made therein, that in the public schools in the same town." See [General Laws chapter 76, § 1](#). In light of the increased requests districts may receive due to COVID-19, DESE encourages districts to consider ways to handle requests efficiently. For example, the district's policy might offer provisional approval for a limited period based on an initial plan, pending receipt by a date certain of additional information that the district requires.

Home schooling plans are reviewed and approved by the school district where the child resides. Charter schools, CMVS, school choice districts, and vocational technical education programs do not approve home schooling plans. DESE does not approve home schooling plans or oversee school district policies regarding home schooling or review districts' decisions on home schooling proposals.

Parents planning to educate their child at home must notify (preferably in writing) the district in which they live, as the first step in the approval process. Notification alone does not authorize a parent to begin home schooling. Removing a child of compulsory school age from school without an approved home schooling plan would cause the child to become truant.

Once the school district receives a parent's notification that they wish to educate their child at home, the district must provide the parent with the district's policy and process for approval of home schooling and ask the parent to submit the proposed home

schooling plan. If the parent’s notification includes the proposed plan, the district should still provide the parent with its policy and process for approval of home schooling plans and then proceed with its review of the proposed home schooling plan.

Upon receipt of a proposed home schooling plan, the school district evaluates it and then either approves it, requests modification or additional information, or disapproves the proposed plan. Districts typically review a proposed home schooling plan for the content, instructional materials, duration and frequency of instruction, methods of instruction, evaluation, and whether it enables the child to make adequate progress in the areas that Massachusetts identifies as essential. The school district must communicate its decision to the parent, preferably in writing, within a reasonable period after receipt of the parent’s home schooling plan.

10. Can families hold off from sending a child to kindergarten and wait to send them next year?

Families are not required to send their children to school until September of the calendar year in which they turn six. While families can choose not to send children to kindergarten, they should consult with their school district. If the children are or will be six years old or older in 2020 and are not attending school, a home schooling plan is required.

11. The school district approved my home schooling plan. Does my child have access to district programs and extracurricular activities?

Under Massachusetts law, home-schooled students have a right to special education services. In addition, school districts are required to evaluate students suspected of having a disability and re-evaluate students eligible for special education services consistent with federal and state requirements. Please see the advisory at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/2018-1.html> for more information about the provision of special education and related services to home-schooled and privately educated students.

Home schooling is a private alternative to public school enrollment. Each school district may establish its own policy on participation in its programs by students not enrolled in the public schools. While not required, school districts have the discretion to allow home-schooled students to join district-provided courses, programs, or extracurricular activities, including athletics. This is a local decision and DESE does not review those decisions.

Remote Learning Parent Cooperatives and Microschools

12. What is a remote learning parent cooperative? Does it need approval from the school district, DESE, or EEC?

The term remote learning parent cooperative refers to families who have decided to keep their children enrolled in public or private school and have joined together to assist with and in some cases supplement the delivery of their children's remote learning program. EEC and DESE have collaborated to provide specific policies and guidance for these arrangements. For more information on expanded childcare options during remote learning, and how to ensure your child is in a licensed or license-exempt arrangement, please read the Joint Guidance at <https://eeclead.force.com/resource/1598716186000/CareOptions>.

13. What is a microschool? Does it need approval from the school district, DESE, or EEC?

The term microschool is not defined in Massachusetts law but is commonly understood to be small groups of families who have children aged 6-16 who are **not** enrolled in a public or private school or taught under an approved home schooling plan, and who wish to collaborate and teach their children as a group. Microschools must be approved by the local school committee. Depending upon what families have planned, the school district will decide whether the proposed microschool is a home school or a private school and review it for approval under its local policy, consistent with state law. For additional information on local approval of private schools, please see above at Private and Parochial Schools. For additional information on approval of home schooling plans, please see above at Home Schooling.

If you have questions not addressed in this document or require additional information, please contact compliance@doe.mass.edu. If you require additional information regarding approval of a home schooling program or other private educational option, please contact the school district in which you live.

ADDENDUM – SUMMARY TABLES

Table 1 Public Education

Public Options for School Enrollment	Where Students Are Educated	Governance	Educational Oversight
Local School District	In-school or remote learning or hybrid*	City or Town School Committee	DESE
Regional School District	In-school or remote learning or hybrid*	Regional School Committee	DESE
Charter School	In-school or remote learning or hybrid*	Board of Trustees	DESE
Vocational Technical Education Program	In-school or remote learning or hybrid*	School Committee	DESE
Inter-District School Choice	In-school or remote learning or hybrid*	School Committee	DESE
Commonwealth of Massachusetts Virtual Schools	Remote learning	Board of Trustees	DESE
METCO	In-school or remote learning or hybrid*	School Committee	DESE

Table 2

Private Options for Education	Where Students Are Educated	Approval Required Prior to Start	Oversight
Private and Parochial Schools	In-school or remote learning or hybrid*	Yes, School Committee or District approval is needed for a private or parochial school that serves students age 6-16	School Committee or District
Home Schooling	Typically, Home or Location of Offsite Activity	Yes, School Committee or District approval is needed for a parent's home schooling plan for a child age 6-16	School Committee or District

Private Options for Education	Where Students Are Educated	Approval Required Prior to Start	Oversight
Remote Learning Parent Cooperatives for Children Attending Public or Private Schools or under an Approved Home Schooling Plan	Home and other locations	No, provided that conditions of EEC license exemption are met; also see Joint Guidance**	
Microschools			
As Part of Home Schooling	Typically, Home or Location of Offsite Activity	Yes, School Committee or District approval is needed for a parent’s home schooling plan for a child age 6-16; also see Joint Guidance**	School Committee or District
As Alternative to Other Private Education or Public School Enrollment	May vary	Yes, School Committee or District approval is needed; also see Joint Guidance**	School Committee or District

*For details on the in-school, remote learning, and hybrid models that a particular district or school will be providing in school year 2020-2021, check the website of that district or school.

**Found in the Joint Guidance at <https://eeclead.force.com/resource/1598716186000/CareOptions>.