



Transitioning to a Model of Routine Respiratory Disease Prevention and Enhanced Outbreak Management and Control for COVID-19 in PreK-12 School Settings



The Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) is releasing this guidance for use in PreK-12 school settings to assist with transitioning to a model for COVID-19 management that aligns with our state's general public health approach to the routine management of respiratory viral diseases.

A New Approach to COVID-19 Management

Given the widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines, at-home COVID-19 testing, medications to treat COVID-19, falling case counts, and our collective experience mitigating the spread of COVID-19 using layered mitigation strategies in our schools over the last two years, effective February 28, 2022 our communities can begin to transition the management of COVID-19 in schools from a pandemic emergency response model toward a model that aligns with a more standard public health approach to the management and control of respiratory viral diseases (e.g., influenza).

When applied in the PreK-12 school setting, this model focuses more on response to clusters of cases, outbreaks, evidence of ongoing transmission in schools, and/or significant increases in community transmission risk and relies less on individual case investigation, contact tracing, and quarantining of staff and students following school exposures. This guidance may also be applied to other activities and settings outside of the normal school day (e.g., extracurricular activities, athletics). DPH encourages school districts to remain prepared to respond to new variants or other changes in the conditions surrounding COVID-19 in our state that could necessitate a local return to more enhanced mitigation strategies in PreK-12 schools.

It is likely that decisions regarding the appropriate time and conditions in which to transition to a routine disease prevention model for COVID-19, including any changes in the mitigation strategies used in school settings, will vary by community and may depend on factors other than current COVID-19 community transmission data. For a more detailed discussion of these considerations, please see the accompanying “Considerations for Boards of Education, District Administrators, and other Local Decision-Makers Regarding Potential Changes to School COVID-19 Policies and Practices.” After assessing the underlying COVID-19 risks and other needs in their communities, DPH encourages school districts that consider it appropriate or necessary to continue implementing some or all the [previous guidance for mitigation strategies](#) developed by DPH and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to continue to do so. PreK programs operating outside of school settings as well as other childcare centers should continue to operate according to [guidance provided by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood](#) (OEC).

Elements of a routine disease prevention model for COVID-19 in PreK-12 settings

During times when available COVID-19 data indicate that local conditions are improving and the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the community and schools is generally stable at a relatively low level, DPH advises that school districts may wish to transition to a routine disease prevention model for managing COVID-19 risk in their PreK-12 schools.

Routine strategies for COVID-19 prevention include:

- **Recommending [COVID-19 vaccination](#)** for all eligible students and staff, including [booster vaccine doses](#) when appropriate.
- **Supporting** students and staff who choose to continue [wearing a mask](#) even when school policies do not require their use.
- **Following [isolation guidelines](#)** for students and staff who have symptoms associated with, or have tested positive for, COVID-19.
- Recommending **COVID-19 transmission prevention strategies, [including testing \(self-testing and/or at provider sites\) and masking](#)** for students and staff, **following illness or exposures** to COVID-19 cases.
- Continuing to advise parents to report all cases of COVID-19 to the school and subsequently schools continuing to [report identified cases](#) to their local health department and the Connecticut Department of Public Health.
- Being prepared to **respond quickly to rapid increases in cases** or clusters of cases in schools (including increases in absenteeism due to respiratory illness) as described below.
- Continuing to follow [existing quarantine guidance](#) for students and staff who have been notified of certain higher-risk close contact exposures (e.g., household exposures, crowded social gatherings).

Strategies that would generally **not** be included in routine COVID-19 prevention include:

- Individual case investigation and contact tracing.
- Quarantine of students and staff with in-school or other lower risk (e.g., short duration, low intensity) close contact exposures.

Enhanced mitigation strategies for surge response and outbreak control

Surges in community spread of COVID-19 due to the emergence of new variants, waning immunity, and/or other factors can be expected to occur periodically, likely seasonally, and can have an impact on the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. Likewise, local increases in school absenteeism, especially due to respiratory illness, or an increase in reported cases of COVID-19 among students and/or staff may indicate a COVID-19 outbreak within a school or district. **Schools and local health officials should be in contact if there is a suspicion of increasing transmission or information suggesting an active outbreak of COVID-19 among students or staff.** Local health districts, in consultation with DPH, can assist schools in determining if a COVID-19 outbreak is suspected and what, if any, outbreak response strategies are needed to control transmission.

Recommended COVID-19 school **outbreak response strategies** include:

- Implementing a local **universal masking policy** for students and staff on a temporary basis. Implementation of masking can be done at the classroom, grade, or school level depending on the extent of transmission and structure of the school.
- **Limiting mixing** of impacted grades, classrooms, or other groups (i.e., cohorting) during meals, recess, and other gathering times to limit spread while a school is experiencing an outbreak.

- **Limiting outside visitors** to the school to those who are necessary for instructional or student support purposes.
- **Notifying potentially exposed students and staff and recommend testing.** While individual contact tracing does not need to occur, students, staff, and families should be notified of outbreaks occurring within their classroom, grade, or school level depending on the extent of transmission and structure of the school. Schools can offer testing available through state-supported programs (e.g., [Project COVID DeteCT](#)) or through distribution of purchased or state-provided self-test kits.
 - Testing of a group of students and/or staff associated with an outbreak should occur as soon as possible after the suspected outbreak is detected.
 - Recommendations for subsequent rounds of testing should be discussed with local health officials. The frequency and scope of outbreak testing can vary depending on the nature of the outbreak and the effectiveness of control measures.
 - Based on capacity and local circumstances, school administrators in coordination with local health officials may choose to implement testing for all students and staff regardless of vaccination status.

Enhanced mitigation strategies in response to worsening COVID-19 transmission conditions

In addition to the outbreak response strategies listed above, school districts may wish to enhance the mitigation strategies they already have in place, or redeploy strategies that have been used previously, either due to local preference or in **response to worsening conditions related to COVID-19 disease transmission in their communities** and/or **in surrounding areas**. These changes may include enhancing:

- **Spacing** to ensure at least 3 feet between seated individuals in classrooms or during other low intensity activities and to maintain 6 feet or more between individuals during high-intensity activities (e.g., physical education, performance arts).
- **Ventilation** to ensure maximum delivery of fresh outdoor air to occupied spaces, appropriate filtration of any recirculated air, and use of outdoor spaces to the extent possible for instructional or other purposes.
- **Cleaning** protocols to ensure that all occupied spaces are cleaned thoroughly at least once per day and that higher-risk spaces and surfaces (e.g., rest rooms, frequent touch points) are routinely cleaned and disinfected.
- **Communication** to encourage a heightened awareness by students, staff, parents, and other members of the school community regarding the enhanced mitigation strategies being utilized, any new policies or procedures implemented on a temporary basis, and reinforcement of the need to remain out of school if they are experiencing any symptoms associated with COVID-19 and/or they have been made aware of a close contact with a known COVID-19 case.

DPH advises school districts to continue to be vigilant in identifying COVID-19 cases and applying COVID-19 mitigation strategies. DPH will continue to work in coordination with local health departments/districts, school districts, and CSDE to monitor statewide COVID-19 data and determine the impact of the transition to a routine disease prevention model for COVID-19.