Considerations for Boards of Education, District Administrators, and other Local Decision-Makers Regarding Potential Changes to School COVID-19 Policies and Practices

Executive Summary

When considering changes to district COVID-19 policies and mitigation strategies, including the wearing of masks, school leaders should consider several factors in consultation with public health, education, and community stakeholders. This document provides some questions to consider when contemplating COVID-19 policy changes for schools including maintaining universal masking in schools or transitioning to "mask optional" policies.

1. What does the available data indicate regarding the community and district prevalence and transmission of COVID-19?

2. What is the risk tolerance for the possibility of increasing case numbers and necessary quarantine and isolation in your students and staff?

3. What is the current COVID-19 vaccination status of students and staff within individual schools and across the district, and what is the current COVID-19 vaccine coverage for the surrounding community?

4. What additional planning is necessary to address the needs of students and staff who may be at greater risk for adverse health outcomes?

5. What additional guidance is necessary to ensure support for students and staff who may wish to continue mask wearing?

6. What processes need to be in place for continuous risk assessment and prompt decision-making regarding COVID-19 policies and mitigation strategies (including mask use) going forward?

7. What advanced contingency planning needs to occur to prepare for potential surges and/or outbreaks?

General Guidance for Assessing COVID-19 Risk

Many individual and environmental factors contribute to transmission of respiratory viruses, including COVID-19. When case rates of COVID-19 in a community are high, the likelihood that any individual person in a group could be infectious is higher. Likewise, when those rates are lower and/or fewer individuals in a community are susceptible to a particular virus due to vaccination or recent recovery from infection, the likelihood of being in contact with an infectious person is lower. The experience with variants of the virus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) that have circulated widely in our state to date has indicated that individuals who are school-aged, in generally good health, and up-to-date with

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COVID-19 vaccinations are at lower risk for developing severe outcomes from COVID-19 if they become infected.

Considerations for School Districts

Prior to making any significant changes to the mitigation strategies in schools (including universal mask use), the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) encourage school districts to consider and discuss the unique complexities of school environments, the environmental conditions inside their school buildings, the health of their school populations, and the conditions in their immediate and surrounding communities. These discussions should take place in consultation with local health officials and school health and medical advisors, and decisions should incorporate input from school staff, students, their families, and other community members.

Although not an exhaustive list, the questions below reflect some of the topics that DPH and CSDE recommend that school districts include in their discussion and decision-making process with other local stakeholders. School districts should also determine if there are other specific questions applicable to their individual districts that should be included in discussions.

1. **What does the available data indicate regarding the level of COVID-19 transmission in the community and the school district?**

Considerations: Periodic review and consideration of various data points from all available resources, including those maintained by state and federal public health agencies, relevant to the risk of COVID-19 in your communities; assessing the current status of data metrics as well as the recent trends to help determine whether it is necessary or appropriate to rescind, revise, or redeploy mitigation strategies as periodic or seasonal changes in risk occur.

2. **What is the risk tolerance in your school district for the possibility of increasing case numbers and necessary quarantine and isolation in your students and staff?**

Considerations: Whether implementing fewer in-school mitigation strategies will have any effect on the ongoing provision of in-person learning; assessing the appropriateness of different masking policies in specific schools, depending upon the percentage of vaccinated students and other metrics.

3. **What is the current COVID-19 vaccination status of students and staff within individual schools and across the district, and what is the current COVID-19 vaccine coverage for the surrounding community?**

Considerations: Percentage of students and staff who are up to date with COVID-19 vaccinations (including the primary series and booster doses when eligible), fully vaccinated (received the primary series but no booster), partially vaccinated, unvaccinated, or whose vaccination status is unknown and the impact of vaccination status on potential differences in masking policies across district schools.

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4. **What additional planning is necessary to address the needs of students and staff who may be at greater risk for adverse health outcomes?**

Considerations: Whether there are medically fragile or immunocompromised students or staff who are at risk for severe outcomes if they become infected with COVID-19; engaging health advisors regarding provisions to reduce the risk of COVID-19 for those medically fragile students and staff who may be in frequent close contact with unmasked individuals inside the school.

5. **What assistance can be provided to students and staff making personal decisions regarding mask wearing?**

Considerations: Acceptance of students and staff who may wish to continue wearing masks; supporting those who might experience stress, fear, or anxiety being in school situations where masks are not being worn, particularly some younger students who have never experienced school in any other way than having everyone masked; managing the expectations of families who wish their children to remain masked in a mask optional environment.

6. **What processes need to be in place for continuous risk assessment and decision-making regarding COVID-19 policies and mitigation strategies (including mask use) going forward?**

Considerations: New processes, or review and revision of existing processes, and engaging stakeholders for monitoring and early identification of increasing respiratory disease cases (including COVID-19) in schools that may necessitate deploying outbreak control measures, including modifications to existing and planned masking policies.

7. **What advanced contingency planning needs to occur to prepare for potential surges and/or outbreaks?**

Considerations: Development of plans to respond to surges and/or outbreaks of COVID-19 in individual schools, school districts, and/or the community; to what extent will these plans include reconsideration of policies and practices or enhancing mitigation strategies in order to maintain safe in-person learning.

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