

Updates to DESE COVID-19 Guidance

May 27, 2021

On May 17, 2021, the Baker-Polito Administration announced that state-wide COVID-19 restrictions will be lifted, gathering limitations will be rescinded, and all industries will be permitted to open effective May 29, 2021. The State of Emergency will end on June 15, 2021.

As of May 29, with the exception of K-12 schools and a few other settings, those who are fully vaccinated (two weeks after receiving the second dose of Pfizer or Moderna vaccines or two weeks after receiving the Johnson & Johnson vaccine) will no longer be required to wear masks or physically distance outdoors or indoors. Unvaccinated individuals are encouraged to continue to wear masks until they are fully vaccinated.

This document is intended to provide guidance to districts and schools in interpreting these announcements in school settings across three time periods:

- **Through the end of the 2020-21 school year:** The core mitigation strategies that districts and schools have used all year will remain in place through the end of the school year, except for outdoor masking. Most other guidance also remains in place with a few exceptions. The graduation guidance has been updated to reduce restrictions in line with the Commonwealth's updates. In addition, there are other instances where guidance issued by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) relies on state-wide guidance that will be rescinded on May 29. In these instances (outlined later in this document), we recommend but do not require that districts and schools continue to follow the practices they currently have in place to minimize changes to school operations so close to the end of the school year.
- **Summer school and other summer programs:** DESE will not issue separate guidance for summer school programs. For summer programs, districts and schools are encouraged to follow the health and safety guidance from DESE currently in place for in-person learning this spring.
- **Fall 2021 school reopening:** For the fall, all districts and schools will be required to be in-person, full-time, five days a week, and all DESE health and safety requirements will be lifted. This includes all physical distancing requirements. We will collaborate with the Department of Public Health (DPH) to issue any additional health and safety recommendations over the summer (e.g., masks for elementary school students). We will provide any updates to districts and schools as we receive them.

Guidance for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year

1. Districts and schools are required to continue core mitigation strategies this school year

Thanks to the hard work of districts and schools, all grades have returned to full-time, in-person learning. Key to our safe reopening has been the implementation of a set of core mitigation strategies. In continued consultation with medical advisors, the strategies below and other DESE reopening guidance issued this year will remain in effect through the end of the school year unless otherwise noted.

- **Monitor for symptoms and stay home when sick:** Staff must monitor themselves for symptoms daily and students, with the assistance of families, must also be monitored daily for symptoms. Staff and

students must stay home if feeling unwell. Everyone must do their part to protect others and not come to school if they are exhibiting any COVID-19 symptoms or are feeling sick.

- **Wear masks:** Masking is a critical measure to contain the spread of COVID-19. We require all students and all staff to wear masks indoors and on school buses unless students receive a medical or behavior exemption. Masks must completely cover the nose and mouth and fit snugly against the sides of the face without gaps. When outdoors, students are not required to wear masks, even if they cannot maintain distance and regardless of the activity.
 - **Effective May 29, 2021, fully vaccinated educators do not have to wear masks when outdoors and unvaccinated educators are encouraged to wear masks when outdoors, in alignment with the [state masking advisory](#).**
- **Maintain strong hand hygiene:** Students and staff are required to exercise hand hygiene (handwashing or sanitizing) upon arrival to school, before eating, before putting on and taking off masks, and before dismissal. Handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is the best practice. However, hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol should be substituted when handwashing is not available.
- **Maintain physical distance:** Since June 2020, DESE guidance has consistently noted that three feet in classrooms is a safe standard for physical distancing when masks are worn and other mitigation strategies are in place, based on guidelines from the World Health Organization¹ and the American Academy of Pediatrics.² Our guidance balanced the urgent need to bring students in the Commonwealth back to in-person learning while minimizing the risk to students, staff, and their families. Three feet continues to be the minimum distance required between individuals when indoors. **When outdoors, individuals should distance as feasible.**
- **Cohorts/assigned seating.** Students organized in groups/classrooms and other cohorts help mitigate transmission of the virus. Assigned seating is also important because it effectively creates even smaller groups within cohorts to minimize transmission and reduce exposure. Wherever possible, seats should be assigned (including classroom, bus, meals).

2. Districts should review updates to guidance for outdoor activities and high school graduation

Outdoor activities. Outdoor activities. According to CDC guidance, students and adults are less likely to be exposed to COVID-19 during outdoor activities, even without the use of masks. When outdoors, students can have lunch, take part in physical education or recess activities, or have chorus or band classes without wearing masks or strict physical distancing. Students are still encouraged to distance as feasible when outdoors, especially if they are participating in higher respiration activities (i.e., chorus or wind/brass instrument use) or seated together (i.e., lunch). As of May 29, 2021, fully vaccinated educators do not have to wear masks when outdoors and unvaccinated educators are encouraged to wear masks, in alignment with the state masking advisory.

Graduation guidance. The graduation guidance has been revised effective May 29, 2021 for K-12 settings only and will be posted on the DESE website. This revised guidance updates masking and distancing guidelines, reduces cleaning and disinfecting guidance, removes graduation capacity limits, and reduces requirements for outdoor graduations.

¹ World Health Organization. (2020). Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19. Available at <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/considerations-for-school-related-public-health-measures-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

² American Academy of Pediatrics. (2020). COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry. Available at <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools>

3. DESE recommends that districts continue to follow state-wide COVID-19 guidance in school settings

In some areas, DESE guidance had required districts and schools to follow the Commonwealth's broader COVID-19 restrictions, such as those in the state theater and performance venue guidance or the state gathering limit. Effective May 29, 2021, these guidelines (which appear in the DESE documents noted below) will no longer be in place and will therefore no longer be required for districts and schools. However, in order to minimize changes to school operations, schools are encouraged to continue following the Commonwealth's previously-issued guidance in these areas at their discretion.

- **Supplemental Guidance for Student Groups and School Events**

This document outlines safety protocols for before and after school activities, school gatherings with outside participants (e.g., prom or performances), and leaving school grounds (e.g., field trips or volunteering activities). Effective May 29, 2021, schools are encouraged, but no longer required, to abide by state gathering limits, state event guidance, and state theater and performance venue guidelines. All other health and safety protocols outlined in the guidance document still apply.

- **Career/Vocational Technical Education Reopening Guidelines**

This document outlines safety protocols for vocational technical schools and comprehensive schools offering vocational technical programs. Effective May 29, 2021, vocational schools and programs are encouraged, but no longer required, to abide by state COVID-19 employee health protection, guidance, and prevention; state reopening mandatory safety standards for workplaces; and state reopening sector-specific protocols and best practices (i.e., restaurants and close contact personal services). All other health and safety protocols outlined in the guidance document still apply, including early education and care safety requirements.

The Commonwealth's guidance cited in the two DESE documents above will be available on the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development's [website](#) for reference as needed.

Planning for school year 2021-22

1. Health and safety requirements issued by DESE will be lifted

With the State of Emergency ending June 15, 2021, and as COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths continue to fall as vaccination rates increase, **for the fall, all districts and schools will be required to be in-person, full-time, five days a week and all DESE health and safety requirements will be lifted. This includes all physical distancing requirements.**

DESE encourages schools to maintain ventilation upgrades from this past year as feasible, continue hand hygiene practices, and extend policies that encourage students and staff to continue to stay home when sick. All current DESE guidance will be archived on the DESE website. Districts and schools may continue to refer to this guidance as helpful.

We will collaborate with the Department of Public Health (DPH) to issue any additional health and safety recommendations (e.g. masks for elementary school students) over the summer, and will provide any updates to districts and schools as we receive them.

2. Districts will no longer be able to offer remote learning as a standard learning model

As noted above, districts and schools will be required to be in-person, full-time, five days a week this fall. Pathways that existed prior to the pandemic for offering virtual learning to individual students in limited cases will remain available to districts and schools. These include home/hospital tutoring programs due to a documented medical condition,³ single district virtual schools, and other narrow circumstances. DESE will share more information on these pathways on a webinar in early June.

³ More information on the home/hospital tutoring program can be found here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/prs/ta/hhep-qa.html>