

COVID-19: Key Questions to Ask Before School Reopens

Adapted from SPAN Parent Advocacy Network

School districts across Maine are making plans for reopening schools the 2020-21 school year. Parents, students, and community members should be actively involved in developing these plans.

To guide these discussions and to ensure that various needs of families and students are taken into consideration, here are key questions you may want to ask district leaders about school reopening. The information in *purple italics* found after the question has been pulled from the MDOE guidance, if the question does not have any *purple italic* language after that means it is not addressed in the MDOE guidance. It is important to note that you should check with your local districts to see how they are addressing all these questions and implementing the MDOE guidance.

Guidance from the Maine Department of Education can be found at:

<https://www.maine.gov/doe/framework>

School Operations:

- ✚ Where can I find information about school district policies and procedures for school reopening?
- ✚ How will the district implement appropriate social distancing and/or face coverings to ensure the health and safety of students and staff?

Physical Distancing and Facilities

1. *Adults must maintain 6 feet of distance from others to the extent possible. Maintaining 3 feet of distance is acceptable between and among students when combined with the other measures outlined in this list of safety requirements.*
2. *6 feet of physical distancing is required for students while eating breakfast and lunch, as students will be unable to wear masks at that time.*
3. *A “medical isolation room” must be designated for students/staff who exhibit COVID-19 symptoms during the school day.*
4. *Schools should evaluate their existing ventilation capabilities and ensure that they are maximizing their current capacity. Adequate ventilation is required for classrooms, with schools having flexibility in implementation such as using properly working ventilation systems or outdoor air exchange using fans in open windows or doors.*
5. *Groups in any one area, room, or classroom must not exceed the Governor’s gathering size limits.*

Masks/Face Coverings

1. *Adults, including educators and staff, are required to wear a mask/face covering.*
2. *Students age two and above are required to wear a mask/face covering that covers their nose and mouth.*

3. *Masks/face coverings must be worn by all students on the bus.*
4. *Face shields may be an alternative for those students with medical, behavioral, or other challenges who are unable to wear masks/face coverings. The same applies to staff with medical or other health reasons for being unable to wear face coverings. Face shields worn in place of a face covering must extend below the chin and back to the ears.*

Personal Protective Equipment

1. *Additional safety precautions are required for school nurses and/or any staff supporting students in close proximity, when distance is not possible, or when student require physical assistance. These precautions must at a minimum include eye protection (e.g., face shield or goggles) and a mask/face covering.*
2. *b. Classrooms and/or areas that have been used by an individual diagnosed with COVID-19 must be closed off until thorough cleaning and sanitization takes place.*

🚧 How will the district implement enhanced cleaning and disinfection of school transportation vehicles and school buildings?

🚧 How will school ensure the safe distribution of breakfast and lunch?

Food Service

School meals play an important role in addressing food security for students. COVID-19 has not been shown to be a food-borne disease. However, eating together is a high-risk time for COVID-19 transmission because people must remove their face coverings to eat and drink. People often touch their mouths with their hands when eating. In addition, meals are usually considered time for talking together, which further increases risk, especially if children must speak loudly to be heard. Standard food preparation guidelines should be followed, with special consideration for masking and physical distancing between food service staff in the kitchen and when in contact with students/staff.

1. *As it is assumed that masks/face coverings will not be worn during meals, in order to achieve six feet of physical distance between individuals, consider ways to conduct breakfast and lunch that support physical distancing (e.g., stagger time, build in other breaks, etc.).*
 - a. *Prepare to hold breakfast and/or lunch in classrooms or outdoors, instead of the cafeteria or common areas.*
 - b. *If serving food in the cafeteria, develop staggered schedules that minimize mixing of cohorts and enforce physical distancing protocols.*
2. *Adjust food preparation and service procedures to minimize shared items (i.e. serving utensils), maintain physical distance, and support compliance with health and safety protocols.*
3. *In the event students continue with, or transition to, remote learning, provide school meals as needed for days they are not in the school building.*

🚧 In the event of a blended/hybrid approach to schooling, how will food services effectively switch between in-school and remote learning?

In the event students continue with, or transition to, remote learning, provide school meals as needed for days they are not in the school building.

- ✚ How will the monitoring of the implementation of safety protocols be conducted?
- ✚ How will the school district ensure that the implementation of physical distancing (e.g. dividers or partitions) does not become another form of restraint and seclusion?
- ✚ How will the school district promote compliance with safety and social distancing protocols through a sense of community responsibility rather than through punitive measures? How will violations be handled?
- ✚ Will ongoing educational training be provided to students, staff, and their families on safety precautions, safe interactions, and current health guidelines?
- ✚ How will students and staff be checked for symptoms of COVID-19? Will there be on-site COVID-19 testing?

Symptom Screening Before Coming to School:

Students (parents/caregivers) and staff members must conduct self-checks for symptoms prior to boarding buses or entering school buildings each day. Schools should provide information to families in their primary language to support them in conducting this check.

Any person showing symptoms must report their symptoms and not be present at school.

Schools must provide clear and accessible directions to parents/caregivers and students for reporting symptoms and absences.

Symptom Screening

Families and caregivers can help mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 in their school communities by keeping their children home from school if they are sick or have had close contact with a person diagnosed or suspected of having COVID-19. Checking for symptoms each morning by families and caregivers is critical and will serve as the primary screening mechanism for COVID-19 symptoms. Schools should provide information to families in their primary language to support them in conducting this check.

1. *Parents/guardians should screen their children for illness before sending them to school and should not send their children to school if they are ill. The following questions are recommended for screening:*
 - a. *Do you feel sick with any symptoms consistent with COVID-19? (such as new cough, shortness of breath, or other)*
 - b. *Have you been around anyone who is unwell?*
 - c. *Have you been in close contact with a person who has COVID-19?*
 - d. *Within the past 24 hours have you had a fever (100.4 and above) or used any fever reducing medicine?*

2. *Universal temperature checks of students upon entry to school premises is not recommended due to the high likelihood of potential false positive and false negative results.*
3. *Any student or staff member with a fever of 100.4 degrees or greater, symptoms of possible COVID-19 virus infection, or use of any fever reducing medicine in the past 24 hours should not be present in school.*
 - a. *The U.S. CDC maintains a list of COVID-19 symptoms that will be updated as more is learned about COVID-19.*
 - b. *Although children manifest many of the same symptoms of COVID-19 infection as adults, some differences are noteworthy. According to the CDC, children may be less likely to have fever, may be less likely to present with fever as an initial symptom, and may have only gastrointestinal tract symptoms.*
4. *Screening procedures are not required at the point of entry to the school. However, school staff, as well as bus drivers, should observe students throughout the day and refer students who may be symptomatic to the school healthcare point of contact.*
5. *Prepare a “medical isolation room” for students/staff who exhibit COVID-19 symptoms during the school day.*
6. *Additional guidance on return to school after illness is forthcoming from DOE/MCDC.*
7. *Students and staff who travel outside of Maine during the school year should follow the Governor’s Executive Orders related to travel.*

- ✚ **What is the plan if a student, student’s family member, or district staff member becomes directly impacted by COVID-19?**

Return to School after Illness

Sick staff members and students must use home isolation until they meet criteria for returning to school.

Additional guidance on return to school after illness is forthcoming from DOE/MCDC.

- ✚ **Would the school district be providing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) to students and staff?**

Masks/face coverings should be provided by the student/family, but extra disposable masks should be made available by the school for students who need them. Districts and schools with families experiencing financial hardship and unable to afford masks/face coverings should provide masks for students.

Reusable masks/face coverings provided by families should be washed by families daily.

Masks/face coverings should be replaced when soiled or wet. If the mask/face covering becomes soiled, remove and safely discard disposable masks, or store reusable face coverings in a sealed container or plastic bag for laundering. Perform hand hygiene after changing a soiled mask/face covering.

Masks/face coverings—or face shields for those who need them as described above—are required to be worn by everyone on the bus during school bus transportation.

Provide information on proper use, removal, and washing of face coverings to staff, students, and parents/guardians.

Additional guidance on the use of masks/face coverings by on-site clinical providers is forthcoming.

- ✚ Will wearing masks by students and staff be mandated to protect the health and safety of all? What if my child cannot wear a mask for a long period of time?

Masks/Face Coverings:

Adults, including educators and staff, are required to wear a mask/face covering.

Students age two and above are required to wear a mask/face covering that covers their nose and mouth.

Masks/face coverings must be worn by all students on the bus.

Face shields may be an alternative for those students with medical, behavioral, or other challenges who are unable to wear masks/face coverings. The same applies to staff with medical or other health reasons for being unable to wear face coverings. Face shields worn in place of a face covering must extend below the chin and back to the ears.

Transparent face coverings may be valuable to teachers and students in classes for deaf and hard of hearing students.

Alternatives 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.

Mask breaks should occur throughout the day. Breaks should occur in settings where students can be at least six feet apart and outside or at least with the windows open. Teach and direct students to cough or sneeze into their elbow when not wearing a face covering or alternatively, cough or sneeze into a tissue, discard the tissue into trash container, and then perform hand hygiene.

Additional safety precautions are required for school nurses and/or any staff supporting students with disabilities in close proximity, when distance is not possible. These precautions must at a minimum include eye protection (e.g., face shield or goggles) and a mask/face covering.

- ✚ What would school day look like for students next school year in terms of student schedules, including bus schedules, class size, class changes, lunch, before and after school activities and clubs, tutoring, and sports?

To minimize the number of students who would potentially be exposed in the case of a COVID-19 event, to the extent feasible, elementary schools should aim to keep students in the same group throughout the day for the duration of the academic term/curriculum, and middle and high schools should minimize mixing student groups to the extent feasible. Cohorts of students are commonly known as “pods” or “teams”.

- 1. Schools should divide students into small groups that remain with each other throughout each day. Schools should look for ways to isolate cohorts of students and prevent inter-group contact to the extent feasible.*
- 2. Faculty and staff should remain with a specific cohort to the extent possible.*
- 3. When in classrooms, all students should have assigned seating.*
- 4. There are no required maximum cohort or group sizes, as long as schools adhere to the physical distancing requirements in this guidance. Schools should utilize the smallest cohort size practicable.*
- 5. Cohorting students in middle and high schools presents unique challenges. Strategies to assist with cohorting in middle and high schools include:*
 - a. Block schedules (much like some colleges, intensive 1-month blocks).*
 - b. Eliminate use of lockers or assign them by cohort to reduce need for hallway use across multiple areas of the building. This strategy would need to be done in conjunction with planning to ensure students are not carrying home an unreasonable number of books on a daily basis and may vary depending on other cohorting and instructional decisions schools are making.*
 - c. Have teachers rotate instead of students when feasible.*

Group Singing/Chorus, Band, Physical Education, and Sports

- 1. Avoid group singing. Suspend choir and wind instruments (band). These activities are higher risk for COVID-19 transmission due to the larger numbers of respiratory droplets produced. Percussion and string instruments are allowed.*
- 2. Limit physical education and extracurricular sports to activities that do not involve close contact with other students or shared equipment, until advised otherwise by local public health officials.*
- 3. Plan for options to convene sporting events and participation in sports activities in ways that minimizes the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to players, families, coaches, and communities.*

Gatherings, Visitors, and Field Trips

- 1. Pursue virtual group events, gatherings, or meetings, if possible, and promote social distancing of at least six feet between people if events are held. Limit group size to the extent possible. Groups must not exceed the Governor’s gathering size limits.*
- 2. Limit any nonessential visitors, volunteers, and activities involving external groups or organizations as much as possible—especially with individuals who are not from the local geographic area (e.g., community, town, city, and county).*

3. *Field trips should be suspended at this time. Pursue virtual activities and events in lieu of field trips, student assemblies, special performances, school-wide parent meetings, and spirit nights, as much as possible.*

✚ How would school transportation services be provided in accordance with health and safety standards?

Busing presents unique challenges. Additional guidance will be provided as more evidence surrounding best practices becomes available.

1. *Encourage alternative modes of transportation for students who have other options.*
 - a. *Consider how you will manage increased traffic flow from families who decide to drop off/pick up their children.*
 - b. *Promote alternatives such as walking and biking.*
 - c. *Advise school staff and families to carpool with the same stable group of people. Open vehicle windows and maximize outdoor air circulation. Everyone in the vehicle should wear a face covering.*
2. *If transport vehicles (e.g., buses) are used by the school, drivers should practice all safety actions and protocols as indicated for other staff (e.g., hand hygiene, cloth face coverings).*
3. *For students riding the bus, symptom screening should be performed by families prior to being dropped off at the bus.*
4. *Physical distancing at bus stops and during pick-up and drop-off is recommended.*
5. *Masks/face coverings are required to be worn by everyone on the bus during school bus transportation.*
6. *Hand sanitizer must be available and used when entering and exiting the bus.*
7. *Assign seating. Students from the same household should sit together.*
8. *Use tape marks and signage to show students where to sit.*
9. *To minimize contact between passengers, load the bus from back to front and unload the bus from front to back.*
10. *Drivers should be a minimum of six feet from students; drivers must wear a face covering; consider physical barriers for driver (e.g., plexiglass).*
11. *Minimize number of people on the bus at one time within reason.*
12. *Adults who do not need to be on the bus should not be on the bus.*
13. *Have windows open if weather allows.*
14. *Routinely clean and disinfect buses or other transport vehicles. See the Cleaning and Disinfecting section of this guidance for additional information.*

✚ Could parents who choose to transport their children to and from school due to health concerns be able to get reimbursed by the district for mileage?

✚ Will the school appoint a designated staff person, who is COVID-19 point of contact, responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns from staff and families?

✚ What is the school district policy for return-to-school after COVID-19 illness?

Return to School after Illness

Sick staff members and students must use home isolation until they meet criteria for returning to school.

Additional guidance on return to school after illness is forthcoming from DOE/MCDC.

- ✚ How will privacy and confidentiality be ensured if a student, staff, or members of their immediate family become sick with COVID-19 symptoms, test positive for COVID-19, or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 symptoms?
- ✚ Will hand-washing or hand sanitizing stations be installed in each classroom and areas used by students and staff?
- ✚ What remote learning opportunities and resources will be provided to students with medical complications who are unavailable for face-to-face learning to ensure education equity?
- ✚ How will students who are quarantined receive education?
- ✚ How will the school attendance and discipline policies be impacted?
- ✚ How does the school district plan to provide educational programs for all students during the regular school day, as well as before and after school programs?
- ✚ What will a typical school day look like?

Academic Recovery:

- ✚ How will the district be reassessing all students when schools resume to determine their learning needs and provide individualized instruction?
- ✚ What professional development will be provided to teachers in online platforms and using tech tools to support remote instruction?
- ✚ How will the school district ensure that educators have timely access to student performance data and professional learning opportunities so they can effectively provide personalized learning and track student progress?
- ✚ What happens if parents do not feel comfortable with their student attending school in-person? Will the instruction be provided in an alternate format? What will it look like?
- ✚ Will the district consider offering more in-person learning opportunities for young children, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, homeless and migrant students, students in foster care, and economically disadvantaged students whose needs are more intense and who have been disproportionately impacted by the extended school closures?
- ✚ How will students receive a well-rounded education, including fine arts, music, physical education, and extracurricular activities, despite social distance restrictions?
- ✚ Have you considered how requiring educators to wear masks, if mandated, will impact students' ability to hear and understand instruction, particularly for early readers, English language learners, and students with disabilities?

1. *Transparent face coverings may be valuable to teachers and students in classes for deaf and hard of hearing students.*
2. *Alternatives 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.*

Social-Emotional and Health Supports:

- ✚ How will the school district be assessing mental health needs of students and staff before beginning the instruction and throughout the school year?
- ✚ Will mental and emotional support related to loss, grief, stress, anxiety, and trauma be provided to students and staff?
- ✚ How will the school district identify ongoing needs for social services, academic supports, and supplemental assistance needs of students and their families and provide supports and resources essential for student success?
- ✚ How will the school district help students, especially students who are new to the school, feel welcome, safe, comfortable, and alleviate their fears?
- ✚ What options are available for families of children with medical complications that may prevent them from returning to school for in-person instruction?
- ✚ How will the school district incorporate movement activities at regular intervals throughout the day to promote student and staff health and wellness?
- ✚ What will trauma-informed school culture and wrap-around supports look like in each school building?
- ✚ How will additional COVID-19 related support protocols be integrated and individualized in my child's Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

Remote Learning and Family Engagement:

- ✚ What specific tools, virtual platforms, and communication channels will be used to establish and maintain ongoing staff-student-parent collaboration?
- ✚ What instructional resources will be provided to families to facilitate learning at home, for example, textbooks, learning plans, and school supplies?
- ✚ Will my child be provided with an Internet service/ hotspot and a 1:1 computer/electronic device at no cost to enable remote learning?
- ✚ What ongoing training and support will be provided to parents/caregivers and other family members to effectively support learning of their children at home, including online tutorials and access to educators who can assist them?
- ✚ What supports will be provided to non-English speaking families? How does the district plan to communicate with families who do not speak English?

- ✚ Will digital literacy instruction and resources on how to use distance learning programs be available for families and in multiple languages?
- ✚ What conditions will prompt physical school buildings to close again and how learning will continue? How will these conditions be communicated to families so they can be prepared?
- ✚ How will the school district provide clear and frequent communication to families so that they have the most up-to-date information related to student schedule, instruction, progress monitoring or any information related to COVID-19?
- ✚ How will the school district ensure that the voices of students and their families are reflected in priorities and solutions outlined in school policies, procedures, and programs for school reopening and closures?
- ✚ Will the in-person parent meetings, such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, be permitted?

Adults and adult staff within schools should attempt to maintain a distance of six feet from other persons as much as possible, particularly around other adult staff. Strategies to increase adult-adult physical distancing in time and space include the following:

- *Conduct meetings, trainings, curriculum planning, and parent-teacher conferences virtually, to the greatest extent possible, even if all staff are on the school campus.*

- ✚ Will family learning centers located in the school buildings be open to provide parent education, training, socialization, and networking opportunities?

Parents should, in general, be discouraged from entering the school building.

- ✚ To what extent will school district-based, parent-led organizations like PTOs/PTAs be able to continue to meet in schools?

Parents should, in general, be discouraged from entering the school building.

- ✚ How will schools make information available to all families, regardless of Internet access, languages spoken in the community, or accessible formats, about school reopening/closures and changes impacting student learning?
- ✚ How will student, family, and community voices be included in the assessment process to determine the needs and assets related to academics, physical and mental health, social-emotional, technology, and socioeconomic conditions for student success?