

COMBATING



COVID-19



COVID-19 HEALTH AND  
PREVENTION GUIDANCE FOR

# OHIO K-12 SCHOOLS



2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR

Revised 7/26/21



Department  
of Health



Department  
of Education





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As schools get ready for the 2021-22 academic year, the ongoing health and safety of students, staff, and volunteers remains paramount. While great strides have been made in controlling the spread of COVID-19, the virus remains a health threat.

In issuing these recommendations, ODH is relying on current epidemiologic information, regulatory requirements, and law even as we anticipate full FDA approval of vaccines in the near future. ODH will continue to actively monitor these factors and will update this guidance as this situation continues to evolve.

Although children are less likely to get severely ill from COVID-19 compared with adults, they are at risk of being infected with the virus that causes COVID-19, getting sick from COVID-19, spreading the virus to others, and having severe health outcomes.

Because children 11 and younger cannot be vaccinated and less than a third of children 12 to 17 are fully vaccinated, it is strongly recommended that schools implement masking for students layered with other prevention strategies to protect people who are not fully vaccinated.

The Delta variant is rapidly becoming dominant in Ohio. It is highly transmissible, increasing risk, especially for those who are unvaccinated. Because the Delta variant spreads so quickly, these strategies to reduce

transmission in school are critically important to protect students, teachers, staff, and communities.

**Our goal is to keep students back in school, in-person five days a week. Students benefit from in-person learning.**

As students head back to school, the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) recommends following the same layered prevention strategies that were remarkably effective at controlling COVID-19 last school year:

- **Strongly recommend vaccinations** for staff and eligible students. Vaccines are our best tool to protect students and prevent the spread of the virus.
- **Wearing masks.** Masks have been proven to be extremely effective in slowing the spread of the virus. Ohio researchers conducted an evaluation last year that showed that masking helped control the spread of the virus in Ohio schools. ODH strongly recommends that those who are unvaccinated wear masks while in school.
- Additional measures including improving ventilation, maximizing distance between people, and practicing good hygiene, among others.

Consistent implementation of these core prevention measures helped limit the spread of COVID-19 in the classroom during the 2020-21 academic year. Continuing to follow these recommendations will protect students as much as possible.



## PROMOTING VACCINATION

COVID-19 is a vaccine-preventable, respiratory illness caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2. The disease can spread rapidly among individuals who are not fully vaccinated and result in serious illness or death.

Vaccination is the leading public health prevention strategy to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Achieving high levels of COVID-19 vaccination among eligible students as well as teachers, staff, and household members is one of the most critical strategies to help schools safely conduct in-person learning and allow safe participation in extracurricular activities and sports.

People who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 are at low risk of symptomatic or severe infection. A person is considered fully vaccinated two weeks following the final dose in a two-dose vaccine or two weeks after a single-dose vaccine.

Ohioans age 12 years and older are eligible for COVID-19 vaccination. We anticipate being able to vaccinate younger children as the academic year progresses.

### Strategies to Promote Vaccination of Eligible Students and Staff

- Encourage teachers, staff, students, and their families to get vaccinated against COVID-19 and share information from your local health department or partner providers on COVID-19 vaccination locations

in your community. Visit [gettheshot.coronavirus.ohio.gov](https://gettheshot.coronavirus.ohio.gov) to find where the vaccine is available in your community.

- Consider partnering with your local health department or other vaccine providers in your community to host vaccination clinics on-site before, during, or after school or in the summer leading up to the return to school.
- In partnership with local vaccine providers, consider hosting information sessions or offering pop-up clinics in conjunction with school activities.
- Consider offering flexible, supportive sick leave options (e.g., paid sick leave) for employees to get vaccinated or who have side effects after vaccination. Provide students and families flexible options for excused absence to receive a COVID-19 vaccination and for possible side effects after vaccination. Side effects are natural and indicate the body activating an immune response after receiving a vaccination. Most side effects are minor and short in duration.
- Work with local partners to offer COVID-19 vaccination for eligible students and eligible family members during pre-sport/extracurricular activity summer physicals or in conjunction with other immunizations administered before the new school year.



## WEARING MASKS HELPS CONTROL VIRUS SPREAD AND PROTECTS STUDENTS AND STAFF

Wearing masks protects students, teachers, and staff from COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.

COVID-19 is an airborne respiratory virus. Wearing masks has been proven to prevent the spread of respiratory droplets that are created when people talk, laugh, sing, cough and sneeze.

Last school year, Ohio researchers conducted an evaluation of interventions implemented in schools to help slow the spread of the virus including wearing masks and distancing. Their research found that wearing masks combined with distancing was effective in slowing the spread of the virus.

ODH strongly recommends that those who are unvaccinated wear masks while in school.

This is especially important indoors, in crowded settings where physical distancing cannot be maintained, and for individuals who are not fully vaccinated.

For those districts not opting to require masks, parents will still have the option to have their children wear masks while in school or participating in school activities.

- **Indoors:** As noted above, it is recommended that masks be worn. Children under 2 years of age should never wear masks.
- **Outdoors:** In general, mask use is not necessary when outdoors, including when participating in outdoor play, recess, and physical education activities.

However, particularly in areas of substantial to high transmission, the CDC recommends that people who are not fully vaccinated wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings or during activities that involve sustained close contact with others who are not fully vaccinated.

### FACT:

**Use of face coverings can reduce the spread of respiratory droplets that, in infected people, carry and spread COVID-19.**

While masking in school is recommended for people older than 2 years of age, exceptions should be made for the following categories of people:

- People who cannot wear a mask, or cannot safely wear a mask, because of a developmental delay or disability. Discuss the possibility of reasonable accommodation with those who are unable to wear or have difficulty wearing certain types of masks.
- People for whom wearing a mask would create a risk to workplace health, safety, or job duty, as determined by relevant workplace safety guidelines or federal regulations.



## Facial Coverings

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have said that COVID-19 spreads via respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks.

These droplets may pose an inhalation threat even when the person they are speaking with is at a distance and in an enclosed space.

Masks provide a barrier that prevents these respiratory droplets and smaller aerosolized particles from spreading from one person to another. They protect the person who is wearing the mask by preventing the spread of that person's respiratory droplets as others speak, cough, sneeze or even sing. If both people involved in the conversation are wearing masks, it limits the particles passing between them.

Be aware that wearing masks can be difficult for people with certain disabilities (for example, visual or hearing impairments) or for those with sensory or cognitive issues.

- For people who are only able to wear masks some of the time, prioritize mask wearing when it is difficult to separate students and/or teachers and staff (e.g., while standing in line or during drop-off and pickup).

## School transportation

The CDC continues to require that masks be worn on all public transportation, including school buses. This requirement is regardless of vaccination status.

All transportation services should follow applicable federal rules and regulations. Learn more at the CDC's [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#) page.





## IMPROVING VENTILATION

COVID-19 is a respiratory virus that is highly transmissible by air. Improving ventilation is a critical intervention that can help slow the spread of the virus.

ODH recommends that schools increase ventilation within classrooms and other common spaces. Schools in Ohio have access to special, one-time federal funding through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. Projects to upgrade and improve air quality systems in school buildings are an allowable use under ESSER, and **schools are strongly encouraged to invest in upgrades, aligned with the CDC guidance below, to their indoor air quality systems using these funds.**

The U.S. Department of Education recently released further guidance for schools on how federal funds can be used to improve ventilation.

The CDC calls ventilation a key part of “maintaining healthy environments, and is an important COVID-19 prevention strategy for schools,” especially when layered with other prevention strategies. The CDC recommends that schools consider ways to do the following:

- Bring in as much outdoor air as possible.
  - When safe, open windows and doors.
  - Use child-safe fans.
  - Consider outdoor activities and classes.
- Ensure HVAC settings are maximizing ventilation.
  - Make sure HVAC systems are serviced and maximized for ventilation purposes.
  - Upgrade and correctly use HVAC systems to provide fresh air.
- Filter and/or clean the air in your school.
  - Improve air filtration, and consider portable air cleaners and ultraviolet germicidal irradiation.

- Use exhaust fans in restrooms and kitchens.
  - Inspect and maintain exhaust systems and use them at full capacity.
- Open windows in transportation vehicles.
  - Keep windows on buses and school vans open when safe.



For more specific information about maintenance, use of ventilation equipment, actions to improve ventilation, and other ventilation considerations, refer to the following CDC guidance:

- [Ventilation in Schools and Childcare Programs.](#)
- [Ventilation in Buildings.](#)
- [Ventilation FAQs.](#)
- [Improving Ventilation in Your Home.](#)

More ventilation recommendations for different types of school buildings can be found in the [American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers \(ASHRAE\) schools and universities guidance document.](#)



## ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATION

### MAXIMIZING DISTANCE BETWEEN STUDENTS, STAFF, AND OTHERS

Ensuring Ohio students have access to in-person learning remains a priority, and schools in which not everyone is fully vaccinated should implement physical distancing to the extent possible. This should not hinder student participation in in-person learning.

People who are not fully vaccinated should maintain physical distance with a target of at least 3 feet from other people who are not from the same household. Several studies, including an evaluation led by Ohio researchers, from the 2020-21 school year show low COVID-19 transmission levels among students in schools where students wore masks.

- The CDC currently recommends schools maintain at least **3 feet** of physical distance between students within classrooms.
  - When it is not possible to maintain a physical distance of at least 3 feet, it is especially important that schools layer multiple other prevention strategies, such as indoor masking, screening testing, cohorting, improved ventilation, regular cleaning, hand-washing, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when sick.
  - Mask use by people who are not fully vaccinated is particularly important when physical distance cannot be maintained.
    - When physical education activities or recess are held indoors, it is particularly important for people who are not fully vaccinated to wear masks and maximize distance when possible.
- During school mealtimes, maximize physical distance as much as possible in the food service

### FACT:

**Social distancing can reduce the spread of infectious disease.**

line and eating areas (especially indoors). Using additional spaces outside the cafeteria for mealtime seating, such as the gymnasium or outdoor seating, can help facilitate distancing.

- Be aware that physical distancing can be difficult for young children and people with certain disabilities (for example, visual or hearing impairments) or for those with sensory or cognitive issues. For more information, review the CDC's Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools page.
- Schools should limit nonessential visitors and volunteers, particularly in areas where there is moderate-to-high COVID-19 community transmission.
  - Schools should not limit access for direct service providers (e.g., paraprofessionals, therapists, early intervention specialists, mental health and healthcare consultants, and others). If providers who are not fully vaccinated travel between more than one location, ask whether any of the other locations have had COVID-19 cases.



## ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATION

### ENCOURAGE HAND-WASHING, CLEANING, AND DISINFECTION TO PREVENT SPREAD

Hand-washing and sanitizing continue to be important tools in preventing the spread of COVID-19. People should practice hand-washing and proper respiratory etiquette (covering coughs and sneezes) to keep from getting and spreading COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Schools should continue to provide adequate hand-washing supplies and hand-sanitizing stations throughout classrooms and high-traffic areas in school buildings.

For more information on cleaning and disinfecting, see [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#).



### **FACT:**

Handwashing and other common prevention methods are some of the most effective ways to reduce the spread of infectious disease.





## ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATION

### ASSESS SYMPTOMS/CONTACT TRACING/ISOLATION AND QUARANTINE

#### Symptoms

Schools should educate teachers, staff, and families about when they and their children should stay home and when they can return to school. Families should be reminded of the importance of keeping children out of the classroom if they are showing symptoms of COVID-19 and encouraged to get them tested.

This is essential to keep COVID-19 infections out of schools and prevent spread to others.

Anyone with symptoms or a temperature above 100 degrees Fahrenheit should stay home.

Schools should monitor daily absences of students and staff for trends.

## COVID-19 Symptoms

Help prevent the spread of COVID-19



### You may have COVID-19 if you experience one or more of the following:

- Fever or chills.
- Cough.
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.
- Fatigue.
- Muscle or body aches.
- Headache.
- Loss of taste or smell.
- Sore throat.
- Congestion or runny nose.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Diarrhea.
- Repeated shaking with chills.

Symptoms range from mild to severe and may appear two to 14 days after exposure to the virus.

Ohio

Department of Health



### Contact Tracing

Anyone with COVID-19 presents a risk of further community transmission, particularly to people who are not fully vaccinated.

People with COVID-19 will be contacted by public health officials and asked to provide information about potential risk factors (e.g., travel, common areas of exposure, etc.) and demographic information.

Schools should also report new diagnoses of COVID-19 to their local health department as soon as they are discovered. School officials should notify, to the extent allowable by applicable privacy laws, teachers, staff, and families of students who were close contacts as soon as possible (within the same day if possible) after they are notified that someone in the school has tested positive.

### Isolation/Quarantine

Isolation and quarantine have been used by public health officials for decades as they work to protect the public from infectious diseases. These practices long pre-date COVID-19 and are routinely used to prevent the spread of childhood illnesses including measles and whooping cough.

The K-12 school environment is a setting in which layered public health strategies have been shown to be effective at reducing spread of COVID-19. During the last school year, Ohio modified standard quarantine procedures for K-12 students based upon studies and pilot evaluations, including the Ohio Schools COVID-19 Evaluation and CDC's Close Contact K-12 Exception.

Under these modified quarantine procedures, unvaccinated students who have been exposed to COVID-19 in school settings can continue to attend school and participate in sports and extra-curricular activities if both students were wearing masks consistently and correctly, and other layered prevention strategies including appropriate distancing were in place. This quarantine procedure will continue as we begin the 2021-22 school year. Fully vaccinated students do not have to quarantine.

With these layered prevention strategies more students will be able to remain in the classroom and continue participating in sports and extra-curricular activities.





## ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATION

### ADDITIONAL NOTES ON SPORTS AND OTHER EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

School-sponsored sports and extracurricular activities can help students learn and achieve, and support social, emotional, and mental health. Due to increased exhalation that occurs during physical activity, some sports can put players, coaches, trainers, and others who are not fully vaccinated at increased risk for getting and spreading COVID-19. Close contact sports and indoor sports are particularly risky. Similar risks might exist for other extracurricular activities, such as band, choir, theater, and school clubs that meet indoors.

- Prevention strategies for those who participate remain important and should comply with school day policies and procedures. Students should refrain from these activities when they have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and should be tested.
- The use of masking and social distancing to the extent possible is recommended during indoor sports and other higher-risk activities to protect students who are not fully vaccinated.





## Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools.](#)
- U.S. Department of Education, [COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 1.](#)
- Ohio Department of Health, [COVID-19 Fact Sheet: Guidelines for K-12 Student Quarantine.](#)

## Communications Resources

- Ohio Department of Health, [COVID-19 Vaccination Communications Toolkit.](#)
- Ohio Department of Health, [Youth Vaccine Clinic Toolkit.](#)
- Ohio Department of Health, [Workplace Vaccine Toolkit.](#)

COMBATING



COVID-19



COVID-19 HEALTH AND  
PREVENTION GUIDANCE FOR  
**OHIO K-12 SCHOOLS**



**MIKE DEWINE**  
GOVERNOR OF OHIO

For more information go to  
**[coronavirus.ohio.gov](https://coronavirus.ohio.gov)**

