

RETURN TO SCHOOL GUIDANCE

To maintain consistency among area school districts, a sub-group of area superintendents, health care professionals and health department personnel developed the following return to school guidance. Participants in this ongoing dialogue are listed at the end of this document. This guidance pertains specifically to school settings and operations, and may differ from guidance provided to the general public. The recommendations included in this document are endorsed by the St. Louis County Department of Public Health, EducationPlus and Independent Schools of St. Louis and are subject to adjustment as conditions change.

This document is categorized into “must” and “may” sections and items may be re-categorized if conditions should change. It is important to note that districts may choose to implement plans differently based on local Board and leadership decisions or due to guidelines established by local government authorities. This guidance to the extent possible was established with the current known factors as of July 1, 2020.

Introduction:

Schools in our community were impacted in an unprecedented way by the emergence of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), the causative agent of COVID-19. As we have moved through this pandemic, we have learned that children are less vulnerable to infection and are unlikely to become seriously ill with COVID-19. The profound negative impact of loss of in-person schooling on the well-being of children has been well documented and thus we are preparing for the return to school for the 2020-2021 school year.

However, we must be attentive that this public health crisis has not ended. Adults, particularly those who are older and those with underlying health conditions, are at increased risk of serious illness from COVID-19. Our schools need to be prepared to reduce the chance that anyone will acquire this infection during the school day and armed with a protocol to respond to a case of infection. Schools must be poised to adapt to new emerging information in order to create a safe and robust educational experience. Although planning for this “new normal” may create some inconveniences, if we work together as a community, we will help ensure that our students, staff and faculty will stay healthy and will reduce the chance of significant educational disruptions.

General Parameters/Suggestions:

- Establish a plan for daily screening for illness or exposure to the novel coronavirus.
- Minimize interaction—stagger lunch times, alternate common space usage and keep students in cohorts to the extent possible.
- Keep students physically distanced in a classroom, to the extent possible.
- Avoid large gatherings that mix multiple groups and do not allow for social distancing. For the short-term, avoid assemblies and pep rallies.
- Develop contingency plans to respond to changes in the level of transmission in the community. Protocols should be developed for hybrid and virtual learning that can be activated if the circumstances dictate.

Social Distancing

Social distancing of at least 6 feet remains one of the best preventative measures for reducing the spread of COVID-19. It is recognized that this cannot be accomplished at all times, and distancing of at least 3 feet has been shown to reduce infections. While children are unlikely to exhibit serious symptoms from COVID-19, social distancing helps prevent the spread to adults—especially those who may be at high risk. Note that all individuals who spend more than 15 minutes within 6 feet of an individual tested positive for COVID-19, will be asked to quarantine. Keep this in mind when deciding parameters in regards to social distancing.

Schools Must:

- Establish social distancing protocols for various activities during the school day—classroom, cafeteria, gym, playground, etc.
- Establish a process for social distancing, not mixing different student groups, and sanitizing between groups when students are eating within a cafeteria.
- Establish a contained area (such as a vestibule) for parents when checking students in/out during the school day. If others are waiting to check their student in, they should wait outside (in their vehicle if necessary) so there is a limited number of individuals in the contained area. Only one person at a time should be waiting in the contained area.
- Discontinue allowing non-essential visitors into the school.
- Administer health screening questions if anyone is allowed into the school building. Face masks should be required for these individuals.
- Keep accurate records of anyone who has been inside a building in case an outbreak occurs to assist with contact tracing efforts.

Schools May Consider:

- Addressing class size by splitting classes, requiring attendance on alternating days and/or reducing the number of students within the classroom.
- Adjusting elective classes by offering activities within the classroom instead of students moving to a new space.
- Establishing a schedule for varying arrival and departure times to minimize the number of students entering and exiting the building at the same time.

Screening – Staff

Schools Must:

- Implement a health screening for all staff before reporting to work.

Schools May Consider:

- Administering a self-assessment before or when reporting to work. Questions on the self-assessment should include the new onset of any of the following not explained by another known condition (note: the CDC may update symptoms at any time): fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea; or if the individual has been in close contact in the past 2 weeks with an individual with a confirmed case of COVID-19.
- If a staff member answers “Yes” to any of the screening questions, they should not report to work.
- Implementing random temperature checks to reinforce the practice of self-screening.
- Conducting a temperature check and administer screening questions when staff member reports to work.

Screening – Students

Schools Must:

- Implement a health screening for all students before reporting to school.

Schools May Consider:

- Establishing a protocol for parents to screen their own children before sending to school. This would include a temperature check and screening questions similar to those administered to staff.
- Taking temperatures of students as they enter the building and requiring parents to complete screening questions for their own children before sending to school. Note that only a minority of children who have COVID-19 will have a fever. Furthermore, temperature checks of students may create a bottleneck and cause the crowding and contact with other students that should be avoided.

When Someone Is Sick

We have a culture of working or going to school when sick, and we need to change that culture by encouraging staff and students to stay home when sick. This message should be clearly sent to staff, parents and students. Perfect attendance awards for staff and students should be eliminated. We must strive to keep sick people at home.

Schools Must (when someone is identified with any symptoms listed in the health screening):

- Send a staff member home immediately. If it is a student, isolate the student until arrangements can be made for the child to be picked up by a parent or guardian.
- Advise the individual to contact a healthcare provider if they exhibit symptoms or answered “Yes” to any screening question. The healthcare provider will be able to determine whether the symptoms are a result of COVID-19 infection or if there are other health issues.
- Follow the guidance of the local health department regarding contact tracing, classroom or school closure, notification of community, sanitizing protocols, etc. if a case of COVID-19 is identified within the school.

Face Masks (or Face Shields) – Staff

Schools Must:

- Require staff members to wear a face mask or face shield when within 6 feet of another individual.
- Require adults who are not staff members to wear a face mask when inside a building.
- Provide medical grade face masks, eye protection and other PPE to nurses and other staff for use when working with students who become ill at school.
- [Instruct](#) staff in the proper manner which a face mask should be worn.

Schools May Consider:

- Providing face shields for health care workers as an additional precaution.

Face Masks – Students

Schools Must:

- Encourage older students (over the age of 9) to wear a face mask if there are circumstances that put them in close areas. If at all possible, wearing masks when in a hallway during passing period is highly recommended. Younger students who are less able to comply with a requirement to wear a face mask should not be asked to do so.
- Isolate any student who becomes ill and provide a face mask.
- [Instruct](#) students who are being required to wear a face mask in the proper manner in which a mask should be worn. Efforts should be made to destigmatize the wearing of face masks to protect those students who need to wear one.

Schools May Consider:

- Requiring older students (over the age of 9) to wear face masks at all times.
 - It should be noted that improper use of a cloth face mask or frequent hand-to-face activity which might be stimulated by continuous face mask usage could result in increased risk of infection.
- Requiring all students to wear face masks at all times.

Gloves – Staff (gloves not necessary for students)

Schools Must:

- Provide gloves for any staff member working with sick or suspected sick individuals. A fresh pair of gloves should be worn when working with each new individual. An individual should use hand sanitizer before putting on gloves and then once again after removing gloves.
- Require custodians to use gloves whenever cleaning.

Hand Washing – Staff and Students

Schools Must:

- Encourage hand washing or the use of hand sanitizer upon entering a building, before eating, after eating, after restroom usage, before any group activities and before boarding school buses.
- Recommend hand washing any time the face/mouth are touched (which may prove difficult with younger students).

Water Fountains – Staff and Students (note: the CDC has not issued specific guidance regarding water fountains)

Schools Must:

- Avoid groups congregating around water fountains waiting for access.

Schools May Consider:

- Closing down access to water fountains.
- Allowing the use of water fountains for filling water bottles.

Restrooms

Schools Must:

- Limit the number of individuals in the restroom.
- Administer at least one deep cleaning a day and clean/wipe down high touch surfaces throughout the day. High-touch surfaces can transmit the disease but it's not a high instance.
- Maintain a cleaning log to assist with contact tracing if necessary.

Schools May Consider:

- Implementing scheduled restroom breaks so each grade/class can use at a specific time and avoid mixing students from different classes.
- Marking spaces outside restrooms to provide visual cues to ensure social distancing while waiting.

Transportation

Schools Must:

- Assign seats to reduce transmission and assist with contact tracing if necessary.
- Establish a protocol for loading and unloading of buses to minimize student contact such as loading the rear of the bus first.
- Establish daily cleaning protocols for sanitizing each bus.
- Require bus drivers to wear face masks.

Schools May Consider:

- Encouraging older students (over the age of 9) to wear face masks while being transported on the bus if they are sitting in the same seat as a non-family member.
- Reducing the number of students on a bus by allowing only one student per seat and/or alternating rows of students.
- Encouraging parents to transport students to and from school.
- Sanitizing each bus in between routes.

Cleaning and Disinfecting

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has provided [guidelines](#) regarding cleaning and disinfecting school buildings and other areas.

Schools Must:

- Require the use of disposable gloves when cleaning and disinfecting.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces per CDC [guidance](#).
- Practice routine cleaning of frequently touched surfaces.
 - More frequent cleaning and disinfection may be required based on level of use.
 - High-touch surfaces and objects (such as tables, doorknobs, light switches, desks, phones, keyboards, faucets, etc.) should be cleaned and disinfected regularly.
- Disinfect using EPA-registered household [disinfectant](#), properly diluted bleach solutions or alcohol solutions with at least 70% alcohol.

Schools May Consider:

- Implementing sanitizing procedures using alternative means. Please check the effectiveness with local health department.

Social and Emotional Well-being

This pandemic has caused stress on staff and students. From prolonged absences to fear of the unknown to deaths related to COVID-19, there have been a variety of stressors on our school community. Schools should consider these objectives when creating their re-entry plans:

- Consider adopting an approach of universal services for mental health support for all students and staff.
- Provide training to teachers and other staff on how to talk to and support students during a pandemic and psychological first aid.
- Consider contacting students who do not return to school with a wellness check-in as they may be experiencing school avoidance due to anxiety related to the pandemic.
- Provide additional support to students who may be exhibiting suicidal ideation or grieving due to loss of a family or friend, or missed experiences.
- Consider implementation of academic accommodations for students having difficulty concentrating or learning new information due to stress associated with the pandemic.

When a Case is Identified

If an individual within a school building is tested positive for COVID-19, schools must work with their local health department but could expect some of these parameters to be put in place:

- Identify who the individual was in contact with, within a 6-foot space, for at least 15 minutes. If specific contacts cannot be identified, quarantine everyone who was in the same room, bus or other areas. Schools will need to keep room/bus logs or photos in order to assist with contact tracing. By having a seating chart, bus seating charts or photos, the number of students required to be quarantined can be minimized.
- The St. Louis County Health Department suggests that if over 5% of the student body in a building or district test positive any day, 4% test positive over 2 days in a row or 3% test positive for 3 days in a row, then that building or district closes for 10 days (percentages may change when better scientific data becomes available).
- Schools need to ensure there is a space to isolate a sick student or staff member until the individual can leave the building.
- In the event a person diagnosed with COVID-19 is determined to have been in the building and poses a risk to the staff or students, a school may close for 1-2 days for cleaning and disinfection of that building or exposed area if unable to clean during the nighttime closing.

This collaborative working group included the following leaders:

Dr. Kevin Carl, Superintendent, Hancock Place School District
Dr. Joe Davis, Superintendent, Ferguson-Florissant School District
Dr. Tim Dilg, Superintendent, Valley Park School District
Jamie Driver, Executive Director, Independent Schools of St. Louis
Jim Eckrich, Program Officer, St. Louis County Children's Service Fund
Katie Kaufmann, Project Manager, COVID-19 Regional Response Team
Dr. Steven Lawrence, Associate Professor of Medicine, Infectious Diseases, Washington University
Dr. Art McCoy, Superintendent, Jennings School District
Dr. Mark Miles, Superintendent, Rockwood School District
Dr. Jason Newland, Professor of Pediatrics, Infectious Diseases, Washington University
Dr. Rachel Orscheln, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Infectious Diseases, Washington University
Dr. Jason Purnell, Lead, COVID-19 Regional Response Team
Spring Schmidt, Acting Director, St. Louis County Department of Public Health
Dr. Randall Sterkel, General Pediatrician, Washington University
Keith Street, Health Education Supervisor, St. Louis County Department of Public Health
Dr. Paul Ziegler, CEO, EducationPlus

EducationPlus is a cooperative of 58 school districts throughout the St. Louis region representing about a third of the state's students. We serve our members by providing quality learning opportunities, leveraging our members' buying power through cooperative purchasing, creating networking opportunities and advocating on behalf of our members. We maximize the region's resources to ensure student success.

Independent Schools of St. Louis (ISSL) is a non-profit professional association established in 1972 that includes 43 independently governed elementary and secondary schools throughout the metropolitan St. Louis region. Member schools provide a complete range of educational opportunities for students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. ISSL promotes public awareness of independent schools and their value, professional development for staff and trustees, and collaboration among its members.