



2021-2022 COVID-19 Guidance for Schools

March 1, 2022

Despite hardships for the 2020-21 school year, Arkansas's students, educators, and communities finished the year strong and were successful at maximizing on-site instruction in Arkansas even when many other states remained virtual. The success came as a result of strategic planning and ongoing communication between school districts, the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH). Last summer, school districts, in collaboration with their communities, developed and implemented "Ready for Learning" plans that put into action multiple mitigation strategies to minimize risks to students and staff. These plans served as each LEAs Safe Return to In-Person learning, and the results from last year leave us more confident in the proven mitigation strategies and more aware of what to expect.

Last spring, during the period of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) ESSER award, schools were required to update their Safe Return to In-Person Instruction procedures to describe plans for Continuity of Services for the remainder of the school year and during the summer. Plans were required to be posted by April 15, 2021, on school district websites. These plans must be reviewed regularly, but no less frequently than every six months, and be revised when appropriate. Updates should be posted on each school district's website.

To assist schools with developing procedures for all school operations, including remaining summer activities, DESE is updating guidance regarding the best practices that will continue to ensure the safety of both students and educators while supporting a strong in-person learning environment.

Because many schools serve children under the age of 5 who are not eligible for vaccination at this time, this guidance emphasizes implementing layered prevention strategies to protect people who are not fully vaccinated, including students, teachers, staff, and other members of their households, especially in areas where community transmission is elevated. School districts are recommended to continue practicing preventative measures such as appropriate masking, physical distancing, screening, testing, ventilation, handwashing and respiratory etiquette, contact tracing, and cleaning and disinfecting to the extent practical. As we lessen requirements for COVID-19 restrictions, a very important mitigation strategy is isolation in accordance with CDC recommendations of those diagnosed with COVID-19. This includes staying home when



sick and getting tested. School districts have access to additional federal funding that is specifically designed to **prevent, prepare for, and respond** to COVID-19 and are encouraged to monitor planned uses of funds to ensure that sufficient PPE and other safety measures are considered when expending funds.

Continued Practices to Mitigate the Likelihood of COVID-19 Spread Inside the School

Vaccinations

COVID-19 vaccines are the most effective strategy to protect people from getting sick and to reduce the risk of people spreading COVID-19. Students who are ages 5 and older are eligible to receive the Pfizer vaccination. Schools are encouraged to help students ages 5 and older, their families, and all school staff with getting vaccinated.

Masks/Face Coverings

As updated on February 25, 2022, CDC guidance recommends that people 2 years of age or older should wear a mask indoors in public, regardless of vaccination status, if the COVID-19 Community Level for the county in which they live is “High”. If the level is “Low” or “Medium”, masking is recommended to be based on personal preference and assessment of personal risk. The COVID-19 Community Level is a metric that combines the current level of spread of COVID-19 in a community with the strain on that community’s healthcare system. The COVID-19 Community Level metric applies to schools. The COVID-19 Community level for your county can be found here. It is particularly important to wear masks in settings where people sing, shout, cheer, or physically exert themselves since these activities increase the risk of spreading the virus.

Physical Distancing

In order to facilitate in-person learning 5 days a week for Arkansas students, it is recommended to **continue** to implement practices that promote physical distancing between individuals and groups of individuals. Although 6 feet is the standard, the inability or impracticality to have physical distance does not prevent a school from having in-person learning. Based on studies from the 2020-2021 school year, the CDC recommends schools maintain:

- at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms, and
- at least 6 feet between students and adults, and between adults who are not fully vaccinated.



Hand Washing/Cleaning

Schools should continue to have hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water readily available (eg. at entrances, classrooms, etc). Students, teachers, staff, and campus visitors should be encouraged to sanitize and/or wash hands frequently.

Ventilation/Air Circulation

Evidence suggests that improved air circulation is beneficial in reducing the spread of COVID-19. Whenever possible, schools should open windows or otherwise work to improve air flow by allowing outside air to circulate in the building, and thereby lower the concentration of viral particles. The CDC has provided guidance on increasing ventilation to prevent COVID-19 spread. ESSER funds can be utilized to upgrade ventilation or purchase devices for classrooms that help with ventilation and air quality.

Screening

Districts are encouraged to continue following their screening plan for each campus and event using screening questions. The value of screening is that it keeps students and staff with symptoms out of school and limits exposure. Screening usually consists of making sure a person doesn't have a fever, as well as having him or her answer questions about symptoms and exposures. For example, some have asked screening questions and used thermometers to check the temperature of all upon entry, while others have asked parents to do the screenings at home. We recommend using whichever screening method districts prefer as long as it is effective at ensuring individuals with symptoms of COVID-19, and those needing to be excluded, do not enter the facility.

Food Service and School Meals

Given the very low risk of transmission from surfaces and shared objects, there is no need to limit food service approaches to single use items and packaged meals. Schools should still establish procedures that maximize physical distance as much as possible when students are moving through the food service line and while eating (especially indoors). Using additional spaces outside of the cafeteria for mealtime seating, such as classrooms, the gymnasium, or outdoor seating, can help facilitate distance.

Busing

While on buses, open or crack windows if doing so does not pose a safety risk. Keeping windows open, even a few inches, improves air circulation. ADH and ADE also recommend maintaining as much physical distance as possible between riders on the bus. In addition, keeping siblings/household members seated together is also a helpful strategy.



Responding to Positive COVID-19 Cases in a School

Point of Contact and Reporting of Positive Cases

To promote the continuation of last year's successful communication strategy, all districts should consider ~~will~~ continuing to identify a Point of Contact (POC) who will continue to remain up to date on the latest trends and guidance involving COVID-19 in the State of Arkansas.

Superintendents will be sent a link to register the district POC. Schools that are performing tests on-site will need to continue to report all results through the COVID-19 Reporting Tool as before. Schools are no longer required to report to ADH positive results that they hear about from 3rd parties (such as from parents, guardians, etc.), but are recommended to continue tracking at the local level so as to know if an in-school outbreak is occurring.

There are some conditions that could exempt an exposed individual / close contact to the quarantine/isolation requirements that are discussed below. School nurses can help verify the status of a potential close contact to help POCs and school officials determine responses.

Close Contact Determination and Responses

ADH has updated its guidance to allow flexibility at the district level for quarantining of those who have come into contact with a positive case. Though the decision on whether to quarantine exposed students/staff now lies with each district, it is still the recommendation of ADH/ADE to do so according to the following guidelines:

The CDC defines a close contact as an individual confirmed to have been within six feet for 15 cumulative minutes or longer within a 24-hour period during the infectious period of a person who has tested positive for COVID-19. To manage the negative impacts of excluding students from onsite education with the risk of spreading COVID-19, the close contact definition within a K-12 setting has been modified in effort to try to achieve the appropriate balance. Close contact within a **K-12 school setting** in which quarantine is recommended is defined as students or staff who have been within **three (3) feet** for 15 cumulative minutes or longer within a 24-hour period during the infectious period of a person who has tested positive for COVID-19.

1. Individuals who have previously tested positive for COVID-19 and recovered and who are subsequently exposed to someone with COVID-19 within 90 days of their original diagnosis do not have to stay at home or get tested again, as long as they do not develop new symptoms. Individuals who develop symptoms again within three months of their first instance of COVID-19 should see their physician as they may need to be tested again if there is no other cause identified for their symptoms.



2. Individuals exposed to a confirmed case of COVID-19 are not recommended to quarantine if they have no symptoms and both the infected and exposed individual consistently and correctly were wearing a mask during the entire exposure.
3. Individuals who have received all recommended vaccines may not have to quarantine. Students, teachers, and staff who come into close contact with someone with COVID-19 do not need to quarantine if they:
 - Are ages 18 and older and up to date with COVID vaccination (have received all recommended vaccine doses, including booster and additional primary shots for some immunocompromised people). This means:
 - Have been boosted
 - Are within 5 months of the 2nd dose of either Pfizer or Moderna vaccines.
 - Are within 2 mos of the 1st dose of J&J vaccine.
 - Are ages 5-17 years and completed the primary series of COVID-19 vaccines.
 - Though not required, it is still recommended that all children eligible for a booster receive one.

Even though not required to quarantine, it is recommended that exposed individuals:

- Wear a mask around others for 10 days
- Test on day 5, if possible

If you develop symptoms, get a test and stay home.

School officials should review with POCs the local process for identifying close contacts and the process for communicating with parents, staff, and students whether an individual will need to stay home and/or be tested.

Isolation of those with COVID-19

It is still important for a person who tests positive for COVID-19 to isolate at home regardless of vaccination status per the following guidance:

- Stay home for 5 days
- If you have no symptoms or your symptoms are resolving after 5 days, you can leave your house.
- Continue to wear a mask around others through day 10 after symptom onset (or test date if asymptomatic).



After the initial 5 days, a person should also be fever-free for at least 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medicines) before leaving isolation.

Educational Options

Based on increasing numbers of positive cases, schools should expect interruptions to the school year and plan for contingencies. DESE and ADH will work closely with districts to monitor local situations and to assist if prolonged school closures or prolonged remote learning becomes necessary.

Students and staff should stay home when sick. Districts should review attendance policies to be sure that COVID-19 isolation and quarantine requirements are taken into consideration when dealing with student and staff absences, as well as state and federal requirements for staff and students with disabilities. Flexible attendance policies will be needed for individual students and staff in order to continue teaching and learning options while unable to be at school due to COVID-19 impacts. Policies should be communicated with parents and staff. Students and families should feel confident that students can remain connected to their school even when they are not able to attend in person due to COVID-19 isolation or quarantine requirements.

AMI Pivots for school-wide or district-wide COVID closures

Responses to positive COVID-19 isolation and quarantines should be as strategic and targeted as possible. In cases where a classroom or grade level pivots to remote learning, the district should ensure the necessary tools for ***blended learning*** are in place to facilitate the continuation of teaching and learning for small groups of students and staff.

In the event that an entire school or district must modify on-site instruction and pivot to ***remote learning***, the school or district will follow the district's approved Alternate Method of Instruction (AMI) plan. If positive cases have evolved to the point that an AMI day is necessary, the superintendent ***shall*** take the following steps:

- Notify the designated DESE POC - the list and contact information will be sent to each superintendent; and,
- Report the AMI day in the *LEA Insights* portal, which is the same process that was in place last school year; The AMI day for the school or district will also be reported in eSchool; and,
- Participate in consultations with the DESE and ADH.

Superintendents will be sent the link and instructions for logging in to the *Insights* portal. This process will help the DESE and the ADH better understand the magnitude of the COVID-19 impact in local areas throughout the state. **Districts are reminded that AMI days are counted as student contact days; therefore, AMI plans should include meaningful and engaging**



learning activities that can be completed remotely by every student. If a district (or a school within a district) exceeds the 10 approved AMI days as a result of closures due to COVID-19, weather, power outages, contagious outbreaks, or other extenuating circumstances, the district will consult with DESE.

Digital Learning Plans

Digital learning plans were submitted by school districts utilizing the Act 1240 waiver process. Each application went through a rigorous vetting process at the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) before being recommended to the State Board of Education (SBE). Approval by the SBE allowed necessary waivers for the district to operate a remote or blended learning programming option for students in addition to their required in-person instructional option. Students enrolled in an approved digital program will be coded and recognized as a virtual student and may have different requirements than traditional students.

The deadline for districts to submit a plan for a digital program was May 1, 2021; however, many districts in the state opted to not offer a digital option, due to Covid-19 cases declining in the spring. Due to changing conditions, these districts are now faced with the demand of parents wanting an option other than in-person for their children. In response to the growing demand and concern, the division is going to reopen the digital learning application to districts that did not apply prior to May 1st to allow for a contingency plan option until a full review can be completed. Information regarding this option for districts to apply is in Commissioner Memo COM-22-017. The DESE and SBE will follow the same rigorous vetting process for this group of digital applications to ensure quality options for students. Parents should consult with their districts about instructional options.

Public Health Considerations

The Secretary of Health, in consultation with the Governor, has authority over all instances of quarantine and isolation throughout Arkansas, as necessary and appropriate to control disease in the state of Arkansas, as authorized by Ark. Code Ann. §§ 20-7-109 and 20-7-110. See also ADH Rules Pertaining to the Control of Reportable Diseases, which provide for the prevention and control of communicable diseases to protect the public health, welfare, and safety of the citizens of Arkansas. The COVID-19 Delta variant is now the predominant COVID-19 strain in Arkansas. The Delta variant is two-to-three times more transmissible, which means that an infected person can spread COVID-19 to twice as many people as observed earlier in the pandemic. The COVID-19 Delta variant appears to cause more severe disease and a greater likelihood of hospitalization in unvaccinated young people than we observed earlier in the pandemic. While adolescents over 12 years of age and adults can be protected from the Delta variant by the COVID-19 vaccines, children under 12 remain at high risk. Children represent an increasing proportion of new COVID-19 cases, including hospitalizations and severe disease. In



light of the spread of this more transmissible variant (and potential future strains), ADH and ADE urge schools to maintain as many mitigation measures as possible, or risk increased spread within the school setting.

This document addresses updates to the public health guidance and is based on the public health situation with COVID-19 as it is understood today. Guidance will be updated as needed if additional or new guidance is made available by the CDC. DESE and the ADH will continue to monitor conditions and work with districts to respond accordingly. School officials, parents and community members are encouraged to work together to plan and to implement as many strategies as possible to make the return to school and continued in-person learning opportunities successful again this year.