

End-of-Year COVID-19 Guidance for Schools

Arkansas's students, educators, and communities have done a great job mitigating the spread of COVID-19 in the school setting this school year due to having multiple mitigation strategies in place. As a result of this dedicated and coordinated effort, Arkansas students began the school year learning onsite, and learning has continued with minimal interruptions.

As vaccines continue to become more readily available to Arkansans and data support a downward trend in the number of positive COVID cases in the state, mitigation efforts that were once state directives have been converted to guidance, effective April 1, 2021. The CDC has also updated requirements for physical distancing to allow for a minimum distance of 3 feet in a classroom setting. In response, districts must review current policies and make decisions regarding how they will implement operational changes, particularly to mask-wearing and physical distancing.

To assist schools in consideration of policy changes, the department is updating guidance to schools regarding the best practices that will continue to ensure the safety of both students and educators while supporting a strong in-person learning environment. This guidance document addresses updates to the public health directives and is based on the public health situation with COVID-19 as it is understood today.

Public Health Considerations

While it is not possible to eliminate all risks associated with COVID-19, Arkansas has successfully provided in-person learning options since August 2020. The success can be attributed to the multiple layers of mitigation strategies that have been implemented by schools, such as social distancing, reduced class sizes, mask wearing, disinfecting and cleaning, handwashing, and physical distancing to the extent practical.

Although the health directives that governed school operations have been converted to guidance, the Arkansas Department of Health and Arkansas Department of Education strongly advise districts to continue to follow all measures that have allowed successful in-person learning to occur. It also is recommended that after-school providers and other programs that operate in conjunction with schools follow this guidance in coordination with the campuses they serve.

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

Updated guidelines continue to focus on successful practices that resulted in onsite learning for students and limited disruptions throughout the year. The continuation of these practices will ensure that students experience a strong finish to the school year. Some of these practices are listed below.

- Stay home when sick.
- Universal and correct use of masks. When masks are worn, individuals and others are protected. Masks work best when everyone wears one.
- Cleaning and disinfecting to maintain healthy facilities
- Increased air circulation/ventilation
- Handwashing and respiratory etiquette. promoting good hand hygiene slows the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, protecting both students and staff.
- Physical distancing. Requirements for physical distancing have been updated by CDC guidelines, depending on mask wearing decisions. Physical distancing should be maximized to the greatest extent possible.
- Respond when positive cases are identified in combination with isolation and quarantine.

Masks/Face Coverings

Mask wearing continues to be a very important and effective way to prevent the spread of the virus. A school system may continue to require the use of masks for adults or students for whom it is developmentally appropriate. Local school district boards of directors may ***continue, modify, or eliminate*** by formal action policies that require the wearing of masks; however, districts should be aware that proper mask wearing may be a consideration when identifying individuals as close contacts in K-12 schools that continue to implement mask requirements. This means that if both individuals – the person diagnosed with COVID-19 and the person exposed to the positive case – were wearing masks correctly at the time of exposure, the individual exposed does not need to quarantine. (See the ***Close Contact Determination*** section below.)

When making decisions to continue, modify or eliminate mask-wearing, districts should consider approaches that are safest for a variety of situations, such as, buses, classrooms, lunchrooms, hallways, activity and special event spaces to determine the extent and impact of changes. It is also important to note that universal mask-wearing also is a factor in allowing districts to reduce physical distancing from 6 feet to the new guideline of 3 feet.

Physical Distancing

CDC now recommends that, with universal masking, students should maintain a distance of at least 3 feet in classroom settings. The CDC still recommends social distancing of 6 feet between adults, as well as adults and students, in common areas, when masks can't be worn (such as while eating), during activities with increased inhalation like sports or band practice (which would preferably be held outside), and in community settings outside the classroom.

Use of Non-Classroom Spaces

1. When feasible and appropriate (for example, in physical education classes as weather permits), it is preferable for students to gather outside rather than inside because of the reduced risk of virus spread outdoors.
2. Schools may continue to offer extracurricular activities at their discretion and consistent with ADH guidance for non-AAA extracurricular activities and with the guidance found on the AAA website for all AAA-sponsored activities.
3. As is the case in typical years, school systems with policies may open facilities to the public. The operation of facilities should be consistent with ADH guidance for large indoor and outdoor venues.
4. School systems should consider modifying or eliminating assemblies and other activities that bring large groupings of students and/or teachers and staff together. If such events do occur, care should be taken to observe all possible mitigation strategies, such as masking, physical distancing, etc. to decrease the risk of virus spread at the event.

Hand Washing/Cleaning

Schools should have hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water at each entrance. They should also attempt to provide hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water in every classroom. 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. The CDC has provided guidance on increasing ventilation to prevent COVID-19 spread.

Visits to Schools

Parents and other adults can visit schools under provisions adopted by local school district policies. During these visits, parents and other visitors must follow the virus prevention and mitigation requirements of the school.



Screening

Districts should continue to screen individuals who enter facilities by taking their temperature and utilizing appropriate questions. If an individual does not pass the screening, they should not be permitted into the building unless they fall under an exemption (i.e. they are a fully vaccinated close contact).

Responding to Positive COVID-19 Cases in a School

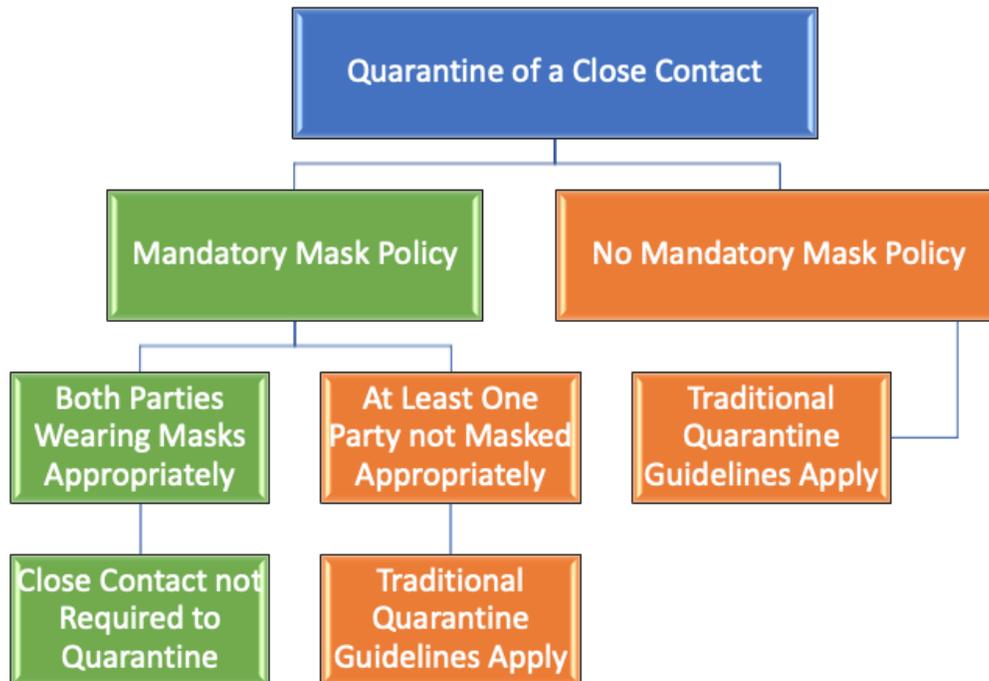
If an individual who has been in a school has tested positive for COVID-19, districts are required to continue to follow the established reporting processes and requirements for quarantine.

Close Contact Determination

This document refers to “close contact” with an individual who is test-confirmed to have COVID-19. The definition of close contact in schools is evolving with the ongoing understanding of COVID-19, and individual scenarios should be determined in consultation with the district point of contact and the Arkansas Department of Health.

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; however, additional factors like case/contact masking (i.e., both the infectious individual and the potential close contact have been consistently and properly masked), vaccination status, and prior infection status may affect this determination.

1. Under this updated guidance, proper mask wearing may now prevent individuals from being identified as close contacts in K-12 schools that continue to implement a mask requirement. This means that if both individuals involved in an exposure that occurs at school – the person diagnosed with COVID-19 and the person exposed to the positive case – were wearing masks correctly at the time of exposure, the individual exposed does not need to quarantine.
2. Exposed individuals should self-monitor for symptoms and stay home at the first sign of illness. They also should continue to wear a mask at all times to further reduce the likelihood of transmitting the virus. The person who tests positive for COVID-19 is still required to isolate at home.



A 14-day stay-at-home period for close contacts was previously advised by the CDC based on the incubation period of the virus. As of December 2, 2020, the CDC amended its guidance to allow two shorter options for the stay-at-home period. Based on current CDC guidance, the stay-at-home period can end for individuals experiencing no symptoms according to the following guidelines:

1. After 10 full 24-hour periods since close contact exposure without testing, or
2. After seven full 24-hour periods since close contact exposure and after receiving a negative test result (sample taken no earlier than five 24-hour periods after exposure).

If individuals return to school from these shorter stay-at-home windows, they should regularly monitor themselves for symptoms to ensure they remain symptom-free and take appropriate precautions (e.g., consistent mask usage) for the duration of the 14-day incubation period.

Additionally, the CDC updated guidance on March 8, 2021, to indicate that a **fully vaccinated individual** does not need to stay at home following close contact exposure to a test-confirmed individual if the following conditions are true:

1. The exposed individual is fully vaccinated (at least two weeks have passed since receiving the second dose of a two-dose vaccine or the first dose of a single-dose vaccine), AND



2. The individual has not experienced any COVID-19 symptoms following the close contact exposure to a test-confirmed individual.

Individuals who have previously tested positive for COVID-19 and recovered who are subsequently exposed to someone with COVID-19 within three months 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 may need to be tested again if there is no other cause identified for their symptoms.

Educational Options

Students and staff should stay home when sick. Districts have implemented digital options that can allow for teacher/student interaction when unable to physically attend school. 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.

Developing a Plan for End-of-Year On-Campus Activities and Continuity of Instruction

As part of the American Rescue Plan Act, school districts must post for parents and the general public a summary of its plan for safe continuation of in-person learning and continuity of services. The summary should be developed in consultation with the district's Ready for Learning Committee to ensure the plan identifies safety measures for teachers, staff, and students during the final quarter of the school year, while taking into consideration the many end-of-school activities that take place both on and off school campuses. The summary should demonstrate how districts will continue to implement safe in-person instruction. It should also broadly address the major points (in bold) in this guidance and include plans for school operations and extra-curricular activities. The district may choose to update their previously developed Ready for Learning Plan to meet this requirement. The summary does not have to be approved by DESE but must address the decisions of the local board of education to continue, modify, or eliminate mask-wearing requirements.

The summary must be posted on the district's website by April 15, 2021. Districts receiving American Rescue Plan Act funds also must request public comment and take such comments into account in the development/modification of the plan for summer and back-to-school activities.