

Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

Frequently Asked Questions, Week of September 21, 2020

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **How do we know if we need to suspend in-person learning for our school or district?**

There is no one threshold or metric that indicates a school or district should suspend in-person learning. District and school leaders can work closely with DESE's COVID Reporting Unit (781-338-3500) when there is a positive case in their district to determine the appropriate next steps. These next steps can include implementing existing DESE protocols to notify close contacts for testing and isolation, conferring with local public health and/or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to determine if transmission is occurring in the class or school, or seeking advice on whether to suspend in-person learning for that class, grade, or school. It is important to note that these decisions need to be made based on local context, occur in collaboration with DESE and the local board of health, and may be based on the following factors:

- If there is a need for an extensive cleaning of the building or other facility mitigation
- If the mobile testing unit results, or other test results, suggest widespread transmission is occurring
- If there are widespread absences among students and staff due to illness
- If the school is in a district reported as "red" on the DPH health metric for the past three weeks, and risk of transmission to students and/or staff is increased

The school department and the local board of health may have other local factors that are important to consider when making this decision.

2. **Does a symptomatic child with an alternative diagnosis, such as a strep throat, still need a COVID test before returning to school?**

In order to protect schools from the introduction of COVID, testing of symptomatic individuals should be the default practice. Students with acute onset of new symptoms (especially respiratory symptoms such as cough, shortness of breath, sore throat) or fever should almost always receive a negative COVID test before returning to school. Health care providers have clinical discretion to consider chronic illnesses or symptoms such as headache and abdominal or gastrointestinal symptoms and use clinical judgment to defer testing when an alternative cause is firmly established.

3. **Can schools host SAT and ACT tests?**

Districts and school leaders have asked questions on how to safely administer SAT and ACT tests during the 2020-2021 school year, especially as many students were not able to take these tests as anticipated last spring. As long as the testing is sponsored by or administered by the school or district, this testing can occur in alignment if DESE health and safety guidelines for gatherings with outside participants, [available here](#) (*download*) are followed. Key health and safety requirements for gatherings with outside participants include maintaining at least six feet of distance between individuals, wearing masks at all times, proper hand hygiene, and a capacity limitation of 8 persons per 1,000 square feet and never more than 25 individuals in a single, enclosed indoor space.

4. What masks are recommended? ⁱ

DESE has received a number of queries on the recommended types of masks from educators. Masks should cover the nose and mouth and fit snugly but comfortably against the side of the face. Masks should be secured with ties or ear loops and include multiple layers of fabric. If students are not able to wear a mask due to medical, behavioral, or other challenges, they may consider wearing a face shield. Transparent masks may be the best option for both teachers and students in classes for deaf and hard of hearing students. They may also be useful for teachers and younger students who rely on visual / facial cues.

5. How can masks be safely removed? ⁱⁱ

When putting on and taking off a mask, do not touch the front of it. Only handle the ties or ear loops. Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer after removing a mask, and before putting on a mask. Be careful not to touch your eyes, nose, and mouth when removing the mask. Masks should be placed on napkins or paper towels (with the inside face up) when removed for meals or mask breaks. Masks should be washed regularly. More information on how to wash masks can be found [here](#).

6. How should mask breaks be conducted?

It is recommended that students have at least two mask breaks per day (e.g. mealtime and recess). As it is recommended that students younger than second grade wear masks, it is important to note that they may need additional mask breaks during the day. Mask breaks should be held outdoors, if feasible. Students must be at least 6 feet apart during mask breaks. Hand washing facilities or hand sanitizer must be available when entering and leaving this space. Students should remove masks as outlined above.

ⁱ <https://www.mass.gov/news/mask-up-ma>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-to-wear-cloth-face-coverings.html>