

Guidance released to help local public health agencies and schools navigate opening for fall 2020

Districts will continue to work with local public health agencies on school plans appropriate for their communities

DENVER, July 20, 2020: The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Education, released [new guidance](#) for the fall opening of schools today. The group [presented slides](#) during a media availability earlier today. The guidance will help local public health agencies work with districts and schools to ensure the safest learning environment possible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The guidance provides specific recommendations schools should consider based on the level of COVID-19 in their communities.

Additionally, the guidance has age-group specific recommendations on mask-wearing, physical distancing, and keeping students in cohorts. The guidelines are based on current evidence that suggests the risk of COVID-19 transmission between younger children and from younger children to adults is low, so preschools and elementary schools have different guidelines than middle schools and high schools.

“Our top and only priority is to keep Coloradans healthy,” said Dr. Eric France, chief medical officer, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. “Having students return to the classroom won't be simple. We will continue to work with school districts across the state, so when ready, schools can have the necessary systems in place to protect our children and ensure that schools can mitigate the spread of COVID-19. We'll need everyone to take tremendous precautions.”

“We know the importance of in-person learning and how critical school is to the health, well-being, and academic growth of our students,” said Colorado Education Commissioner Katy Anthes. “While our goal is to get students back into the classroom where they can be the most supported, we need to prioritize the health and safety of students, their families and staff. With the virus still in our communities, we must continue to follow the guidance of health professionals. These guidelines are designed to help local health agencies and districts make appropriate decisions on health and safety precautions based on the incidence of COVID-19 in their community.”

CDPHE led the creation of the guidance, which is based on the latest science and health recommendations by the American Academy of Pediatrics and others. The guidance incorporates feedback and ideas from a variety of sources, including an advisory committee of education stakeholders and a focus group of doctors, epidemiologists, local public health directors, and superintendents -- as well as thousands of written comments from parents, teachers, and community members.

The guidance is organized by the level of COVID-19 incidence in the community: Stay at Home (high level of COVID-19), Safer at Home (mid-level of COVID-19), and Protect Our Neighbors (lower level of COVID-19).

For example, the guidance for the Safer at Home phase emphasizes keeping students with the same group (or cohort) in their primary classroom throughout the week to prevent full school closure if a COVID-19 case is identified. In this scenario, only four teachers would rotate into one specific classroom per day.

This guidance, [CDE's toolkit for the 2020-21 school year](#), and guidance from local public health agencies will provide districts with the information they need to start the school year safely and in a way that makes sense for their local communities.

Executive or Public Health orders can supersede the guidance. Local public health agencies, local governments, school districts, BOCES, and charters can choose to enact stricter guidance than the state. Except where there is a public health order or other legal requirement, these are recommendations and best practices for local public health agencies to consider as they advise the school districts in their area.

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