

# Austin Public Health Recommendations for Summer 2021 and School Year 2021-22 COVID-19 Operations for Pre-K-12<sup>th</sup> Grade Schools



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While it is too early to know what Stage of Risk our community will be at in mid-August, we know that schools and parents are making plans now for next school year. This document serves as APH recommendations to school districts/systems about COVID-19 prevention and operations for summer 2021 and the 2021-22 school year. These recommendations are subject to change as the pandemic evolves. The CDC will also be updating guidance for schools in the coming weeks to help inform school planning for the 2021-22 school year.

## Introduction

We have all learned a lot about COVID-19 and how to reduce transmission since March 2020. We know more about how it spreads and measures that work to prevent the spread such as vaccination, masks, physical distancing, and choosing outdoor options over indoor when possible. Our community has successfully brought cases down allowing us to move from Stage 5 to our current Stage 2 in the [Risk-Based Guidelines](#). We hope these downward trends continue and we can move into Stage 1, though that will depend on many factors. Schools can help through the messaging and mitigation measures they implement for graduation events, summer school, and other school sponsored events over the summer.

The 2020-21 school year was perhaps the most challenging yet for schools and school communities. Many school staff (teachers, nurses, aides, custodians, food service staff, bus drivers, administrators, front office staff, and others) worked tirelessly, going above and beyond their normal duties to implement prevention measures in schools and deal with cases of and exposure to COVID-19 when they arose. Due to vaccination efforts, many adults and some adolescents in the community are fully or partially vaccinated against COVID-19 and we hope many more will be fully vaccinated before the 2021-22 school year begins. Primarily for this reason, we are hopeful that school can look a bit more “normal” next year.

Although many may be feeling “COVID fatigue” after all the work of this past school year to be vigilant, COVID-19 is still prevalent in the community and will still be here when school begins in the fall. We do not yet know what proportion of students ages 12+ (those currently eligible for the vaccine) in our community will be fully vaccinated by the time school starts. It is likely that those under 12 years of age will not have the opportunity to get vaccinated before then. In addition, schools will likely have all or most of their students back on campus learning in person, and unlike in the 2020-21 school year, per [GA36](#), public schools will not be able to require masks. Because more people will be in schools and fewer people will be wearing masks, we can anticipate the fall flu season to pose a greater challenge in 2020-21 which will complicate efforts to identify potential cases of COVID-19.

**While the prevention measures needed in the 2021-22 school year may be less and different in some ways than they have been this past year and the extent of the precautions school districts/systems implement may vary based on the risk tolerance level of differing school communities, it will be critically necessary to implement COVID-19 prevention measures in schools. Preventive measures will be especially critical at the elementary school level given that elementary school children are not yet eligible for vaccination.**

## Summer 2021 School Activities

During summer school and school-sponsored summer activities, APH strongly urges elementary, middle, and high schools to continue all mitigation measures that have been in place in the 2020-21 school year and to continue following the [CDC's Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools](#) and the Austin Public Health Interim Guidance on COVID\_19 Operations for Austin Travis County Schools available [here](#). See the mask section of this document for detailed APH recommendations on mask use.

## Messaging to the School Community

It is strongly recommended that, **prior to and throughout the 2021-22 school year**, schools clearly communicate to parents, students, and staff the following:

- COVID-19 is still present in our community and COVID-19 prevention measures will be in place during the 2021-22 school year
- Any COVID-19 operational plans that school districts/systems create over the summer for the next school year are subject to change before the school year starts and/or during the school year based on how the COVID-19 situation evolves
- Vaccines are widely available (currently for those 12+ years old) and the more eligible students and families who get vaccinated over the summer, the less interruptions and COVID-19 illness there will be next school year. Schools can also help spread the word to families when younger children become eligible for vaccination and about any recommendations for vaccine booster shots in the event such recommendations are made.
- Students and staff should stay home if they have any symptoms of COVID-19, are a close contact of a COVID-positive person, or test positive or are diagnosed with COVID-19
- Staying home for these reasons (symptomatic, quarantining, or isolating) is strongly urged and students who stay home for these reasons will not be penalized for doing so
- There will be a virtual learning option available for students who need to stay home for these reasons (if your district or system will offer this option)

## Ventilation Upgrades

APH strongly recommends that school districts/systems assess ventilation in buildings over the summer and make any needed upgrades before the start of the 2021-22 school year.

- APH further encourages schools to take advantage of any federal COVID-19 relief funding to make any necessary upgrades.
- It is hoped schools can make all necessary upgrades across districts/systems, but to the extent districts must prioritize which schools to upgrade or which schools to focus on first, APH recommends prioritizing elementary schools, starting with those in areas that have been most impacted by COVID-19.

The [CDC has found](#) that schools can reduce COVID-19 transmission by [improving ventilation](#) through:

- Dilution methods (opening doors, opening windows, and using fans to improve circulation from open windows);
- Filtration methods (installation of high-efficiency particulate absorbing [HEPA] filters); and
- Purification methods (installation of ultraviolet germicidal irradiation [UVGI] units, installed in upper room areas and shielded from persons or installed in the heating, ventilation, and air

conditioning [HVAC] system). Purification strategies should be considered in rooms that are difficult to ventilate or have an increased likelihood of being occupied by persons with COVID-19 (e.g., nurse's office).

A [CDC study](#) published May 21, 2021, found, "In schools that improved ventilation through dilution methods alone, COVID-19 incidence was 35% lower, whereas in schools that combined dilution methods with filtration, incidence was 48% lower."

## Virtual Learning Options

During 2021 summer school and the 2021-22 school year, APH strongly urges schools to make plans to offer and facilitate a virtual learning option for students who:

- Have tested positive for or been diagnosed with COVID-19 and need to isolate
- Are a close contact of a person with COVID-19 and need to quarantine
- Have one or more symptoms of COVID-19
- Are medically fragile, who have conditions that put them at high risk if they contract COVID-19, or who have family members at high risk

Schools should include virtual learning as part of their emergency operations plans and ensure virtual learning can be scaled up to serve a large portion of the student body if circumstances necessitate.

Schools should [refer to the Texas Education Agency](#) to ensure plans comply with any state requirements related to virtual learning, and for the latest TEA [Attendance and Enrollment FAQs](#) (last updated June 3, 2021) and [Public Health Guidance](#) (last updated June 5, 2021).

For many students, in-person school is more effective than virtual learning, and a return to primarily in-person instruction will have positive results across a range of factors (academic, social, mental and emotional, physical) for most students, teachers, and parents. However, offering a virtual learning option will help avoid students missing large periods of instruction and learning time.

## Masks

Per a [CDC order](#) under the Public Health Service Act, masks are required on school buses.

In **elementary schools**, because most children are not yet eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine, APH also urges schools to strongly recommend that masks be used by:

- **Students** when:
  - Indoors
  - Outdoors, unless they are engaged in physical activity and maintaining a physical distance of at least 3 feet from others
- **Unvaccinated adults** including staff, parents dropping off and picking up children, and visitors, wear a mask when:
  - Indoors
  - Outdoors, unless they are engaged in physical activity and maintaining a physical distance of at least 3 feet from others

For **middle schools and high schools**, APH urges schools to strongly recommend that masks be used by:

- **Unvaccinated individuals** – students and adults including staff, parents dropping off and picking up children, and visitors – when:
  - Indoors
  - Outdoors, unless they are engaged in physical activity and maintaining a physical distance of at least 3 feet from others

In addition to the above specific situations in which masks are recommended, **schools are strongly encouraged to implement education and communication strategies to normalize mask wearing, promote acceptance of mask wearing, and combat any stigma against masking.** This is critical as we are entering phase of the pandemic in which mask requirements and recommendations are no longer “one size fits all.” Schools are strongly urged to convey the following to students, staff, and families:

- The importance of respecting and accepting the personal decisions of others related to wearing a mask
- To keep in mind that you cannot tell a person’s vaccination status based on whether or not they wear a mask
  - Many individuals – even those who are vaccinated – may choose to continue wearing a mask for a variety of reasons. For example, some may consider masking essential to protect a family or community member with a compromised immune system who does not have the ability to receive a vaccine. In addition, masks also help prevent the spread of many other airborne illnesses such as the flu.

## **Physical distancing**

Per the CDC, physical distancing is one of two prevention strategies, along with the use of masks, that schools should prioritize. Because public schools are not allowed to require masking, physical distancing will be critical in all schools, and especially in elementary schools where most students will be unvaccinated at the start of the year. However, given that it is likely more people will be in person on campuses in the 2021-22 school year, physical distancing will be more of a challenge.

Schools are urged to use the summer to think creatively and plan how to achieve physical distancing next school year. As they did in the 2020-21 school year, schools should be prepared to continue physical distancing policies and structural interventions to promote physical distance between people. Schools can remove nonessential furniture and make other changes to classroom layouts to maximize distance between students.

## **Plexiglass barriers**

Schools that do not already possess plexiglass barriers do not need to purchase them for the upcoming school year. Elementary schools that already have barriers could consider using them during lunch and snack times or in areas where physical distancing is difficult, such as in front office lobbies. Plexiglass barriers may not be necessary at the middle and high school levels.

## Cohorting

APH recommends that elementary schools use cohorting (identifying small groups and keeping them together). Maintain distance and limit mixing between cohorts. The CDC notes that cohorting minimizes transmission across cohorts and facilitates contact tracing. Because higher proportions of individuals in middle and high schools will be vaccinated, cohorting may not be necessary.

## Frequent Hand Washing

[Cleaning hands at key times](#) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol if soap and water is not readily available is one of the most important steps a person can take to avoid getting sick. This can help prevent respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses and can result in fewer missed school days.

In order to [establish a culture of hand hygiene](#), schools should continue to teach and reinforce regular [handwashing](#) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, build time into daily routines for students and staff to wash hands, and use visual cues to promote hand hygiene throughout the school. Schools should make hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol available for use when soap and water are not available.

## Cleaning Regularly and Disinfecting as Necessary

APH recommends schools:

- Clean indoor surfaces and objects routinely with soap (or detergent) and water at least once a day
- Prioritize disinfecting surfaces that ill persons have touched and those that are routinely touched or shared between students. Not every surface needs to be disinfected every time it is cleaned.
- Clean more frequently or clean AND disinfect surfaces and objects if certain conditions apply:
  - If there has been a sick person or someone who tested positive for COVID-19 in your facility within the last 24 hours,
  - High transmission of COVID-19 in the community,
  - Low number of people wearing masks,
  - Infrequent hand hygiene, or
  - The space is occupied by certain populations, such as people at [increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19](#)
- Not use disinfection products near children or allow children to use these products.

According to the CDC, “In most situations, the [risk of infection from touching a surface is low](#). The most reliable way to prevent infection from surfaces is to [regularly wash hands or use hand sanitizer](#).”

## Increase Use of Outdoor Space

The risk of COVID-19 transmission is far less outdoors than indoors. Conducting activities outdoors may also facilitate physical distancing. All schools, and especially elementary schools, are strongly encouraged to maximize and increase the use of outdoor space during the school day. Schools should plan ways to [conduct classes, meals, and meetings outdoors](#) as much as possible. Schools are

encouraged to use and create additional “outdoor classroom” areas, especially in shady or covered outdoor spaces.

## **Identifying Close Contacts**

As schools did in the 2020-21 school year, in the event an individual who has been in the school is found to have COVID-19, schools should be prepared to quickly identify who on campus was in close contact with that individual and recommend that those individuals quarantine if they are unvaccinated. These efforts will continue to be an integral part of curbing the spread of COVID-19 in schools.

## **Isolation**

As schools did in the 2020-21 school year, it is recommended schools identify an isolation room where individuals who develop symptom(s) while on campus can isolate until they can go home. Alternatively, or in the event that there is not a room available for this purpose, schools could consider finding an outdoor area where students can isolate, while being supervised, until a parent/guardian picks them up.

APH urges schools to recommend any individuals who develop symptoms while at school wear a mask until they leave the school. If an adult is supervising or caring for a symptomatic individual, it is also recommended that they wear a mask.

## **Quarantine**

Those who are fully vaccinated do not need to quarantine following a known exposure unless they develop symptoms.

For those who are partially vaccinated or unvaccinated, APH recommends schools recommend a 14-day quarantine or use this [flowchart](#) to identify options for staff and students/families for a possible shorter quarantine period.

## **Daily Screening**

Because COVID-19 is still present in our community, the first semester of school will coincide with flu season, and schools can be a location of transmission of COVID-19 and other contagious illnesses, schools (in collaboration with APH and healthcare providers) must help families, students, and staff understand they should stay home when sick. Implementing daily screening requirements may help to emphasize the importance of doing so.

For elementary schools, APH recommends that schools require students and adults to be screened daily for COVID-19 symptoms, diagnosis, and close contact to individuals with COVID-19 before entry. This screening could take any form – via app, verbally at school, or on a paper form – and can be done either at home prior to coming to school or at school prior to entering the building. It is not necessary to take temperatures at school before individuals enter the building. It is, however, strongly recommended that the symptoms list on the screening questions include a question asking whether the individual feels feverish or has a measured temperature over 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit.

APH recommends that middle schools and high schools consider requiring students and staff to complete a screening before arriving for school each day.

Whether or not schools implement screening requirements, it is important for schools to **message clearly and regularly to families and staff that if someone feels sick, they should stay home.**

### **Prompt Testing**

It is recommended that schools consider participating in the state's upcoming opportunity for funding and support for schools to administer rapid antigen and/or PCR COVID-19 tests (more information will be forthcoming on this in July 2021 from TEA).

Schools that are administering tests on campus should offer a COVID-19 test to all symptomatic individuals, including students, with parental consent. Schools that are not administering tests on campus are urged to encourage symptomatic individuals to promptly seek a COVID-19 test.

### **Water Fountains**

- [Take steps](#) to ensure water fountains are safe to use after a prolonged shutdown.
- As with all high touch surfaces and objects, schools should clean water fountains at least once a day or as often as needed (for example, when visibly dirty). APH also recommends that schools disinfect water fountains once a day.
- Consider installing no-touch activation methods for water fountains or replacing drinking fountains with water bottle filling stations. APH further encourages schools receiving federal COVID-19 relief funding to include such upgrades as one use of those funds.
- Encourage students to bring refillable water bottles and/or provide water bottles.
- Provide regular education and frequent reminders to students, especially young children, about how to properly use water fountains, including that they should not touch their mouth to any fountain surface.