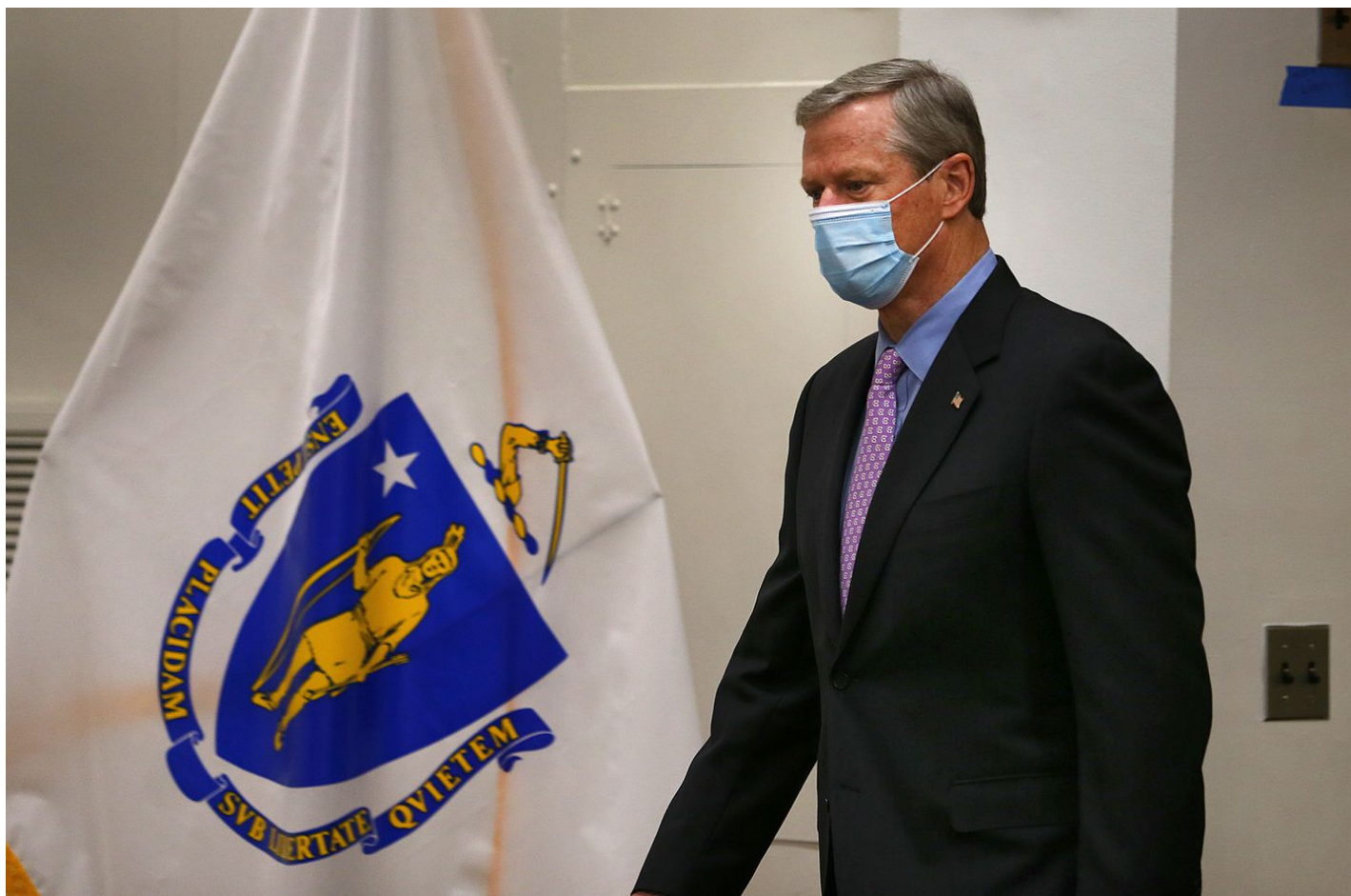


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Baker instructs schools to reopen classrooms, even in communities with surging COVID-19 cases

By [James Vaznis](#), [Travis Andersen](#) and [Felicia Gans](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 6, 2020, 2:25 p.m.



TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Concerned that too many students are attempting to learn from home, Governor Charlie Baker on Friday made his biggest push yet for schools to reopen classrooms — even in communities like Boston where coronavirus cases have been surging — issuing a new set of rules that strongly discourages remote learning.

In making the announcement, Baker upended previous state guidance that had urged school districts to shift learning online if coronavirus positivity rates put communities at high risk for widespread transmission. Now, under the new state rules, districts should close schools or classrooms only as a “last resort” — when there is evidence of transmission or in communities where COVID-19 positivity rates are exceptionally high.

Only Chelsea, Lawrence, and Revere, have positivity rates that are high enough to rely exclusively on remote learning, according to state officials.

Currently, more than half of the state’s 950,000 public school students are doing all their learning from home, while many of the remaining students are receiving instruction at home part time.

“We all know that losing a week, a month, a quarter, or more in the life of a kid’s education has real consequences,” Baker said during a news conference. “And that’s why today we’re improving our methods for assessing transmission rates in communities and upgrading school guidance to reflect what the data now makes clear: that learning can happen safely in the classroom.”

Baker does not have direct control over individual school districts, which are under the control of cities, towns, and regional committees in Massachusetts. However, the governor’s latest statement represents a significant step in affirming his long-stated belief that schools can be safe and are not responsible for spreading the virus.

determine coronavirus transmission risks for each community to include a more nuanced view of the data. The new methodology takes into consideration a community's population, the number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents, and in some instances positivity rates. Previously, the state looked only at cases per 100,000 residents.

The state is continuing to designate risk levels using colors, progressing from gray — the very lowest — to green to yellow to red.

The change in methodology led to a dramatic decline in the number of red communities from more than 120 last week to just 16 this week.

The rosier view of transmission risks immediately raised suspicion among educators statewide, as it coincides with a surge of coronavirus cases that prompted the state to impose more restrictions on residents from Boston to the Berkshires, including an unpopular 10 p.m. curfew that went into effect Friday.

“The governor says it's not safe to gather for Thanksgiving, but let's cram as many students as we can into schools?” said Merrie Najimy, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. “It's hypocritical.”

She also noted that the decision to reopen schools goes beyond a community's COVID-19 positivity rate. Districts also need to take steps to ensure ventilation systems can effectively protect students and adults from the coronavirus and they need to carefully calculate how many students they can accommodate in age of physical distancing.

The new rules will likely heighten tensions in many districts struggling to keep schools open or those like Boston that are trying to figure out how to reopen classrooms.

Jessica Tang, president of the Boston Teachers Union, said the new state rules imploring Boston to bring back as many students as possible will jeopardize their safety as well as that of the adults. The union, prior to Baker's announcement, had just sent a newsletter

The union has scheduled an emergency town hall for Sunday night to consider potential collective action.

“While we share the goal of prioritizing in-person learning, sending students back when COVID cases are on the rise, and reasonable safety measures have not been made is impractical and unsafe,” Tang said in a statement, noting that ventilation and other issues remain unresolved.

Because of the city’s rising coronavirus rate, Boston abruptly closed classrooms last month after bringing back some students who require specialized services.

Superintendent Brenda Cassellius is devising a plan to reopen classrooms for those students again and has appointed a task force.

“We will review this new guidance from [the state] and will continue consulting with our City of Boston colleagues and the Boston Public Health Commission to ensure public health, safety, and equity remain at the forefront of our reopening planning,” Cassellius said in a statement.

In making a push to reopen schools, Baker and his team focused largely on coronavirus positivity rates, characterizing COVID-19 cases in schools this fall as isolated and the number as low. They said they were unaware of any instance of coronavirus transmission within a school.

As of Thursday, [a total of 743 cases among students and 416 cases](#) among staff members have been reported in Massachusetts school districts, educational collaboratives, and approved SPED schools.

“Data collected from school districts across the US, of which we now have several months' worth, shows schools can open and operate safely in person,” said Baker, adding that remote-only learning carries mental health risks, such as depression and anxiety.

expected to have students learning fully in-person, if feasible, and should alternate students between days of in-person and remote learning only if there is no other way to meet health and safety guidelines.

Schools in red communities should rely on hybrid learning instead of following the state's previous recommendation of switching to remote learning. In communities with exceptionally high cases, districts can shift to remote learning, while working with the state to find ways to safely educate some students in person.

Baker and Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley wouldn't commit to penalizing school districts that choose to remain in a remote-only model when public health data does not seem to support the choice, saying they will evaluate each district on a case-by-case basis.

But the state has sought to publicly single out districts that officials see as too slow to reopen. Riley previously audited two public school districts — East Longmeadow and Watertown — over their timelines for bringing students back for in-person [instruction](#).

Thomas Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, said superintendents are trying the best they can to educate students in person, but there are many competing factors, including demands from teacher unions, staffing shortages, limited finances, and facility improvements, particularly with ventilation systems. He said the new rules and the overhaul metrics will likely be helpful down the road, but in the short term they could create some problems.

“There is a good amount of skepticism when these kinds of changes occur,” he said.

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to see it come back a bit," said Dan Lewis, co-leader of Lincoln-Sudbury's Outing Club.

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