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MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, Assistant Superintendents, Collaborative Leaders, Leaders of Approved Special Education Schools

FROM: Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Margret R. Cooke, Acting Commissioner, Department of Public Health

SUBJECT: DESE/DPH COVID-19 Guidance for Districts and Schools: Fall 2021

DATE: July 30, 2021

Background and context

As noted in the [Updates to DESE COVID-19 Guidance](#) released on May 27, 2021, all districts and schools will be required to be **in-person, full-time, five days a week this fall** and all previously-released Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) health and safety requirements will be lifted.

Recent updates by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to its [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#) emphasize the importance of all students returning to full-time, in-person school this fall. The CDC guidance supports the use of vaccines as the primary mitigation measure in school settings, and also continues to recommend masking in K-12 schools. Additionally, according to the CDC, “Because of the importance of in-person learning, schools where not everyone is fully vaccinated should implement physical distancing to the extent possible within their structures, but should not exclude students from in-person learning to keep a minimum distance requirement.”¹

Massachusetts has among the highest vaccination rates of any state in the nation,² and evidence continues to reinforce that the COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective, especially against severe disease.³ At the same time, even for those students not yet vaccinated, the apparent risk of

¹ Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools: Physical Distancing: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html#physical-distancing>

² “Data Table for COVID-19 Vaccinations in the United States,” CDC 2021. Data as of July 26, 2021. Available at: <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations>

³ Jamie Lopez Bernal, Nick Andrews, Charlotte Govver, Eileen Gallagher, et. al. July 21, 2021. “Effectiveness of COVID-19 Vaccines against the B.1.617.2 (Delta) Variant.” The New England Journal of Medicine. Available at: <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2108891>

COVID-19 to children remains small.^{4 5 6 7} These factors continue to reinforce that many previously instituted COVID-19 mitigation measures in school settings are no longer necessary.

In a [letter](#) released earlier this month, U.S. Education Secretary Cardona reiterated the importance of COVID-19 vaccine adoption for eligible students. This reinforced the [message](#) sent by Department of Public Health (DPH) and DESE Commissioners Bharel and Riley last school year indicating that vaccination is a critical strategy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on in-person learning.

Fall 2021 recommendations

This guidance document was developed jointly by DESE and DPH and outlines recommendations on masking, COVID-19 testing, and quarantine protocols. It also includes information on back-to-school vaccine clinics, local vaccine sites, and public awareness materials for families.

DESE and DPH also continue to encourage schools to maintain ventilation upgrades from this past year as feasible, continue hand hygiene practices, and extend policies for students and staff to stay home when sick. As always, we will monitor the public health situation and may issue additional guidance as needed.

Please note: The DESE COVID-19 Help Center remains open and available for consultation with districts and schools. Please do not hesitate to call with any questions at (781) 338-3500.

DESE and DPH will also issue Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) related to this guidance.

Masking

- **This fall, DESE and DPH strongly recommend that all students in kindergarten through grade 6 wear masks when indoors, except students who cannot do so due to medical conditions or behavioral needs.** Masks are not necessary outdoors and may be removed while eating indoors.
- **DESE and DPH also strongly recommend that unvaccinated staff in all grades, unvaccinated students in grades 7 and above, and unvaccinated visitors wear masks indoors,** in alignment with the statewide [advisory](#) on masking.

⁴ Massachusetts COVID-19 Response Reporting. 2021. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-response-reporting>

⁵ Coronavirus Disease 2019 in Children — United States, February 12–April 2, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:422–426. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6914e4>

⁶ J L Ward, R Harwood, C Smith, et. al. July 2021. “Risk factors for intensive care admission and death amongst children and young people admitted to hospital with COVID-19 and PIMS-TS in England during the first pandemic year.” medRxiv. *Please note: this is a preprint study that has not yet completed peer review.* Available at: <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.07.01.21259785v1>

⁷ Clare Smith, David Odd, Rachel Harwood, Joseph Ward, et. al. July 2021. “Deaths in Children and Young People in England following SARS-CoV-2 infection during the first pandemic year: a national study using linked mandatory child death reporting data.” Research Square. *Please note: this is a preprint study that has not yet completed peer review.* Available at: <https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-689684/v1>

- **DESE and DPH recommend that schools allow vaccinated students to remain unmasked.**
- Any individual at higher risk for severe disease from COVID or with a household member who is at high risk is encouraged to mask regardless of vaccination status consistent with the updated [DPH Advisory on Face Coverings and Masks](#).
- Any child or family who prefers to mask at school should be supported in this choice.
- By federal public health order, all students and staff are required to wear masks on school buses at this time.
- All staff and students must wear masks while in school health offices. Additional guidance for school health professionals is forthcoming from DPH.

Please note: DESE and DPH will continue to consult with medical advisors and may update the masking requirements above as we learn more about COVID-19's effects on hospitalizations in Massachusetts and on children.

COVID-19 testing

Districts and schools are highly encouraged to maintain or establish a robust plan for COVID-19 testing in schools, including both diagnostic testing and screening (pooled) testing for students and staff. DESE and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services will continue to offer these services at no cost to districts. These no cost services will include optional support for districts who would like additional staff to conduct testing on-site and/or help with testing logistics and communication.

Diagnostic testing, such as the BinaxNOW rapid antigen test, is an important tool for use in testing asymptomatic close contacts as part of updated quarantine guidance (see below). Diagnostic testing is especially important this year, as we head into cold and flu season. Districts are strongly encouraged to sign up for the statewide COVID-19 testing program as soon as it becomes available later in August to minimize the number of students required to quarantine outside of school.

Further information will be forthcoming.

Contact tracing and quarantine protocols

DESE and DPH will soon release a new version of the “Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios” document. **As part of this guidance, districts in the statewide testing program or using other approved diagnostic tests will be able to implement a new “test and stay” protocol in lieu of requiring asymptomatic close contacts to quarantine.** Under test and stay, asymptomatic close contacts will have the option to remain in school and be tested daily with BinaxNOW for at least 5 days. Vaccinated staff and students are exempt from quarantine.

Additional Information

Back to school vaccination clinics

A number of schools have hosted vaccination clinics on campus since May, which have served as an important tool in our collective efforts to vaccinate all eligible Massachusetts residents. Vaccination clinics at schools make vaccinations easier to access and more convenient for students and their families. We urge all schools, and in particular those with vaccination rates below the Massachusetts state average, to host an on-site vaccination clinic during summer orientation events or when classes begin. A DPH-approved mobile vaccination provider, including clinic staff and vaccination administrators, will be provided free of charge. Interested schools can submit their request via our [online form](#).

Local vaccination sites

More than 900 vaccination sites are available across the state and most accept walk-in appointments, including CVS and Walgreens pharmacies, pediatric primary care offices, and community health centers. As a reminder, the COVID vaccine is free for all, and no ID or insurance is needed to obtain the vaccine.

More information on these sites, as well as safety information, and helpful Q&As are all available at www.mass.gov/covidvaccine.

Public awareness materials for families

We encourage districts and schools to use their communications channels including social media, newsletters to parents, and flyers and posters to encourage vaccination.

The successful *Trust the Facts. Get the Vax.* statewide public awareness campaign is now focused on raising awareness and engaging parents. We know many parents and guardians may have questions about their children getting vaccinated and so the [latest TV spot](#) features pediatricians from our community health centers and hospitals on the importance of vaccinating our young people. A [Spanish language version](#) is also available featuring Spanish-speaking clinicians.

Another short, animated message is available [here](#). It is available in 10 languages. You can find these videos and other materials and graphics in multiple languages [here](#).

We continue to urge all school personnel to get vaccinated to protect themselves, their families, and their school community. We appreciate your assistance to keep all of our students, faculty, staff, and volunteers safe and healthy.