



*News from Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley & the
MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*

On the Desktop - February 23, 2021

Initial Information on Expanding In-Person Learning This Spring

Dear School and District Leaders,

After a challenging winter, we are beginning to see hopeful signs ahead as we return from February vacation and look towards spring. Warmer weather is on the horizon. We have seen significant improvement in our COVID-19 health metrics, nearly half of our schools now have pooled testing available for students and staff, and the vaccine rollout is in process. We continue to see in-person instruction delivered safely across the Commonwealth, and many districts are already starting to bring more students back, especially at the elementary level.

In a town hall last Tuesday, President Biden stated that his administration is focused on “opening the majority of schools in K through eighth grade” and, specifically, that “at the end of the first 100 days, we’d have a significant percentage of them being able to be open.” He stated further that for in-person learning time “the goal will be five days a week.”¹ We agree that it continues to be vital to have as many students back in person as possible before the end of the school year.

In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released its updated guidance for K-12 schools with a focus on safely reopening schools for in-person learning. In general, the updated CDC guidance is consistent with the health and safety guidance DESE has provided to schools since the start of the pandemic. Indeed, schools throughout Massachusetts have been providing in-person instruction to students using DESE’s guidance for over six months and have experienced first-hand the efficacy of these measures in significantly limiting in-school transmission. Importantly, DESE’s guidance balances the urgent need to bring students in the Commonwealth back to in-person learning while minimizing the risk to students, staff, and their families.

Several important themes are worth noting from the updated CDC guidance. Specifically, the CDC:

¹CNN Town Hall. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2021/02/17/part-1-entire-joe-biden-town-hall-february-16-vpx.cnn>. Relevant section begins at 7:20.

- Recommends a layered mitigation approach in schools to minimize the risks of COVID-19, consistent with DESE guidance, which includes masking, physical distancing, hand hygiene, cleaning, and contact tracing.
 - The CDC continues to recommend 6 feet of distancing in its guidance. DESE will continue to recommend 6 feet of distance where feasible and a minimum of 3 feet when all other mitigation measures are in place, which is supported by the World Health Organization², local public health experts³, infectious disease physicians⁴, the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics⁵, and the Governor’s COVID-19 Medical Advisory Board.
- Emphasizes that in-person instruction – whether in a hybrid or full in-person model – is particularly encouraged for elementary schools, regardless of community transmission. The guidance also notes that with screening tests in place (such as pooled testing), in-person learning is possible across grade levels and at all levels of community prevalence.
- Notes the importance of a comprehensive testing program for staff and students, including required testing for symptomatic individuals as well as the benefits of regular screening testing. The Department’s recent pooled testing initiative is consistent with the CDC’s screening testing recommendations.
- Indicates that vaccines are not a prerequisite for returning to in-person learning even as they will provide an extra layer of protection for school staff.

Looking ahead, with the extensive mitigation strategies in place and as state health metrics continue to improve, at some point districts and schools will need to shift away from remote and hybrid learning models and return to a traditional in-person educational format. At today’s meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), I indicated that in March, I will request that the Board grant me the authority to determine when hybrid and remote models no longer count for learning hours. This would be part of a broader plan, to be released in March, to begin returning more students to in-person learning this spring, assuming our state’s health metrics continue to improve.

²World Health Organization. Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19. (2020, May 10). Available at <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/considerations-for-school-related-public-health-measures-in-the-context-of-covid-19>.

³Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Healthy Buildings: Schools. Available at <https://schools.forhealth.org/>.

⁴See attached letter from Massachusetts infectious diseases physicians, pediatricians, and public health experts. (“By using this multi-layered infection control approach, school districts across Massachusetts have safely remained open for in-person learning, with only rare instances of in-school transmission. This has occurred even at community prevalence rates significantly higher than those set forth by CDC. The CDC itself released a study showing that community spread is not an indicator of within-school transmission; mitigation can tip the schools to be much lower risk than other community locations. Massachusetts private and public schools have opened with as little as 3 feet of distance between students and have proven that with these other mitigation measures, in-school transmission is exceedingly rare.”).

⁵Letter of endorsement from the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/2020-0624mcaap-letter.pdf>. See also American Academy of Pediatrics (2020) COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry. Retrieved from <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>.

If granted this authority, I will pursue a phased approach to returning students to the classroom, working closely with state health officials and medical experts. Ideally, my initial goal is to bring all elementary school students back to in-person learning five days a week this April. Parents will still have the option for their children to learn remotely through the end of the school year. There will also be a waiver process for districts who may need to take a more incremental approach (for instance, to first move to a robust hybrid model if they are currently fully remote).

In preparation for returning more students to school this spring, DESE recommends the following initial actions, with more information to follow in March:

- If districts and schools are currently open in an in-person or hybrid model, they should remain open and consult with DESE's COVID-19 operations team before making any changes to in-person learning.
- Furthermore, if not already underway, districts and schools in fully remote models should plan for an in-person return for elementary students in either a robust hybrid or fully in-person model, regardless of community prevalence.
- To support this planning and accommodate as many family preferences as possible, we encourage districts and schools to survey families about their interest in both hybrid and fully in-person models. Some families may prefer fully remote learning through the end of the school year. As such, districts and schools may be able to accommodate the remaining students interested in attending school fully in-person this spring, while maintaining physical distance between students.
- We continue to encourage districts and schools to sign up for DESE's pooled testing initiative. Please email k12covid19testing@mass.gov for support.

Working with the medical community, districts and schools have done an incredible job keeping our students and staff safe during what we hope is a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. At this point, with the robust mitigation strategies we have in place and all the data and evidence we have in hand, it is time to begin the process of returning even more of our students to classrooms.

We will provide additional information in the coming days and weeks. As always, feel free to reach out to DESE's COVID-19 operations team with any questions.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner