



MassCOSH

Massachusetts COVID-19 School Safety & Health Protections Frequently Asked Questions for Parents, Guardians, and Students

The Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Health and Safety (MassCOSH)'s mission is to ensure that all workers can earn a fair wage, be treated with respect and dignity and return home to their families alive and well. This FAQ is designed to help answer questions parents, guardians, and students may have about health and safety as their children return to in-person learning. For more information, please contact Jazmin Morinigo at jazmin@masscosh.org.

Who regulates COVID-19 health and safety in schools in Massachusetts?

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Department of Public Health (DPH) released guidance in August 2021 which was used by local school districts to create their COVID-19 protocols and procedures. DESE/DPH guidance offers recommendations for best practices that students, staff and faculty should follow but almost none of their recommendations are mandated or required statewide. The only current statewide mandate is the mask mandate detailed below. Parents and guardians should refer to the policies of their child's local school district to see what is mandated or required. Across the state, teachers' unions have played a key role in negotiating health and safety protections for staff, faculty and students and can also be a good resource for information in your district.

Are students required to wear a mask?

Public school students (age 5 and above) and staff in all grades are required to wear masks indoors in schools. Masks are not required when outdoors. All visitors are also expected to wear a mask in school buildings. The mask requirement will be in place until at least October 1, 2021. After that time, schools that demonstrate that they have at least 80% vaccination rate may be able to lift the mask mandate for vaccinated students only.

Students and staff who cannot wear a mask for medical reasons, and students who cannot wear a mask for behavioral reasons, are exempted from the requirement. Face shields may be an option for students with medical or behavioral needs who are unable to wear masks or face coverings. Transparent masks may be the best option for both teachers and students in classes for deaf and hard of hearing students.

For more information on the DESE mask mandate: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/2021-0825mask-requirement.pdf>

MassCOSH recommends universal masking, beyond October 1, in pre-K through higher education with well-fitting, high quality masks. It is especially important as the very infectious Delta variant is circulating and fully vaccinated individuals can get infected and infect others.

Are students, staff and faculty required to be vaccinated against COVID-19?

Students are not required to be vaccinated against COVID-19. However, some school districts do mandate vaccines for staff and faculty. For instance, all Boston Public School staff must adhere to the vaccine verification or regular testing policy for City of Boston employees announced on August 16.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone age 12+ receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

MassCOSH recommends that school districts implement multiple strategies to increase the vaccination rate among eligible students.

What does DESE suggest for distancing, ventilation, and air filtration?

There are no physical distancing requirements in place this year, even during meals. DESE recommends that districts and schools encourage individuals to distance when feasible when masks are removed indoors, such as during mealtimes. Schools are also encouraged to continue utilizing outdoor space for meals, as feasible. Additionally DESE recommends the following:

- Schools should continue to maximize ventilation and air exchanges in schools and classrooms, even in warmer weather.
- Schools should use any combination of ventilation and filtration by keeping doors open, using portable air purifiers, and/or keeping windows cracked open one or two inches.
- For schools with centralized systems or in-room unit ventilators, they should continue to have those units bring in as much fresh air as possible into the classrooms and increase the level of filtration in the system.
- Keeping windows and doors open for cross-ventilation or using portable air cleaners with HEPA filters are good strategies.

MassCOSH recommends that all schools implement ventilation and filtration upgrades to ensure adequate air changes per hour (the number of times per hour that the volume of air is replaced) - ideally 6 or more air changes per hour -- 6 times per hour -- and filtration (use of filters in HVAC systems that are at least MERV 13; use of portable air cleaners with HEPA filters in rooms where there is no HVAC system with MERV 13 filters or higher) and appropriate distancing that addresses airborne, aerosolized transmission.

How will students and faculty be tested?

DESE highly encourages districts and schools to maintain or establish a robust plan for COVID-19 testing in schools, including testing students and staff with symptoms (diagnostic testing to determine if the symptoms are COVID-19) and screening or pooled testing (to identify asymptomatic cases). Routine COVID pooled testing involves combining several test samples together and then testing the group sample with a PCR test for detection of COVID-19. Testing

for all consenting students and staff members will typically take place once per week. DESE and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services offer these services at no cost to districts. Families should refer to their local district to find more about testing options at their schools.

There are **two** kinds of COVID-19 tests:

PCR Test: This is a swab or spit test. PCR tests are very accurate when properly performed by a health care professional. Samples are sent to a lab for analysis. Pool testing uses the PCR test method.

Rapid Antigen Test: Antigen tests are relatively inexpensive, and most can be used right at school with results in approximately 15–30 minutes. DESE is providing schools with BINAX NowAntigen tests for the Test and Stay Program (see below).

MassCOSH recommends that all students and staff have access to free COVID-19 testing in schools and that both school districts and DESE track COVID-19 cases in schools.

How will I know if my child has been exposed?

Someone is considered exposed to COVID-19 if they are a close contact of someone who has tested positive. Both the CDC and DESE define close contacts as individuals who have been within 6 feet of a COVID-19 positive individual while indoors, for at least 15 minutes during a 24-hour period, even if they are masked.

When someone tests positive, contact tracing is performed to identify all close contacts. Contact tracing is usually done by local public health officials with the support of school nurses. They will contact parents/guardians if a student is a close contact of someone who tests positive for COVID-19.

What happens if my child is exposed to COVID-19? What is “Test and Stay?”

DESE has different protocols for students who are exposed to COVID-19 depending on if they have symptoms, or are asymptomatic (don’t have symptoms).

If they are asymptomatic:

Students who have been found to be a close contact to someone who tests positive for COVID-19 will follow DESE’s “Test **and** Stay” policy. “Test and Stay” allows individuals who are identified as a close contact of a confirmed positive case to stay in school, rather than quarantine, with a daily testing for 7 days. This allows for students to avoid missing school while awaiting results. Students can participate in “Test and Stay” as long as they:

- Are asymptomatic
- Wear masks in school at all times, other than when eating or drinking.
- When these individuals cannot be masked (i.e., when eating or drinking) they should maintain 3 feet of distance from other individuals to the extent feasible.
- Take a rapid antigen test (e.g., BinaxNOW) on each school day and receive a negative result. When the 7 days from date of exposure includes weekends or holidays, individuals should quarantine on weekends, and if they remain asymptomatic, upon return to school be tested immediately. If the individual remains negative, they can stay in school.

- Conduct active monitoring for symptoms through day 14, and self-isolate at home if symptoms develop.

If they have COVID-19 symptoms:

- Individuals may return to school after they have received a negative PCR test result for COVID-19. So long as the individual is not a close contact, if a medical professional makes an alternative diagnosis for the COVID-19-like symptoms, the individual may use this recommendation (e.g., for influenza or strep pharyngitis) in lieu of a PCR test. Students, must also have improvement in symptoms, have been without fever for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications.
- Alternatively, if a student chooses not to take a PCR test, they must isolate themselves for 10 days, returning to school on the 11th day.

DESE allows certain students to be exempt from the “test and stay” protocol even if they are a close contact. This includes:

- Asymptomatic, fully vaccinated close contacts: Individuals who are asymptomatic and fully vaccinated are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- Classroom close contacts: An individual who is exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual in the classroom while both individuals were masked, so long as the individuals were spaced at least 3 feet apart, is exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- Bus close contacts: Individuals on buses must be masked according to federal requirements. As such, individuals who are masked on buses when windows are open are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- Close contacts who have had COVID-19 within the past 90 days: An individual who has been previously diagnosed with COVID-19 and then becomes a close contact of someone with COVID-19 is exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols if:
 - o The exposure occurred within 90 days of the onset of their own illness AND
 - o The exposed individual is recovered and remains without COVID-19 symptoms.

MassCOSH recommends that quarantine and isolation are important tools to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While “Test and Stay” allows students who are close contacts and have no remote-learning option to avoid missing school, it may result in the exposure of many more students, teachers and staff.

What happens if my child tests positive for COVID-19?

DESE guidance says that a student who tests positive will be required to self-isolate for a minimum of 10 days after symptoms onset or (if asymptomatic) after positive PCR or antigen test. After 10 days and once they will be allowed to return to school if symptoms have improved, and if they have been without fever for 24 hours without taking fever-reducing medications.

What happens if there are a lot of cases at my school?

A cluster of COVID-19 cases should prompt an investigation by local public health departments to determine where and how people were infected (the source) and whether they were likely infected at school or outside school. The CDC defines a cluster in a K-12 as the person infected plus two or more people who had closed contacts (3 cases). DESE encourages schools that have a high number of cases to reach out to their Rapid Response Center at 781-338-3500.

Some districts, but not all, are posting COVID-19 data on their websites for parents, teachers and staff.

MassCOSH recommends all clusters should be properly investigated and that districts, and the State, should post accurate data about positive COVID-19 cases by school.

Who do I call if my school is not following these guidelines?

Mask mandates and other health and safety protocols in schools are being enforced by local public health officials. Please call your local public health commission for more information.

Boston 617-534-5395

Cambridge 617-665-3826

Somerville 617-625-6600

Brockton 508-894-1480

Chelsea 617-466-4080

*This FAQ was updated on 9/20/21. Information is ever-changing.
For updated versions please go to www.masscosh.org.*