





MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents

FROM: Dr. Michael Johnson, Commissioner 
Dr. Anne Zink, Chief Medical Officer, DHSS 

DATE: August 26, 2021

SUBJECT: Recommendations for keeping Alaskan K-12 students safe in school

The delta variant is causing a dramatic rise in COVID-19 cases in Alaska and throughout the country. Currently, most of Alaska's boroughs and census areas are in the high-risk level. Presently, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services' (DHSS) ability to process COVID-19 testing results and perform contact tracing in a timely manner is delayed. Cases of COVID-19 occurring in schools that are not promptly identified and managed can spread quickly and broadly, resulting in increased community spread and possible school or classroom shutdowns.

Districts with optional masking policies and limited screening testing policies are more likely to experience considerably higher rates of COVID-19 transmission. Already, full classrooms have had to quarantine where students were not universally masked. Conversely, when proper universal masking is implemented, the number of students quarantined is greatly reduced.

DHSS recommends that in areas with ongoing community transmission, school districts should implement the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's \(CDC\) Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#) to the fullest extent possible. The CDC guidance is designed specifically to keep students safely in the classroom to benefit from in-person learning.

These guidelines underscore the importance of a layered approach to preventing COVID-19 transmission in schools that takes into consideration the level of community transmission and vaccination coverage rates, among other things. The layers of protection outlined in the guidance include vaccination of eligible students and staff, universal masking, social distancing, appropriate ventilation, screening testing, and appropriate isolation and quarantine.

DHSS also recommends that schools assist by including procedures for internal contact tracing and rapid notification to close contacts in their mitigation plans to respond quickly and efficiently to COVID-19 cases in school settings. While the DHSS Division of Public Health works to increase capacity, **we are asking schools to take the lead on intraschool contact tracing.**

DHSS remains available to answer questions, provide consultation as needed, and assist districts with their COVID-19 mitigation planning.

School districts are best situated to quickly respond to cases that occur in their schools as they are the most knowledgeable about district-specific policies (and associated compliance) regarding student and staff spacing, masking, and school-based interactions. Districts can also work swiftly with staff to determine which students and staff were close contacts and notify parents to implement appropriate quarantine guidance.

Here are recommendations for school districts regarding contact tracing:

- Each school should establish internal procedures to rapidly notify students and staff who are close contacts to confirmed cases. Schools should also identify one point of contact to coordinate with local public health nurses or contact tracers.
- Parents of students with a known exposure, as defined by CDC, should be notified by the school district of the exposure and be given appropriate [quarantine instructions](#).ⁱ Parents should be notified of an exposure regardless of the vaccination status of students. Students who are unvaccinated will need to quarantine.
- If contact tracing is not possible and a positive case is detected in an indoor setting where all students were not consistently masking, all unvaccinated students who were in the same room with the infected individual for an extended period should quarantine and all students in the school should be notified of the positive.

Per CDC, students are considered to be a “close contact” in the K–12 indoor classroom setting if any of the following criteria are met:
1) An unvaccinated student who was fully masked but spent a cumulative 15 minutes at less than 3 feet from a COVID-19 positive student who was also <i>fully masked</i> ; OR
2) An unvaccinated student who spent a cumulative 15 minutes or more at less than 6 feet from a COVID-19 positive student where one or both students were <i>unmasked</i> ; OR
3) An unvaccinated student who was exposed to a COVID-19 positive teacher or staff member for 15 minutes or more at less than 6 feet, regardless of masking. ⁱⁱ

We recommend sharing with parents the contact tracing efforts that will be performed by your district and letting them know in advance the types of notifications they can expect to receive.

The Division of Public Health has created two template letters to help you communicate with parents. Please see the attached. These templates can be modified to meet your needs. They include up to date recommendations for quarantine of close contacts, and a general letter that informs parents about the limited capacity to perform contact investigations, and the actions they can take to protect the health and safety of their children and families.

If your school cannot perform contact tracing or contact tracing efforts cannot determine whether students meet the known exposure criteria, the minimum expectation is for schools to provide notification to parents of potential exposures.

The Division of Public Health remains available to provide guidance and suggestions on school district contact tracing procedures. It is the intent of our contact tracing workforce and local public health nurses to continue to notify the school when new staff and student positives are reported and identified as associated with the school setting.

Thank you for your cooperation and continued partnership. Keeping students in school this year is a priority for all of us! If you have any questions or would like assistance, please email schoolhealthandsafety@alaska.gov or call the school health and safety number: 907-269-3433.

For more information, please visit the [DHSS School Health Information webpage](#).

Enclosures (3)

ⁱ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/quarantine.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/contact-tracing/contact-tracing-plan/appendix.html#contact>