

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education &
Department of Public Health
Frequently Asked Questions Compilation Document
August 20, 2021 through December 6, 2021, updated February 28, 2022.

DESE/DPH Guidance and Local Decision-Making

1. Is the DESE/DPH guidance intended for districts/schools or for use by individuals outside of a school setting (e.g., parents/students)?

In general, DESE/DPH's guidance is issued to districts and schools, with the intent to inform decision-making and policy development at the school/district level. Parents and guardians should refer to the policies of their child's local school district when planning during the school year.

2. Is a school committee or executive board allowed to set additional policies beyond what is outlined in the DESE/DPH guidance documents?

School committees and executive boards may set additional policies beyond those provided in the guidance so long as those policies meet the minimum structured learning time requirements for schools and districts and do not impede students' access and right to public education.

3. Are school health professionals able to check an individual's COVID-19 vaccination status in the Massachusetts Immunization Information System (MIIS)?

In general, school health professionals who are authorized users of the MIIS can check MIIS to confirm adequate up to date immunizations, avoid unnecessary immunizations, control disease outbreaks, or as otherwise needed to confirm compliance with immunization requirements. Authorized school health professionals may check the COVID-19 vaccination status of any individual within their school or program authorization in MIIS for those purposes regardless of whether vaccines are mandated.

4. What should a school district do if a school in the district is experiencing a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases?

If a school has concerns over a rapid increase in cases within a classroom, grade, or a school, **districts and schools must notify their local board of health and must call** the DESE Rapid Response Help Center at 781-338-3500.

DESE will then support the district/school with the following steps:

- Follow [DESE/DPH testing, isolation and quarantine protocols](#)
- Narrow the focus to relevant classrooms and/or grades where the case increases have been observed and classrooms and/or grades where cases have exposed others

- Work with DESE, local board of health, and DPH epidemiologists to review and assess the most recent testing results, discuss strategies to control the spread, and determine additional measures to be taken, including administering enhanced testing.
 - Districts must consult with their local health department and DESE prior to making any decisions about quarantining and closure of an entire classroom, grade, or school.

5. What COVID-19 protocols should students at vocational/technical schools follow at their external internships and co-ops?

Students should follow the COVID-19 requirements as specified by the external placement site. If students do not wish to comply with their assigned placement site’s requirements, vocational / technical schools are not required to find them an alternative placement.

Remote Learning

6. Can students who are quarantining due to a COVID-19 related issue participate in remote learning?

During the 2021-22 school year, full-time remote learning programs will not count toward structured learning time hours unless specifically previously authorized by DESE.

Only in the limited instance where students must isolate and/or enter quarantine, as described in the SY22 protocols issued by DESE and DPH, if schools have the ability to allow students to join their schedule remotely, then they may do so. Consistent with DESE’s guidance on student attendance, students who participate in at least half of the school day activities while quarantining or isolating can be marked present.

If schools are not able to allow students to join their schedule remotely, schools should adopt a policy consistent with other absences and provide work for students that can be completed while at home.

7. What is the school’s obligation to provide home or hospital services to students who are medically unable to attend school in person?

Some students are unable to attend school due to a documented, longer-term medical need. Upon receipt of a physician's written order verifying that a student enrolled in a public school or placed by the public school in a private setting must remain at home or in a hospital on a day or overnight basis, or any combination of both, for medical reasons and for a period of not less than fourteen school days in any school year, the principal shall arrange for provision of educational services to provide the student with the opportunity to make educational progress even when a physician determines that the student is physically unable to attend school.

Please note that home and hospital services apply only to students with documented medical needs. To learn more about home and hospital services, please read the [Question and Answer Guide on the Implementation of Educational Services in the Home or Hospital \(download\)](#) and

review the physician affirmation forms [here](#). For additional questions, please email specialeducation@doe.mass.edu.

Physical Distancing

8. Do individuals need to maintain physical distance in school this year?

There are no physical distancing requirements in place this year, even during meals. However, we recommend that districts and schools encourage individuals to distance as feasible when masks are removed indoors, such as during mealtimes. Schools are also encouraged to continue utilizing outdoor space for meals, as feasible and as weather permits.

DESE and DPH strongly recommend a physical distance of at least 3 feet during meals, as feasible, when masks are removed **only** for individuals in Test and Stay and/or those who return to school after the first 5 days of isolation and/or quarantine.

Masks

9. When the mask requirement is lifted statewide on February 28th, will masks still be required in any setting? (*Updated, February 28, 2022*)

Yes, masks will still be required in school health offices. School health offices are health care settings and as such, masks will continue to be worn by all individuals in these offices. Please refer the [Additional Information for School Health Offices](#) for more information.

10. What is DESE's guidance on appropriate mask wearing?

Individuals' masks must completely cover their nose and mouth and fit snugly against the sides of their face without gaps. The CDC has published [additional helpful guidelines](#) on proper mask wearing, including emphasizing that individuals should not choose masks that have any holes or vents, such as those for exhalation, which allow the virus particles to escape.

11. Are clubs, activities, and electives (e.g., chorus/band and physical education) allowed indoors and unmasked?

Currently, there is not differentiated guidance for specific student activities – all student clubs, sports, activities, and electives should follow the same masking protocols as the classroom. Schools are encouraged to maintain distance between individuals as feasible or use outdoor space. For further guidance/support in planning clubs, activities, and electives, call DESE's Rapid Response Center at 781-338-3500.

12. May individuals remove their masks when students are receiving speech and language services?

Masks should be worn during speech and language services, with clear face masks preferred. If a clear mask is unavailable, a face shield may be worn. Individuals should maintain distance as feasible whenever masks are removed, including when face shields are being used.

Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios

13. If an individual is identified as a close contact outside of school, can a fully vaccinated individual attend school, even if their vaccination status is not “up to date” (i.e. they completed their vaccination series more than 5 months ago and have not received the booster)? (*New, February 18, 2022*)

Yes, because the individual is fully vaccinated according to the DESE/DPH Protocols for Responding to K-12 Scenarios, the individual may attend school. However, unless an individual has received their primary vaccination series and a booster within 5 months of primary series (or within 2 months if they received J&J for their primary series), *they must quarantine when outside of school settings.*

Please note, at this time, and as provided in the updated DPH/DESE Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios, “fully vaccinated” is defined as two weeks following the completion of the Pfizer or Moderna series or two weeks following a single dose of Johnson & Johnson’s Janssen vaccine.

14. Is a negative test required prior to returning to school following a COVID-19 diagnosis? (*New, February 18, 2022*)

No, return to school should be based on time and symptom resolution. Testing during isolation to return to school is not required. Individuals with a positive test should follow Protocol A.

15. What is the primary resource I should review to understand the protocols?

The [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22](#) is the primary source on the DESE/DPH protocols for this school year.

If you have further questions on the Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22, you can contact the DESE Rapid Response Help Center at 781-338-3500.

16. The [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios](#) refers to mild symptoms. What symptoms are considered mild?

Mild symptoms: This refers to any **single** (isolated) symptom on the list below if the symptom is also mild. If a symptom is **severe** (based on the clinical judgement of school health professionals), even if isolated, then it should **not** be considered a mild symptom.

- Cough
- Sore throat
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea

- Headache
- Fatigue
- Nasal congestion or runny nose (not due to other known causes, such as allergies)

17. When do children need to undergo testing following vaccination if they develop symptoms including fever, headache, fatigue, chills, and body aches (which may be side effects following COVID-19 vaccination)?

Provided that temperature is below 100.0°F degrees and there are no known exposures to COVID-19, mild-to-moderate symptoms including fever, headache, fatigue, chills, and body aches that begin after vaccination and fully resolve within 48 hours after vaccination do not require COVID testing prior to return to school. For mild symptoms that occur during this time frame at school, rapid antigen testing is still encouraged. As a reminder, COVID-19 vaccination will not cause respiratory symptoms such as sore throat, cough, and nasal congestion, etc.

18. If a student is isolating or quarantining at home, should they receive a daily visual check in (e.g., over Zoom or Google Classroom)?

Yes. Schools are strongly encouraged to do a daily visual check in with students who must quarantine at home, per DESE and DPH protocols.

Transportation

19. As the weather grows colder, how should districts communicate with families about ventilation on buses?

Schools are strongly encouraged to keep bus windows open whenever feasible to increase ventilation on buses. DESE encourages districts to communicate with their school community that increasing outside air will affect the temperatures on buses. Districts should encourage families and caregivers to send their students to school with plenty of warm layers in fall and winter, as bus temperatures could fluctuate throughout the day.

Returning to School

20. After holiday breaks, can schools require a negative COVID-19 test prior to a student's return to school?

No. Testing cannot be required for a student's return to school after holidays or vacations. Individuals are encouraged to follow the [recommended travel guidelines set by the CDC](#).

Miscellaneous

21. Where can districts find information on purchasing air purifiers?

Last year DESE purchased the Medify MA-40 HEPA air purifier units from Safe Ware Inc. Inventory of this product is available under the state contract HLS06. The cost is \$258.82 per

unit. Other options available on the state contract for air purifiers include the following: FAC85, FAC100, FAC101, FAC105, and HSP41. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Anne Marie Stronach at anne.marie.stronach@mass.gov; 781-873-9514.

22. Do schools need to maintain a dedicated medical waiting room?

No, schools do not need to maintain a dedicated medical waiting room. If an individual is symptomatic on the bus or at school or tests positive for COVID-19 while at school, they must be masked, and when feasible, be in a separate, appropriately supervised, room with the door closed. If a separate room is not available, they must adhere to strict 6 feet of physical distancing until they can go home. Information for School Health offices can be found <https://www.mass.gov/doc/information-for-school-health-offices/download>.

23. During short school weeks, such as Thanksgiving week, should schools still provide pooled testing programs?

DESE recommends that pooled testing programs are only run when the school is able to complete the entire pooled testing process from the initial pooled test through the completion of all needed follow-up tests. Schools are encouraged to work with their project coordinator to develop a schedule that will work for your school community and can be supported by your CIC staff during shorter school weeks.

Symptomatic Testing

24. What should happen if a student or staff member presents symptoms during school?

When a student or staff member presents to the school health office with symptoms from the list in Section 1, they should receive a rapid antigen test if available.

- If the result is positive, they should be sent home and follow Protocol A.
- If the result is negative, they may be sent home at the discretion of the school health professional. The student's parent/guardian, or the staff member, should be advised to follow Protocol C.

25. How should schools address individuals with mild symptoms?

If an individual has mild symptoms, the individual may be considered for testing using a rapid antigen test, if available.

- If the result is positive, they should be sent home and follow Protocol A.
- If the result is negative, they should remain in school.
- If the minimal symptom(s) persist, the individual should be re-tested within the subsequent 3 days. Either a rapid antigen or a PCR test is suitable for re-testing.
- If symptoms worsen, the individual should seek medical care and be evaluated for the need for additional testing.

26. Who should participate in routine COVID-19 pooled testing?

Unvaccinated district and school staff and students who submit consent forms are strongly encouraged to participate in voluntary routine COVID-19 pooled testing. This includes contracted staff such as bus drivers. Vaccinated staff and students may also participate in pooled testing if they submit consent forms; however, this is not recommended. Any individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 90 days should not participate in routine COVID-19 pooled testing.

27. Who will administer routine COVID-19 pooled testing?

Based on guidance from DPH, staff and students who are in grades kindergarten and above are encouraged to self-administer the nasal swab under appropriate supervision and at the discretion of the trained observer. Tests may also be administered at school either by trained school staff, including school health professionals, or trained onsite test specimen collectors.

28. How should routine COVID-19 pooled testing be grouped?

“Membership” within a given pooled testing group should remain consistent when feasible. Teachers should be tested with their students to avoid staffing issues if each teacher needs an individual re-test. If districts or schools strongly prefer to create pooled testing groups composed exclusively of staff, they are limited to a maximum of 5 swabs per staff-only group and must have rapid antigen tests available for immediate follow-up testing.

29. How often should routine COVID-19 pooled testing occur?

Routine COVID-19 pooled testing should be conducted once a week in most scenarios.

30. What if the follow-up tests to a positive group pooled testing result in no individual positive tests?

In the case where a positive group pooled testing returns no individual positives upon follow-up testing, all members of the group should remain in school and be individually tested by rapid antigen test again 1-2 days after the initial negative result.

Test and Stay (For districts continuing with Test and Stay - Legacy)

31. Is the Test and Stay program available to both students and staff?

Yes. If districts/schools are offering Test and Stay, both students and staff may participate in the Test and Stay program.

32. Should schools include asymptomatic, fully vaccinated individuals in the Test and Stay Program?

No. Schools **may not** test asymptomatic, fully vaccinated individuals as part of the Test and Stay Program. As a reminder, the following categories are exempt from testing and quarantine protocols, as outlined in the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19](#).

- **Asymptomatic, fully vaccinated individuals**
- **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
- **Bus close contacts:** An individual who is exposed to COVID-19 positive individual on the bus, while individuals are masked and windows are open
- **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 if
 - i. The exposure occurred within 90 days of the onset of their illness AND
 - ii. the exposed individual is recovered and remains asymptomatic

33. For the Test and Stay program, is there a specific time of day that the tests need to occur?

Schools are encouraged to conduct Test and Stay testing the first day of the school week and as early in the day as possible, but there is not a specific deadline for testing. On Tuesday through Friday, there is a not a recommended testing time, as long as individuals in the program are tested daily.

34. How many days will an individual be tested during the Test & Stay program?

The duration of the Test and Stay program is 5 days from the date of exposure. Some of these days could be non-school days (i.e., weekends or holidays). Testing is only required on school days, unless the individual participates in school-sponsored sports or extracurricular activities that fall on a non-school day. If the 5th day falls over a non-school day, the individual must be tested on the morning of their return to school. On the 6th day, a student will exit the Test and Stay protocol, assuming all tests were negative, and they remain asymptomatic.

35. What happens if the 5th day of Test and Stay falls over an extended break (e.g., long weekend, vacation, holiday break)?

The duration of the Test and Stay program is 5 days from the date of exposure. Some of these days could be non-school days (i.e., weekends or holidays). Testing is only required on school days unless the individual participates in school-sponsored sports or extracurricular activities that fall on a non-school day. If the 5th day falls over an extended break (e.g., long weekend, vacation, holiday break), the individual may be tested on the morning of their return to school so long as the first day back is within 7 days of the date of exposure. If the first day back to school following an extended break is day 8 or later from the date of exposure, the individual does not need to be tested upon return to school provided that they have not experienced any symptoms.

36. Can symptomatic individuals participate in Test and Stay?

No. Symptomatic individuals (as defined in the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY2021-22](#)) **cannot** participate in Test and Stay.

However, if a close contact has symptoms **and** the symptoms resolve prior to day 5, they may return to school and participate in the Test and Stay program. If possible, students should receive a test (rapid antigen or PCR) prior to returning to school. Please refer to the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY2021-22](#) to see which individuals are exempted from Test and Stay and other quarantine protocols.

If symptoms (as defined in the protocols document) arise while an individual is participating in Test and Stay, they should go home and isolate until symptoms resolve. Please note that symptom resolution is defined as having improvement in symptoms and having been without fever for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications.

37. When individuals participating in Test and Stay are not in school, are they required to quarantine?

In alignment with DPH guidance, individuals participating in Test and Stay should stay home and quarantine whenever they are not in school settings, for the duration of the Test and Stay period. As a reminder, as noted in the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios - SY 2021-22 document](#), individuals can participate in school activities on the weekends and after school if they continue to test on those days and follow the other Test and Stay protocols.

38. If individuals are exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual outside of school, can they participate in Test and Stay?

No. At this time, Test and Stay is intended for close contacts exposed in school only. Unvaccinated close contacts that were exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual in their household (such as siblings) or other non-school setting, must quarantine at home per [DPH/DESE's Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22 document](#). As a reminder, vaccinated close contacts are exempt from quarantine protocols and do not participate in Test and Stay.

39. When individuals must mask after returning from isolation and/or quarantine, or are participating in the Test and Stay program, do they have to wear masks even when outdoors?

No. Individuals who are returning from isolation and/or quarantine and must mask or those that are participating in the Test and Stay program must wear masks at all times, unless they are eating or drinking, or when outdoors.

40. Can individuals in special education settings who are unable to wear a mask due to medical or behavioral issues participate in Test and Stay?

Yes, provided that staff supporting such students employ the additional safety precautions described below (Appendix A). *Please note: this question was revised on October 19, 2021.*

41. Can individuals participating in Test and Stay ride the bus?

Yes. Individuals participating in Test and Stay can participate in all school setting activities, including riding the bus. Per the federal requirements, all individuals must remain masked while riding the bus.

Appendix A

Revised October 19, 2021

Additional Precautions for Staff Supporting Students Who Cannot Wear Masks

Please note: this guidance applies to students in special education settings.

Some students cannot wear masks for medical or behavioral reasons and, like any other students, they might be identified as close contacts who can participate in Test and Stay. When this happens, the staff members who interact with such students should follow the guidelines that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes for “[direct service providers](#)”. Direct service providers include educators, personal care attendants, paraprofessionals, therapists, related services personnel, assistants, school nurses, health office staff, and any other staff who must interact closely with students who cannot wear masks while participating in Test and Stay.

Direct service providers are essential for the health and well-being of the students they serve. Direct service providers should be aware of and trained on how COVID-19 spreads, risk factors, and prevention actions. Additional preventive measures may need to be taken depending on the activity and the risk level of that activity. Below, please find additional information on the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for direct service providers:

<i>Classification of Individual Wearing protective equipment</i>	<i>N95 or KN95 Respirator</i>	<i>Face Shield</i>	<i>Disposable Gowns</i>	<i>Disposable Gloves</i>	<i>Gowns/ Coveralls/ Other Body Covering</i>	<i>Cloth Face Covering</i>	<i>Disposable mask</i>
DSPs in care areas of students who cannot wear masks and are identified as close contacts	X	X	X	X	X		X (with face shield if N95/KN95 not available)
DSPs in the same facility but not in the care areas for students who cannot wear masks and are identified as close contacts						X	
DSPs providing personal care to students without suspected COVID-19 but who may potentially be exposed to bodily fluids		X (preferred)		X			X
DSPs performing or present during aerosol generating procedures such as nebulizer treatments, chest PT, suctioning, trach care	X	X		X	X		
Transportation personnel/monitors who must come in direct physical contact with passengers (e.g. buckling/unbuckling, performing wheelchair safety services)				X		X	