



## **2021-2022 COVID-19 Guidance for Schools August 10, 2021**

Despite hardships for the 2020-21 school year, Arkansas's students, educators, and communities finished the year strong and were successful at maximizing on-site instruction in Arkansas even when many other states remained virtual. The success came as a result of strategic planning and ongoing communication between school districts, the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH). Last summer, school districts, in collaboration with their communities, developed and implemented "Ready for Learning" plans that put into action multiple mitigation strategies to minimize risks to students and staff. These plans served as each LEAs Safe Return to In-Person learning, and the results from last year leave us more confident in the proven mitigation strategies and more aware of what to expect.

Last spring, during the period of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) ESSER award, schools were required to update their Safe Return to In-Person Instruction procedures to describe plans for Continuity of Services for the remainder of the school year and during the summer. Plans were required to be posted by April 15, 2021, on school district websites. These plans must be reviewed regularly, but no less frequently than every six months, and be revised when appropriate. While the next regularly-scheduled update is October 15, 2021, school districts should re-engage their communities to review plans and make updates to reflect the district's strategies for a Safe Return and Continuity of Service for the upcoming school year. Updates should be posted on each school district's website.

To assist schools with developing procedures for all school operations, including remaining summer activities, DESE is updating guidance regarding the best practices that will continue to ensure the safety of both students and educators while supporting a strong in-person learning environment.

Because many schools serve children under the age of 12 who are not eligible for vaccination at this time or are not yet fully vaccinated, this guidance emphasizes implementing layered prevention strategies to protect people who are not fully vaccinated, including students, teachers, staff, and other members of their households, especially in areas where community transmission is elevated. School districts are advised to continue practicing preventative measures such as appropriate masking, physical distancing, screening, testing, ventilation, handwashing and respiratory etiquette, staying home when sick and getting tested, contact tracing in combination with quarantine and isolation, and cleaning and disinfection to the extent practical. School districts have access to additional federal funding that is specifically designed



to **prevent, prepare for, and respond** to COVID-19 and are encouraged to monitor planned uses of funds to ensure that sufficient PPE and other safety measures are considered when expending funds.

**Continued Practices to Mitigate the Likelihood of COVID-19 Spread Inside the School**

***Vaccinations***

COVID-19 vaccines are the most effective strategy to protect people from getting sick and to reduce the risk of people spreading COVID-19. Students who are ages 12 and older are eligible to receive the Pfizer vaccination. Schools are encouraged to help students ages 12 and older, their families, and all school staff with getting vaccinated. Actions districts can take include:

- initiating vaccination campaigns,
- hosting informational sessions with local medical professionals,
- partnering with local community-based programs, including childcare facilities, and
- sponsoring vaccination clinics at local school sites.

**Fully-vaccinated students or staff do not need to quarantine if deemed close contacts, unless they have/develop symptoms.** School nurses can help verify the vaccination status of a potential close contact through WeblZ to help POCs and school officials determine responses. Parents and students should not be required to provide documentation of vaccination status if nurses are unable to verify through WeblZ.

***Masks/Face Coverings***

As updated on August 4, 2021, CDC guidance states, “When teachers, staff, and students consistently and correctly wear a mask, they protect others as well as themselves. Consistent and [correct mask use](#) is especially important indoors and in crowded settings, when physical distancing cannot be maintained.” The CDC currently recommends the following regarding the wearing of masks in school settings:

- **Indoors.** CDC recommends indoor masking for all individuals age 2 years and older, including students, teachers, staff, and visitors, regardless of vaccination status.
- **Outdoors.** In general, people do not need to wear masks when outdoors. CDC recommends that people who are not fully vaccinated wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings or during activities that involve sustained close contact with other people. Fully vaccinated people might choose to wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings if they or someone in their household is immunocompromised.



**Individuals exposed to a confirmed case of COVID-19 will not need to quarantine if the individual exposed has no symptoms and both the infected and exposed individual consistently and correctly were wearing a mask.**

**NOTE: On August 6, 2021, Judge Tim Fox issued a temporary restraining order that prohibits the enforcement of Act 1002 of 2021 pending continuing court proceedings. Under the order, there can be no enforcement action taken against any school district or charter school that adopts or implements a requirement to use masks/face coverings. It is recommended that districts and charter schools consult district legal counsel when considering the adoption or implementation of mask/face covering requirements and the applicability of current local policies.**

***Physical Distancing***

In order to facilitate in-person learning 5 days a week for Arkansas students, each district should **continue** to implement practices that promote physical distancing between individuals and groups of individuals. Although 6 feet is the standard, the inability or impracticality to have physical distance does not prevent a school from having in-person learning. Based on studies from the 2020-2021 school year, the CDC recommends schools maintain:

- at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms, and
- at least 6 feet between students and adults, and between adults who are not fully vaccinated.

It is suggested that both of these recommendations be combined with indoor mask wearing by all individuals in a school setting to reduce transmission risk.

***Hand Washing/Cleaning***

Schools should continue to have hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water at entrances. They should also attempt to provide hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water in every classroom. Students, teachers, staff, and campus visitors should be encouraged to sanitize and/or wash hands frequently.

***Ventilation/Air Circulation***

Evidence suggests that improved air circulation is beneficial in reducing the spread of COVID-19. Whenever possible, schools should open windows or otherwise work to improve air flow by allowing outside air to circulate in the building, and thereby lower the concentration of viral particles. The CDC has provided guidance on increasing ventilation to prevent COVID-19 spread. ESSER funds can be utilized to upgrade ventilation or purchase devices for classrooms that help with ventilation and air quality.



**Screening**

Districts should continue to screen individuals who enter facilities. Districts are still encouraged to continue following their screening plan for each campus and event using screening questions approved by the ADH. The value of screening is that it keeps students and staff with symptoms out of school and limits exposure. Screening usually consists of making sure a person doesn't have a fever, as well as having him or her answer questions about symptoms and exposures. For example, some asked screening questions and used thermometers to check the temperature of all upon entry, while others had parents do the screenings at home. We recommend using whichever screening method districts prefer as long as it is effective at ensuring individuals with symptoms of COVID-19, and those needing to be excluded, do not enter the facility.

**Food Service and School Meals**

Given the very low risk of transmission from surfaces and shared objects, there is no need to limit food service approaches to single use items and packaged meals. Schools should still establish procedures that maximize physical distance as much as possible when students are moving through the food service line and while eating (especially indoors). Using additional spaces outside of the cafeteria for mealtime seating, such as classrooms, the gymnasium, or outdoor seating, can help facilitate distance.

**Busing**

While on buses, open or crack windows if doing so does not pose a safety risk. Keeping windows open, even a few inches, improves air circulation. ADH and ADE also recommend maintaining as much physical distance as possible between riders on the bus. In addition, keeping siblings/household members seated together is also a helpful strategy. Masks are recommended due to the close nature of a bus environment.

**School-Related Activities**

Districts should be mindful of activities associated with regular school operations that could create a higher risk for COVID-19 transmission and review ADH guidance for specific activity or event protocols. These may include, but are not limited to:

- Vocal and Instrumental music programs
- Theater Performances
- Athletic programs and activities
- Back to school orientation and registrations
- School dances
- Club events or co-curricular activities



Schools are encouraged to consider guidance for each event and to follow established guidelines and communicate to students and families procedures that promote safety and continuity of operations. Various school-related guidelines can be accessed at COVID-19 Arkansas Department of Health.

- [Large Outdoor Venues](#)
- [Large Indoor Venues](#)
- [Community and School Sponsored Team Sports](#)
- [Community and School Sponsored Music and Theater Events](#)

**Responding to Positive COVID-19 Cases in a School**

***Point of Contact and Reporting of Positive Cases***

To promote the continuation of last year’s successful communication strategy, all districts will continue to identify a Point of Contact (POC) who will initiate the contact tracing process when positive cases are reported at school and notify the ADH of positive cases as they occur. Superintendents will be sent a link to register the district POC.

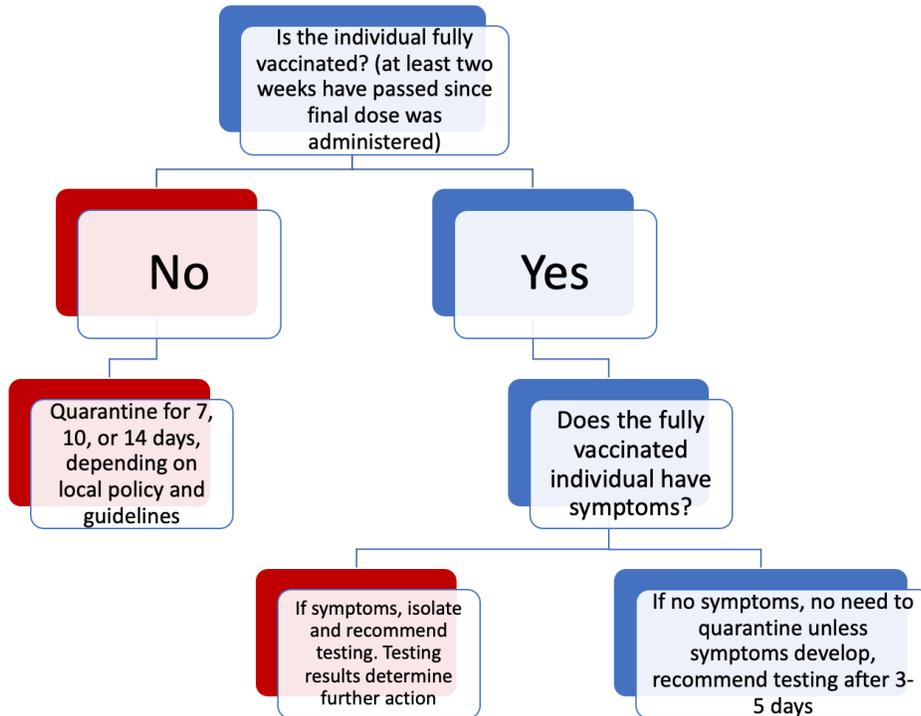
If an individual who has been in a school has tested positive for COVID-19, districts are still required to continue to follow the established ADH reporting processes and requirements for isolation and quarantine. There are some conditions that could exempt an exposed individual / close contact to the quarantine/isolation requirements that are discussed below. School nurses can help verify the status of a potential close contact to help POCs and school officials determine responses.

***Close Contact Determination and Responses***

The CDC defines a close contact as an individual confirmed to have been within six feet for 15 cumulative minutes or longer within a 24-hour period during the infectious period of a person who has tested positive for COVID-19.

1. Individuals who have previously tested positive for COVID-19 and recovered and who are subsequently exposed to someone with COVID-19 within three months of their original diagnosis do not have to stay at home or get tested again, as long as they do not develop new symptoms. Individuals who develop symptoms again within three months of their first instance of COVID-19 should see their physician as they may need to be tested again if there is no other cause identified for their symptoms.
2. Individuals exposed to a confirmed case of COVID-19 will not need to be quarantined **if they have no symptoms and both the infected and exposed individual consistently and correctly were wearing a mask.**

3. Individuals who are fully vaccinated may not have to quarantine. To help determine whether a **fully vaccinated individual** should quarantine, refer to the following chart:



School officials should review with POCs the local process for identifying close contacts and the process for communicating with parents, staff, and students whether an individual will need to stay home and/or be tested.

### ***Quarantine of those exposed to someone with COVID-19***

As of December 2, 2020, the CDC amended its guidance to allow two shorter options for the quarantine period. Based on current CDC guidance, the quarantine period can end for individuals experiencing no symptoms according to the following guidelines:

1. After 10 full 24-hour periods since close contact exposure without testing, or
2. After seven full 24-hour periods since close contact exposure and after receiving a negative test result (sample taken no earlier than five 24-hour periods after exposure).

If individuals return to school from these shorter quarantine windows, they should regularly monitor themselves for symptoms to ensure they remain symptom-free and take appropriate precautions (e.g., consistent mask usage) for the duration of the 14-day incubation period.



### ***Isolation of those with COVID-19***

The person who tests positive for COVID-19 is still required to isolate at home for 10 days from the onset of symptoms or, if asymptomatic, 10 days from the positive test date. A person who is immunosuppressed or was hospitalized may need a longer isolation period of 20 days.

### ***Educational Options***

Based on increasing numbers of positive cases, schools should expect interruptions to the school year and plan for contingencies. DESE and ADH will work closely with districts to monitor local situations and to assist if prolonged school closures or prolonged remote learning becomes necessary.

Students and staff should stay home when sick. Districts should review attendance policies to be sure that COVID-19 isolation and quarantine requirements are taken into consideration when dealing with student and staff absences, as well as state and federal requirements for staff and students with disabilities. Flexible attendance policies will be needed for individual students and staff in order to continue teaching and learning options while unable to be at school due to COVID-19 impacts. Policies should be communicated with parents and staff. Students and families should feel confident that students can remain connected to their school even when they are not able to attend in person due to COVID-19 isolation or quarantine requirements.

### ***AMI Pivots for school-wide or district-wide COVID closures***

Responses to positive COVID-19 isolation and quarantines should be as strategic and targeted as possible. In cases where a classroom or grade level pivots to remote learning, the district should ensure the necessary tools for ***blended learning*** are in place to facilitate the continuation of teaching and learning for small groups of students and staff.

In the event that an entire school or district must modify on-site instruction and pivot to ***remote learning***, the school or district will follow the district's approved Alternate Method of Instruction (AMI) plan. If positive cases have evolved to the point that an AMI day is necessary, the superintendent ***shall*** take the following steps:

- Notify the designated DESE POC - the list and contact information will be sent to each superintendent; and,
- Report the AMI day in the *LEA Insights* portal, which is the same process that was in place last school year; The AMI day for the school or district will also be reported in eSchool; and,
- Participate in consultations with the DESE and ADH.



Superintendents will be sent the link and instructions for logging in to the *Insights* portal. This process will help the DESE and the ADH better understand the magnitude of the COVID-19 impact in local areas throughout the state. **Districts are reminded that AMI days are counted as student contact days; therefore, AMI plans should include meaningful and engaging learning activities that can be completed remotely by every student.** If a district (or a school within a district) exceeds the 10 approved AMI days as a result of closures due to COVID-19, weather, power outages, contagious outbreaks, or other extenuating circumstances, the district will consult with DESE.

***Digital Learning Plans***

Digital learning plans were submitted by school districts utilizing the Act 1240 waiver process. Each application went through a rigorous vetting process at the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) before being recommended to the State Board of Education (SBE). Approval by the SBE allowed necessary waivers for the district to operate a remote or blended learning programming option for students in addition to their required in-person instructional option. Students enrolled in an approved digital program will be coded and recognized as a virtual student and may have different requirements than traditional students.

The deadline for districts to submit a plan for a digital program was May 1, 2021; however, many districts in the state opted to not offer a digital option, due to Covid-19 cases declining in the spring. Due to changing conditions, these districts are now faced with the demand of parents wanting an option other than in-person for their children. In response to the growing demand and concern, the division is going to reopen the digital learning application to districts that did not apply prior to May 1st to allow for a contingency plan option until a full review can be completed. Information regarding this option for districts to apply is in Commissioner Memo COM-22-017. The DESE and SBE will follow the same rigorous vetting process for this group of digital applications to ensure quality options for students. Parents should consult with their districts about instructional options.

**Public Health Considerations**

The Secretary of Health, in consultation with the Governor, has authority over all instances of quarantine and isolation throughout Arkansas, as necessary and appropriate to control disease in the state of Arkansas, as authorized by Ark. Code Ann. §§ 20-7-109 and 20-7-110. See also ADH Rules Pertaining to the Control of Reportable Diseases, which provide for the prevention and control of communicable diseases to protect the public health, welfare, and safety of the citizens of Arkansas. The COVID-19 Delta variant is now the predominant COVID-19 strain in Arkansas. The Delta variant is two-to-three times more transmissible, which means that an infected person can spread COVID-19 to twice as many people as observed earlier in the pandemic. The COVID-19 Delta variant appears to cause more severe disease and a greater



likelihood of hospitalization in unvaccinated young people than we observed earlier in the pandemic. While adolescents over 12 years of age and adults can be protected from the Delta variant by the COVID-19 vaccines, children under 12 remain at high risk. Children represent an increasing proportion of new COVID-19 cases, including hospitalizations and severe disease. In light of the spread of this more transmissible variant (and potential future strains), ADH and ADE urge schools to maintain as many mitigation measures as possible, or risk increased spread within the school setting.

This document addresses updates to the public health guidance and is based on the public health situation with COVID-19 as it is understood today. Guidance will be updated as needed if additional or new guidance is made available by the CDC. DESE and the ADH will continue to monitor conditions and work with districts to respond accordingly. School officials, parents and community members are encouraged to work together to plan and to implement as many strategies as possible to make the return to school and continued in-person learning opportunities successful again this year.