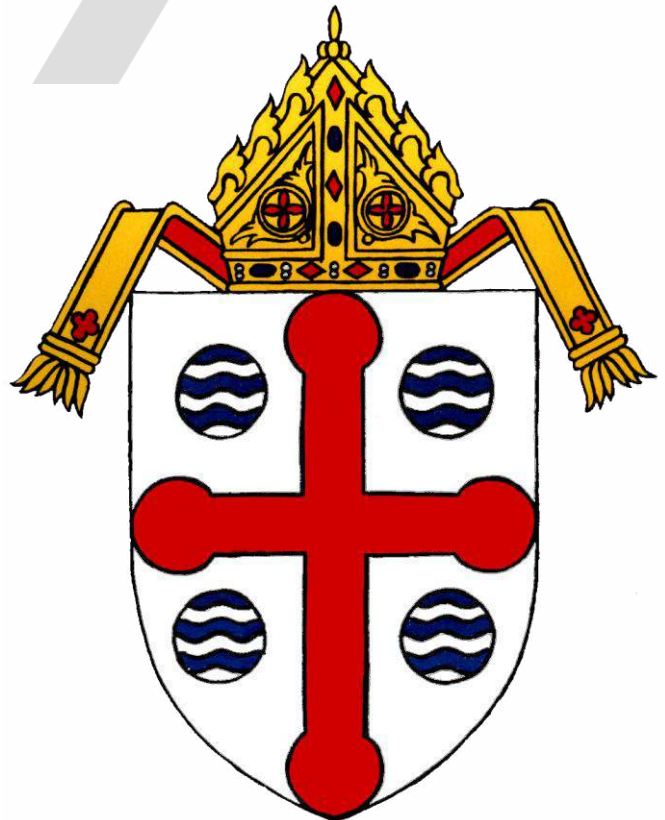


**Diocese of Springfield
Catholic Schools Office**

Website: www.diospringfield.org

**Fall Reopening
Guidance
2021-2022**



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Letter from the Superintendent

Dear Families, Pastors, Employees, and Friends of our Diocese of Springfield Catholic Schools:

In the summer of last year, the Diocese of Springfield made the bold decision to open all of its schools for in-person learning. Working closely with local and state departments of public health and health professionals, and following the guidelines set forth by the State Departments of Education, plans were developed to ensure the safe opening and operation of our school facilities. All schools demonstrated evidence of little to no spread of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) throughout their communities while being in-person. As a result, Catholic school students and families were provided a high quality Catholic education in the face of adversity.

As we look forward to the 2021-2022 school year, the Diocese of Springfield will continue to grow and welcome new families into our school communities while ensuring the health and safety of our students, their families, and our faculties and staff. These updated guidelines and protocols are built using school data and in consultation with other educational professionals. Their validity has been reinforced by health professionals. Each school will continue to work closely with public health authorities in monitoring the health and safety practices of our schools. The protocols prioritize school community health standards while supporting a more normal learning environment.

The Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Springfield partner with parents and guardians in the formation of their children. In consultation with health care professionals, in reviewing relevant data, and in following our mission to provide for the total development of every child in our care, we recommend that parents and guardians should have the freedom to decide whether or not their children wear a mask in our schools. We feel with our mitigation efforts, a year of successful in-person learning accomplished, and an ongoing commitment to monitor the pandemic using objective data, we have demonstrated that our schools will continue to be safe environments conducive to learning at the highest level. We will also modify our guidance should it become necessary.

We appreciate your continued support, trust, and prayers as we look forward to Getting Back to Better for the 2021-2022 academic year.

May God bless you and your family.

In Christ through Mary,



Daniel R. Baillargeon, PhD
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Springfield

Introduction

The purpose of this reopening plan is to provide guidance and support to the schools of the Diocese of Springfield so they may safely re-open, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, for the 2021-2022 school year. It is the intention of the Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Springfield to open our schools in such a way that builds upon the success of last year, guaranteeing to our families that our schools are safe and maintaining the excellence they expect.

It is also our goal to reduce the impact of the current pandemic on our children, families, personnel, and communities in our care. Regular updates will be made to this plan based on information provided by our health experts, applicable federal and state laws and mandates, and local agencies.

The needs of our Catholic schools are different than those of the public schools. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is going to provide guidance for the public schools. The Catholic schools will look to these only as recommendations and therefore will open in a manner that is most conducive to the preservation of our schools and with respect to the public health standards. Our school populations are relatively small and controlled in most cases and thus our protocols reflect this reality.

The priorities for this plan are as follows:

Safe Schools

Academic
Excellence in
Schools

Mission-
connected
Schools

- **Safe Schools** - School environments conducive to learning that take into account: appropriate social distancing, use of PPE, best practices in sanitization, the emotional needs of our students and families, continued education in good hygiene.
- **Academic Excellence in Schools** - Keeping schools physically open as much as possible because this: supports our parents, provides consistent schedules, maximizes the highest quality instruction, delivers a program that ensures our students' holistic progress.
- **Mission-connected Schools** - Providing tangible expressions of the Catholic faith to our students advancing our mission of: preserving school traditions and charisms, ensuring liturgical celebrations and strong connections to the Faith community, advancing our emphasis on integrating the Catholic faith in all aspects of school life.

This general document will be distributed to the schools for adoption as written or as a foundation from which they will make their own plans unique to the needs of their communities. These plans should be updated regularly in accordance with any changes to public health directives. Each school principal will share the updated document with all stakeholders and distribute the updated version to parents via the school information system.

Goal Statements

1. The goal of the Catholic Schools Office of the Diocese of Springfield is to ensure the full, safe, and physical reopening of the Catholic Schools in our Diocese for the 2021-2022 school year.
2. The purpose of this document is to provide direction and guidance to our school leaders for the full and physical reopening of their schools in the fall, based on a fuller understanding of the impact on learning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

General Protocols

Social Distancing

We are recommending that each school design their classroom layouts to maximize the distance between students with regard to the number of students in a classroom. Our recommended standard in the classroom for the 2021-2022 school year is no less than 3 feet (center of desk to center of desk). Schools are still encouraged to creatively utilize classroom spaces and other large spaces to make this accommodation. If it is not possible to meet the 3-foot requirement and ensure that all students can safely fit in the school building, a school must seek approval from the Catholic Schools Office for a variance. Schools using any less than a 3-foot standard must have a contingency plan to adhere to a 3-foot standard.

Employees, students, parents, and visitors should follow the local DPH mandates for social distancing when in common areas on school grounds.

Gatherings

Our schools celebrated graduation ceremonies in-person and in our parishes at the end of the 2020-2021 school year without resulting in spread of the virus. Some schools celebrated weekly liturgy throughout the entire school year at the height of the pandemic without resulting in spread. Our parishes are currently open with masks recommended for in-person liturgy without current evidence of spread. Schools also conducted retreats and other major gatherings, with permission, throughout the 2020-2021 school year without spread. We are recommending that students of our Catholic schools return to the practice of weekly Mass at their local parishes as prescribed in the curriculum guidelines

of the Diocese of Springfield. If there is a question regarding gatherings other than Mass and normal school activities, principals may consult with the Catholic Schools Office.

Classroom Space

Schools are encouraged to utilize their classroom space in a manner that best supports student learning. This includes allowing students to work in small groups, use tables in lieu of desks, use shared equipment, and other developmentally appropriate materials while maintaining good hygienic practices. It is possible that classroom space may be adapted due to a change in protocols, and so schools should be ready to make these adjustments if necessary.

Cohorts and Spacing

Cohorts helped the mitigation of spread in certain circumstances. Schools may continue to, but are not mandated to, group students in cohorts. Care should be given to keeping students at reasonable distances while passing in the hallways or during transition times. Good hygiene, including limiting excessive physical touch between students, should be encouraged.

Close Contact (As defined by DESE 5/31/21)

Close contacts will be defined as only those who have been within 6 feet of distance of the individual for at least fifteen minutes, while the person was infectious. The infectious period begins 2 days prior to symptom onset. If someone is asymptomatic, the infectious period is considered to begin 2 days prior to the collection of their positive test.

Face-Coverings

This Fall, DESE and DPH strongly recommend that all students in Kindergarten through grade 6 wear masks when indoors, except students who cannot do so due to medical conditions or behavioral needs. Masks are not necessary outdoors and may be removed while eating indoors. DESE and DPH also strongly recommend that unvaccinated staff in all grades, unvaccinated students in grades 7 and above, and unvaccinated visitors wear masks indoors, in alignment with the statewide advisory for masking.

In our schools, unless mandated otherwise by the State of Massachusetts or local departments of public health, our policy for masking is as follows:

- Masks or face shields will be strongly recommended for non-vaccinated employees.
- Visitors and volunteers should wear masks into our schools regardless of vaccination status.
- Fully vaccinated students are allowed to remain unmasked at all times.

- Any child, regardless of vaccination status, whose parents prefer him or her to mask at school should be supported in this choice.
- Any child, regardless of vaccination status, whose parents prefer him or her not to wear a mask at school should be supported in this choice.
- Student who use public services such as transportation or services in a public school must adhere to the public school guidance regarding masks at those times.

Parents, who choose to have their children masked, are required to provide masks for their children; however, schools may decide to provide masks for their school families. Each school is responsible to have a robust supply of masks in the event a student or visitor does not have a proper face covering, or there are future developments that require masking during the school day.

General Good Hygiene

Prioritizing health training with our staff, the use of hand sanitizer, and handwashing with our school communities contributed to the success of our 2020-2021 school year. Routine and proper handwashing can significantly reduce the spread of germs. Schools will continue to provide handwashing opportunities, hand sanitizer, and general hygienic practices to all students and staff throughout the day.

Following good hygiene practices limits exposure to all viruses. Good hygiene practices include:

1. Washing hands often with soap and water for at least 30 seconds,
2. Using hand sanitizer with at least 70% alcohol if soap and water are not available,
3. Avoiding touching the eyes, nose, and mouth,
4. Covering the mouth and nose or use the inside of your elbow when you cough or sneeze,
5. Teaching students how to practice good hygiene practices.

Cleaning

Just like preparations for the 2020-2021 school year were directed and supported by Bob Kirchherr from OTO Engineering, cleaning protocols and training for the 2021-2022 school year will be provided in light of a better understanding of how the virus spreads and is transmitted.

Stay Home

While the details of DESE's and DPH's "Test and Stay" protocol are not yet released, our schools will not be following these protocols.

One reason our schools were so successful in remaining open throughout the 2020-2021 school year was that students and/or staff members who were not feeling well did not come into school or left at symptom onset. We are grateful for our parents who kept their sick children home and our staff

members who stayed home during sickness. We will continue to encourage these practices by addressing attendance and sick leave policies that support these decisions.

Transportation

Bus transportation, where available, will continue to be offered to our students. Schools will follow the protocols of their local district.

Volunteers

Volunteers were welcomed back in various capacities during the 2020-2021 academic year in many schools. We are ready to welcome back our parents and volunteers into our school communities for the 2021-2022 academic year. Their presence and support are vital in helping our schools to flourish. It is important that all volunteers and visitors are following our protocols for masking.

COVID-19 Protocols for Catholic Schools 2021-2022

The Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Springfield will continue to follow the most updated guidance regarding contact tracing, exposure, and mitigation as shared at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. As these are ever-changing, the Catholic Schools Office will provide updates to the guidance when any changes are mandated by our local health experts, Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and local departments of public health.

Staff Protocols

Social Distancing and Face-Coverings

It is strongly recommended that unvaccinated staff and personnel of the schools will be expected to wear masks or face coverings when teaching; interacting with other people; entering, exiting, and moving throughout the building; or in common spaces with other people.

These same staff and personnel may remove face-coverings when in classrooms or private offices without students or visitors present. They are still expected to follow social distancing protocols throughout the school day when they are not wearing masks. This includes break rooms, copy rooms, classrooms without students or visitors present, and other potential gathering spaces.

Staff Illness and Screening

1. If an employee becomes ill at work or if another person is exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 at work, they should be instructed to go home and contact the most accessible health provider.

2. Employees returning to work from an approved medical leave should contact their principal. A healthcare provider's note will be required before returning to work.

If diagnosed with COVID-19, an employee may return to work when both criteria below are met:

1. At least 3 days (72 hours) has passed since recovery (no fever without the use of fever-reducing medications),
2. Local Health Department or Health Care Provider confirms release to return safely to work.

Additional Responsibilities

Staff members may be asked to disinfect their areas including cubicles, classrooms, carts, etc. to reduce exposure and assure that all areas are properly sanitized. In certain cases, staff members, who have not in the past, may be asked to monitor students in order to help the school maintain protocols.

Student Protocols

Social Distancing

Students of the schools will be expected to follow social distancing protocols throughout the school day. As stated above we are recommending that students are seated no less than 3-feet apart in the classrooms when seated. Any lesser standard of seated space in the classroom must be approved by the Catholic Schools Office. Students should follow at least a 3-foot standard while entering and exiting the facility, passing in the hallways, moving around the classrooms, and during liturgy.

Student Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

The only PPE that may be required for students is a face-covering. Families, who choose to send their children in masks, are required to provide face-coverings for the children they have in the schools. Masks and/or face-coverings for students are not required. Schools should have a large enough reserve of face-coverings in case there are future developments that require masking during the school day.

Student Illness and Screening

Screening procedures are not required at the point of entry to the school. However, school staff (as well as bus drivers) should observe students throughout the day and refer students who may be symptomatic to the school healthcare point of contact. Parents play a critical role in preventing the spread of any illness in our schools by monitoring their children's health before

sending them to our schools each day. They should be encouraged to maintain the same level of diligence as last year.

As noted in previous guidance, temperature checks are not recommended as screening for all students due to the high likelihood of potential false positive and false negative results.

If a student demonstrates symptoms of COVID-19, the school is required to follow the local DPH guidelines for student isolation and return to home. The school will also follow the local DPH guidance for student reentry into the classroom and any other protocols given by the local health department.

Wellness Education

Students must be trained in the appropriate use of PPE, how to move about the school building, as well as good hygiene practices.

Student Emotional Needs

Special care must be taken for the emotional needs of our students. Many have increased anxiety as a result of the societal changes and use of unnatural boundaries. As Catholic schools, we must provide responses that are connected to the traditions of our Church to help students manage these in a way that directs them always to our Loving God. Any programs that are geared toward helping students manage stress and anxiety should first be approved by the Catholic Schools Office. There should be increased time for prayer, meditation, and open dialogue connected to the Faith.

Facilities

Passing and Cohorts

Students in grades PK – 5 are no longer required to remain with their classmates at all times. Students may share spaces, supplies, or work in groups in ways that support good hygiene and limit physical contact.

Students, in any grade (PK-12), should maintain a minimum of 3-foot distance while passing from class to class. Desks no longer need to be disinfected before another group of students enters the classroom; however, they should be disinfected regularly.

Shared Spaces

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers and cleaning products should be accessible throughout the workplace to disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces such as telephones, doorknobs, handles, keyboards, etc. The site custodial team will clean all workspaces at their designated cleaning time.

Please note that proper equipment such as acceptable disinfectant and PPE should be used when cleaning individual workspaces. There should be limited access to certain workspaces to reduce risk of exposure and ensure employee safety.

COVID-19 Medical Waiting Room

Per previous guidance, “Schools must establish a separate room for students exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms or who may have learned about a positive test result while at school, while waiting to be picked up by a family member. This space must be supervised. If feasible, given space and staffing constraints, schools are encouraged to provide individual students with their own waiting room. If more than one student is in the same waiting room at a time, each student must be at least 6 feet apart (and should be spaced as far apart as possible) and wearing a surgical mask (non-N95 and non-cloth) while in the medical waiting room. If a student does not already have a surgical mask, the school should provide one. Schools must also be equipped with the PPE for the staff involved with supervision of the waiting room.”

If a school does not have the capacity for a dedicated room, there must be a designated area for symptomatic students.

Preparation and Maintenance of Facilities

The schools of the Diocese of Springfield will be working with Robert Kirchherr from OTO Engineering Associates in developing comprehensive disinfecting plans for each of the schools. Information and resources from this work have been developed and will be updated which include sanitization, ventilation, approved spaces, and the following matters:

Sanitization of Classrooms and Facility

Teachers will be required to sanitize their classroom surfaces at the end of each day. The classrooms will be cleaned thoroughly and sanitized following the guidance provided by the State and local DPH requirements.

Integration with other Parish Programs

Parish religious education programs have traditionally used classroom space in Catholic school buildings for their ministry. Throughout last year, many religious education programs were not allowed to use parish school space due to the uncertainty of how COVID-19 was transmitted. In consultation with Bob Kirchherr, this separation is no longer necessary. Therefore, pastors should ensure that these programs are welcomed back into the Catholic school buildings for the 2021-2022 school year.

Schools that share their space with religious education programs should coordinate their sanitization plans ensuring that all protocols are followed by each group using the space. The school sanitization protocols will be shared with all Religious Education Programs of the Diocese of Springfield.

Instructional Delivery

Schools must have plans to handle extended absences for students through remote means.

Distance Learning

If in-school learning is suspended by executive order of the Governor of Massachusetts, all students participate in a school-provided distance learning program composed of both synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences.

Continuity of Instruction

The Continuity of Instruction document should be used for students who are out of school as a result of sickness or quarantine. It should also be used as guidance if classrooms or entire schools are asked to quarantine by their local DPH.

Individual School Reopening Plan

This section can be used as a checklist to ensure that the local reopening plan, if it differs from this plan, meets the expectations of the Catholic Schools Office of the Diocese of Springfield. It can be used as a framework for the development of a local school-based plan.

Point person and teams:

Name a COVID-19 response leader. **Name a COVID-19 Response Leader for your school.**

If not done already, establish a planning and implementation team **to cover the following essential domains:**

1. **Teaching and learning**, including plans for in-person learning, hybrid learning, and remote learning, including technology needs and training,
2. **Student supports**,
3. **Special education, English learners, (if applicable)**,
4. **Personnel and staffing**, including managing staff assignments, supporting staff with high risk medical conditions, addressing the need for possible additional staff to assist with instruction, possible additional needs for tutors, and ways to provide additional support including recruitment of volunteers as needed,
5. **Facilities and operations**, including cleaning and sanitization, classroom and building set-up and flow, and food services,
6. **Transportation**, including bus transportation capacity and safety protocols, management of increased traffic flow from families who decide to drop off/pick up their children,
7. **Additional topics** should be addressed as appropriate to the school and the district.

Communication plans and structures:

Maintain a plan for communicating with students, families, staff, and the community. Ensure translation of any information published by the school into the primary language spoken by the parent/guardian and make interpretation services available for two-way communication.

Establish connections and a process to work with local boards of health so that all parties are up to date on various statewide, local, and Diocesan guidance and plans (e.g., health and safety updates, COVID-19 testing availability, availability of flu vaccines, etc.)

Planning for training:

Ensure training sessions **for staff, students, and families. Training should include health and safety topics (such as the use of safety supplies/PPE, visual screening for symptoms, and health and hygiene practices) and educational topics (such as strengthening remote learning).**

Protocols for Responding to Symptoms

From DESE July 30, 2021 guidance

“Contact tracing and quarantine protocols DESE and DPH will soon release a new version of the “Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios document.”

The Office of Catholic Schools will share this guidance along with an appropriate interpretation for Catholic schools once it is posted.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Do students have to wear masks while outdoors?

On May 29th, 2021, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Mask Order was rescinded. On July 30th, 2021, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts stated, “Masks are not necessary outdoors and may be removed while eating indoors.” Students in the Catholic schools of the Diocese of Springfield are not required to wear masks when outdoors. This includes recess.

2. How frequently do schools have to clean spaces or surfaces?

Based on CDC guidance and updated information on the low likelihood of surface transmission, schools now only need to clean high touch surfaces (door handles, bus seats, drinking fountains) and shared objects within the school and on school transport vehicles once a day, excluding certain circumstances.¹ If schools are located in an area of high transmission of COVID-19, then they may consider cleaning more frequently, or cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and objects once a day. Similarly, for areas where masks are not worn (i.e., lunch areas), schools may consider cleaning surfaces between use. If a surface or object is visibly soiled, it should be immediately cleaned. If someone in the school in the past 24 hours has been confirmed to have COVID-19, the spaces (i.e., classroom, bus and lunch area) they were in should be cleaned and disinfected. If disinfecting, ensure [safe and correct use](#) and storage of cleaning products, including storing products securely away from children.

3. Why are the Catholic Schools returning to a more normal learning environment?

- a. Making a bold decision last year to open our schools despite the public school’s decision to not open provided the best environment for student learning and limited learning loss significantly. It will take some public schools years to recover the learning loss.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/clean-disinfect-hygiene.html>

- b. We have a moral responsibility to our students and families to provide learning environments that are based in best practices and help students to learn in the supportive and emotionally safe environments.
- c. Health is not just about physical wellbeing but social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. The impact isolation has had nationwide includes tremendous increase in anxiety, depression, cutting, drug and alcohol use, accidental overdose and suicide.
 - i. April to October 2020 in the US, emergency room visits linked to mental health problems (e.g. anxiety) for children aged 5-11 increased by nearly 25% and increased by 31% for those aged 12-17 years old as compared to the same period in 2019. During the month of June 2020, 25% of persons aged 18 to 24 in the US reported suicidal ideation. <https://www.aier.org/article/cost-of-us-lockdowns-a-preliminary-report/> and <https://collateralglobal.org/article/the-youth-mental-health-crisis-we-saw-coming-has-exploded/>
- d. While the Commonwealth of Massachusetts strongly encourages certain practices, it also allows the opportunity for local school boards to make decisions regarding masks.

4. Why allow parents and guardians to choose whether or not their children wear a face-covering?

The schools in the Diocese of Springfield are equipped with medical grade air purifying units and filters, expert verified ventilation, access to handwashing stations and hand sanitizer, cleaning protocols that have proven to and will continue to be effective against viral spread, isolated areas for symptomatic students, and strong relationships with families who understand the need to keep our communities safe by keeping sick children home. We have a proven track record of no spread in classrooms where students were not masked throughout the 2020-2021 school year.

In addition are the following reasons:

- Prioritize as normal a school environment as possible, knowing that our mission is focused on the holistic development of our students - social, emotional, spiritual, academic, and physical.
- MA COVID case data (as of August 3rd) per 7.1 million show that:
 - i. One-day New COVID infection rate = $815 \text{ New Cases} / 7.1 \text{ million people} = 0.0011 = 0.0018\%$ (less than $2/100^{\text{ths}}$ of 1 percent)
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education allows the opportunity for local school districts to make decisions regarding masks.
- Vaccinations: Widely available and large percentage of school population has been vaccinated; Currently (July 27th) MA has 72.9% of population at least 1 dose and 62.1% fully vaccinated.
- Internal school data: No schools showed evidence of “clusters/school spread” originating from extra-curricular activities throughout the summer or during the height of the pandemic last year, including those that were mask optional in the classrooms. We know that our school environments are safe and even with changes implemented from January through the spring, we did not see an increase in school spread.
- Parent and staff surveys: data collected supports the vast majority wanting options to choose.

- We will abide by the requirements for face coverings/masks for any field trips or other off campus initiatives.
- Article: [Pandemic Masks the Way People Perceive Faces](#)
- Article: [Face Masks Impair How We Read Emotions](#)
- Data on the Delta variant shows that while more contagious, there is no data to show that it is more dangerous than the Alpha variant, and Delta actually has a lower mortality rate than the Alpha variant, and the mortality rate for those under 50 is 0.0%
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1005517/Technical_Briefing_19.pdf

5. Can a teacher ask/require students to wear a face covering/mask in their classroom or for a specific event?

- Teachers/staff members cannot ask/request students to wear a face covering unless they are symptomatic.
- Vaccinations are available should they choose. The option to wear a mask and stay socially distant is another layer of protection for themselves.
- If a health concern is shared, the administration should speak with the individual to determine if the school environment with our current protocols in place is safe for their return. If applicable/available, the opportunity to shift in role/responsibility could be reviewed.

6. What would be the decision making process to move from one model of instruction to another model?

- Any decision to shift instruction to a hybrid or virtual learning model within a specific school or grade level, will be made after consultation with the local school administration, local departments of public health, and CSO. We will continue to monitor the effects of the pandemic locally and nationwide.

7. Why are we no longer updating the school community regarding COVID cases?

- If contact tracing is necessary, the administration/nurse/COVID-19 point person will communicate with the appropriate individuals, including the local health department. COVID cases will not be reported community wide so as to protect the privacy of those affected.
- This protocol falls in line with our overall policy regarding privacy of individuals' health. We do not communicate other illnesses or health concerns to our wider school communities.

8. How will contact tracing be implemented at schools?

- Our internal school data from schools who limited to less than 6-ft distancing shows that a lesser space did not result in spread.
- We made the shift from 6ft to 3ft based upon the space guidance provided by DESE.
- Protocol for contact tracing includes: Within 3ft for 15 minutes or longer, siblings, carpool or other directly identified individuals.
- Article: <https://www.king5.com/article/news/nation-world/schools-cdc-consider-3-feet-distance/507-603874ec-b767-41e2-9691-d493ea995203>
- Article: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/19/health/cdc-physical-distancing/index.html>

9. What are the quarantine measures?

- We will wait for an update to quarantine measures as directed by the State Department of Public Health and DESE.

10. What are the necessary virtual/continuous learning options for students?

- Schools are not required to provide virtual learning for this upcoming school year while simultaneously providing in-person instruction.
- If a student has to be out due to quarantine or another extenuating health issue requiring an extended absence, virtual or continuous learning options should be considered.

11. Are we requiring the COVID vaccine?

- We will support the right of individuals to choose vaccinations.