



## COVID-19 Interim Guidance for School Operations

Prevention strategies are essential to safe delivery of in-person instruction and help to prevent COVID-19 transmission in schools. Schools providing in-person instruction should prioritize two prevention strategies:

1. Universal and correct use of masks should be required.
2. Physical distancing should be maximized to the greatest extent possible.

Other key strategies include:

1. Handwashing and respiratory etiquette
2. Cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities
3. Contact tracing
4. Testing
5. Vaccination

### Universal and correct use of masks

- *On May 11, 2021, Governor Henry McMaster issued [Executive Order No. 2021-34](#), directing DHEC to take action to allow for parents, guardians, legal custodians, foster-care providers, or other representatives authorized to provide consent for or on behalf of a student in any South Carolina public school to opt out of any face covering requirement imposed by any public school official or public school district in South Carolina. The DHEC form that parents, guardians, legal custodians, foster-care providers, or other representatives authorized to provide consent for or on behalf of a student must use, unaltered, to opt-out of a face covering requirement is available [here](#). In order to be valid, the form must be completed without change by the parent or guardian (or student, if age 18 or older). These forms are applicable only for students and do not apply to faculty and staff. Executive Order No. 2021-34 also authorized DHEC, in consultation with the Superintendent of Education, to provide or issue any necessary and appropriate additional or supplemental guidance rules, regulations or restrictions on this issue.*
- *Although CDC guidance for fully vaccinated people indicates mask use is no longer required for most indoor and outdoor settings, this guidance does not apply in schools, healthcare facilities, correctional facilities, and homeless shelters ([Operational Strategies for K-12 Phased Preventions](#)).*
- *Masks should be worn at all times, by all people in school facilities, with certain exceptions for certain people, or for certain settings or activities, such as while eating or drinking. Masks should be required in all classroom and non-classroom settings, including hallways, school offices, restrooms, gyms, auditoriums, etc.*
  - *Cloth face coverings should not be used on children under 2 years old, anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone unable to remove the face covering without assistance.*
- *The most effective fabrics for cloth masks are tightly woven, such as cotton and cotton blends, breathable, and in two or three fabric layers. Masks with exhalation valves or vents, those that use loosely woven fabrics, and those that do not fit properly are not recommended.*
- *Masks may not be necessary if students can remain physically distanced outside.*
- *Mask use is required on school buses and other public transportation; school systems should take appropriate steps to ensure compliance with this requirement by students, staff, and others.*
- *If visitors are permitted in school, they should always be required to wear masks and should maintain physical distance from others.*



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- *Face masks or cloth face coverings should be worn by all persons in healthcare settings like health rooms and isolation rooms regardless of school or district policy or mask opt-out waiver status per [Executive Order 2021-23](#). Health and isolation rooms are categorized differently from other school settings and are considered healthcare settings for the purposes of determining applications of and exemptions from schoolwide prevention strategies.*

### Physical Distancing

- To the extent possible, maintain at least six feet of distance between each person.
  - If desks are used, increase the space between them. Rearrange them to maximize the space between students. Make desks face in the same direction (rather than facing each other). Remove non-essential furniture to maximize the distance between students.
  - Options for reduced physical distancing may be allowable depending on disease activity in the community and grade-level according to [CDC guidance](#).
  - Use of plexiglass may be considered when physical distancing is not feasible according to the [DHEC plexiglass document](#).
- Use cohorting and maintain 6 feet of distance between cohorts where possible. Limit contact between cohorts.
- Stagger arrival and dismissal times.
- Avoid students congregating in common areas. For example, have students eat meals in their classrooms rather than mixing in the cafeteria or other common area.
  - If it is not possible to suspend use of common areas, try to limit the extent to which students mix with each other, and particularly with students from other classes.
  - Restrict hallway use through staggered release of classes.
- Limit people present to only students and essential faculty and staff.
- Avoid assemblies or other congregate events.
- Transportation: Create distance between children on school buses (for example, seat children one child per row, skip rows, use seating charts to assist with contact tracing), when possible. Masks are required by federal order on school buses and other forms of public transportation in the United States. Open windows to improve ventilation when it does not create a safety hazard. More information about school transportation and prevention is available.

### Handwashing and Respiratory Etiquette

- Teach and reinforce handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and increase monitoring to ensure adherence among students, teachers, and staff. If handwashing is not possible, hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol should be used.
- Encourage students and staff to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue when not wearing a mask and immediately wash their hands after blowing their nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- Some students with disabilities might need assistance with handwashing and respiratory etiquette behaviors.
- Adequate supplies: Support healthy hygiene behaviors by providing adequate supplies, including soap, a way to dry hands, tissues, face masks (as feasible), and no-touch/foot-pedal trash cans. If soap and water are not readily available, schools can provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer).



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### Cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities

- **Ventilation:** Improve ventilation to the extent possible to increase circulation of outdoor air, increase the delivery of clean air, and dilute potential contaminants. This can be achieved through several actions.
  - Bring in as much outdoor air as possible.
  - Ensure Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) settings are maximizing ventilation.
  - Filter and/or clean the air in the school by improving the level of filtration as much as possible.
  - Use exhaust fans in restrooms and kitchens.
  - Open windows in buses and other transportation, if doing so does not pose a safety risk. Even just cracking windows open a few inches improves air circulation.
- **Modified layouts:** Adjust physical layouts in classrooms and other settings to maximize physical space, such as by turning desks to face in the same direction.
- **Cleaning:** Regularly clean high touch surfaces and objects (for example, playground equipment, door handles, sink handles, toilets) within the school and on school buses at least daily or between use as much as possible.
- **Communal spaces:** Close communal use of shared spaces, such as cafeterias, if possible; otherwise, stagger use and clean regularly (for example, daily or as often as needed). Consider use of larger spaces such as cafeterias, libraries, gyms for academic instruction, to maximize physical distancing.
- **Food service:** Avoid offering any self-serve food or drink options such as hot and cold food bars, salad or condiment bars, and drink stations.
- **Water systems:** Take steps to ensure that all water systems and features (for example, sink faucets, decorative fountains) are safe to use after a prolonged facility shutdown.

### Contact tracing

- Case investigation and contact tracing are effective strategies to identify and isolate cases and test and quarantine close contacts to reduce transmission. Schools should collaborate with health departments when [investigating cases](#) and exposures to COVID-19.
- Educate students and their parents on the [symptoms](#) of COVID-19 and the importance of the student staying home if they have any of the symptoms or if anyone in the household tests positive for the disease.
  - Require sick students and staff to stay home as per the [School and Child Care Exclusion List](#). Establish procedures for those who are sick at school to be sent home as soon as possible and kept separate from others until they can leave.

### Testing

- Testing should not be used alone, but in combination with other prevention to reduce risk of transmission in schools according to [CDC Testing Guidance](#). If schools implement testing combined with prevention strategies, they can detect new cases to prevent outbreaks, reduce the risk of further transmission, and protect students, teachers, and staff from COVID-19.



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### Vaccination

- Vaccination of staff, educators, and eligible students is a key strategy that should be considered in prevention plans.

### References

1. [DHEC COVID-19 webpage](#)
2. [CDC COVID-19 webpage](#)