

CDC's Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Mitigation

K–12 schools should be the last settings to close after all other mitigation measures in the community have been employed, and the first to reopen when they can do so safely. Many K-12 schools that have implemented mitigation strategies have been able to safely open for in-person instruction and remain open. This operational strategy presents a pathway to reopen schools and help them remain open through consistent use of mitigation strategies, especially universal and correct use of masks and physical distancing.



Mitigation strategies to reduce transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in schools

Regardless of the level of community transmission, all schools should use and layer [mitigation strategies](#).

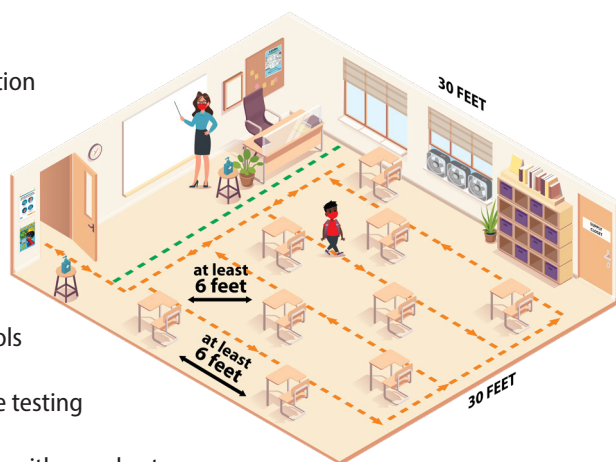
Schools providing in-person instruction should prioritize two mitigation strategies:

- Universal and correct use of [masks](#) should be required.
- Physical distancing (at least 6 feet) should be maximized to the greatest extent possible.

Phased mitigation and learning modes

At any level of community transmission, there are options for in-person instruction (either full or hybrid) for all schools by strictly using mitigation strategies.

- In-person learning for elementary schools is likely to have less risk of in-school transmission than for middle schools and high schools.
- Families of students who are at increased risk of severe illness or who live with people at high risk should be given the option of virtual instruction regardless of the mode of learning offered.
- In-person instruction should be prioritized over extracurricular activities including sports and school events, to minimize risk of transmission in schools and protect in-person learning.
- Schools are encouraged to use cohorting or podding of students to facilitate testing and contact tracing, and to minimize transmission across cohorts.
- Students, teachers, and staff who are at high risk of severe illness or who live with people at high risk should be provided virtual options.



cdc.gov/coronavirus

Recommended Implementation of Mitigation Strategies and K-12 School Learning Modes by Level of Community Transmission

Low Transmission ¹ Blue	Moderate Transmission Yellow	Substantial Transmission Orange	High Transmission Red
All schools: Universal and correct use of masks is required; implementing other key mitigation strategies: handwashing and respiratory etiquette; cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities; contact tracing and diagnostic testing ² in combination with quarantine and isolation.			
K-12 schools open for full in-person instruction Physical distancing of 6 feet or more to the greatest extent possible ³		Elementary schools in hybrid mode ⁴ ; physical distancing of 6 feet or more required	
		Middle and high schools in hybrid learning mode or reduced attendance Physical distancing of 6 feet or more is required	Middle and high schools in virtual only instruction unless they can strictly implement all mitigation strategies, and have few cases; schools that are already open for in-person instruction can remain open, but only if they strictly implement mitigation strategies and have few cases ⁵
Sports and extracurricular activities with masks required; physical distancing of 6 feet or more to the greatest extent possible ⁶	Sports and extracurricular activities with masks and physical distancing of 6 feet or more required	Sports and extracurricular activities occur only if they can be held outdoors, with masks and physical distancing of 6 feet or more required	Sports and extracurricular activities virtual only

¹Levels of community transmission defined as total new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days (low, <5%; moderate, 5-7.9%; substantial, 8-9.9%; high, ≥10%).²Levels of community transmission defined as total new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days (low, 0-9; moderate, 10-49; substantial, 50-99; high, ≥100) and percentage of positive tests in the past 7 days (low, <5%; moderate, 5-7.9%; substantial, 8-9.9%; high, ≥10%).

²Diagnostic testing for SARS-CoV-2 is intended to identify occurrence of SARS-CoV-2 infection at the individual level and is performed when there is a reason to suspect that an individual may be infected, such as having symptoms or suspected recent exposure.

³If physical distancing of at least 6 feet among all students, teachers, and staff within a class, cohort, or pod is not possible at all times, schools should ensure physical distancing between classes, cohorts, and pods.

⁴Hybrid learning or reduced attendance is intended to maximize physical distance between students. Schools may consider hybrid learning models or instructional modes where substantial percentages of students are in virtual only instruction. At all levels of community transmission, schools should provide families the option to participate in virtual learning if a student or family member is at risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

⁵Strict implementation of mitigation strategies includes policies that require consistent and correct use of masks, physical distancing of at least 6 feet, all other key mitigation strategies.

⁶School officials should implement limits on spectators and attendees for sports, extracurricular activities, and school events as consistent with recommendations for masking and physical distancing for each phase.

Additional COVID-19 Prevention in Schools

Testing

When schools implement testing combined with mitigation, they can detect new cases to prevent outbreaks, reduce the risk of further transmission, and protect students, teachers, and staff from COVID-19.

- Diagnostic Testing:** At all levels of community transmission, schools should offer referrals to [diagnostic testing](#) to any student, teacher, or staff member who is exhibiting [symptoms of COVID-19](#) at school or who is a close contact of a person who tested positive.
- Screening Testing:** Some schools may also elect to use screening testing as a strategy to identify cases and prevent secondary transmission. Weekly screening testing can be used as an additional layer of mitigation to complement mitigation strategies in schools.

Vaccination for teachers and staff, and in communities as soon as supply allows

Teachers and school staff hold jobs critical to the continued functioning of society and are at potential occupational risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2. In order to support safe school reopening, state, territorial, local, and tribal (STLT) officials should consider giving high priority to teachers in early phases of vaccine distribution.

Access to vaccination should nevertheless not be considered a condition for reopening schools for in-person instruction. Even after teachers and staff are vaccinated, schools need to continue mitigation measures for the foreseeable future, including requiring masks in schools and physical distancing.

