



Reopening Guidance for Schools: Frequently Asked Questions

Purpose

This set of frequently asked questions is meant to be read with the Iowa Department of Education's (Department) [Reopening Guidance for Schools](#), written in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH). This document may be updated with additional questions or if IDPH releases new recommendations in the future, so make sure to look for the most recent publication date.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why is the Department's guidance for reopening schools so brief? Some states have issued very long and thorough guidelines.

Many states created guidance that joined their Return-to-Learn planning with their reopening guidance. In Iowa we have purposely kept these separate because reopening guidance is based on current recommendations from IDPH intended to supplement Return-to-Learn guidelines and may change.

Reopening guidance is meant to be high-level guidance and should be used with other guidance and resources the Department has provided for schools and districts as they develop their own reopening plans, which are more comprehensive than the reopening guidance, and include considerations to ensure ongoing workplace safety, mitigation strategies, and monitoring the health and safety of teachers, staff, students and families. Return-to-Learn guidance issued by the Department has been lengthy and supported by a [site full of information](#) and tools to help schools prepare, including a [40-page Return-to-Learn support document](#) that walks through each key area, including health and safety measures, in detail. In addition, the Department has facilitated weekly webinars to provide information to school districts and allow the opportunity to ask questions.

2. Where can I get more information on the health and safety training the Department of Education has provided for schools?

The Department has provided health and safety training modules at our [Return-to-Learn Support Site](#) for schools to voluntarily use. Under the [Health and Safety](#) tab school districts are encouraged to use the [slides and tools](#) to have discussions in walking through conversation and planning. Sample communication for schools to share with families and their school community regarding their return to learn plan is provided under the Leadership and Infrastructure tab.

It is important to use several public health strategies together as much as possible to limit the spread of COVID-19, such as those outlined in our modules, which can be adapted to your population and setting as needed.

Topics in these tools and slides broadly cover: handwashing, cough and sneeze etiquette, shared materials, attendance, physical distancing (if feasible), schedules, facial coverings, facilities, transportation, nutrition, delivery/entrance movement within the building, health and safety of students and staff.

3. Why does the Department not recommend that districts and accredited nonpublic schools require face coverings for all students and staff?

While cloth face coverings can reduce the spread of COVID-19 when worn properly and when other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain, the Department of Education, in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Public Health, does not recommend that districts and nonpublic schools require face coverings for all students and staff because of the considerable health and safety, legal and training implications for such a policy (as outlined below). Some individuals might not be able to use cloth face coverings due to a health or safety concern including but not limited to age, developmental disability, underlying condition, or mental health concern. Numerous considerations need to be examined at the local level based on individual staff and student needs.

4. What should a school or school district consider if it wants to create a policy requiring face coverings?

If a school or school district intends to require face coverings, we encourage them to carefully consider all factors, including the following nonexhaustive list of considerations:

- What type of face coverings will be allowed considering that some face coverings are for temporary use only and should be discarded once they become moist or are handled inappropriately? Who will be responsible for ensuring that the appropriate type of face coverings are worn?
- Who will be responsible for providing face coverings and what measures will be taken to ensure they are sanitary?
- Who will be responsible for tracking the appropriate use and storage of face coverings during lunch and snack times and during physical education and recess when wearing a cloth face covering during high intensity activities may cause difficulty breathing?
- How will schools address students or staff with communication needs that may prohibit the use of a face covering?
- Who in the district is responsible for training staff and students in proper use and disposal/removal of face coverings so they are worn safely and correctly?
- How will the districts and nonpublic schools enforce requirements that face coverings be worn by students and staff, including whether this is considered a discipline infraction?
- Are there other laws or directives from other federal, state, or local agencies that may address the use of face coverings by school personnel?
- What are the implications for students and staff with health or other conditions, including those who may be unable to wear a face covering and, in doing so, may reveal personal health conditions?
- How will students or staff members who do not wish to wear a face covering or cannot due to a medical or other condition be considered? How will schools protect them from being singled out by their peers, and how will schools protect the privacy of students and staff?

5. What do you mean by proper use of face coverings?

The CDC states: “*Cloth face coverings should be washed after each use. It is important to always [remove face coverings correctly](#) and [wash your hands](#) after handling or touching a used face covering.*”

It is important to wear face coverings correctly. The CDC guidelines advise to wash hands before putting on a face covering, place it over your nose and mouth and secure it under your chin, try to fit it snugly against the sides of your face, do not touch the face covering, and if you do, wash your hands again. Face coverings should be handled only by the ear loops or ties and wearers should be careful not to touch eyes, nose and mouth when removing the covering. IDPH has guidance [here](#).

6. Why doesn't the Department's guidance mention social distancing?

The Department's guidance encourages social distancing whenever possible but recognizes that each school building and setting is unique and there are times when maintaining or guaranteeing a distance of six feet from others in a school setting may not be possible. Examples may include therapy, transportation, recess and class passing time. Social distancing is mentioned and recommended in all of our training modules.

7. Why doesn't the Department's guidance mention temperature screening?

One symptom is not necessarily indicative of communicable disease. Some individuals may be ill and have no symptoms as symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure ([CDC, June 24](#)). Obtaining reliable temperature readings is affected by multiple factors, including:

- The ambient environment in which the temperature is measured. If the environment is extremely hot or cold, body temperature readings may be affected, regardless of the temperature-taking device that is used.
- Proper calibration of the thermometers per manufacturer standards. Improper calibration can lead to incorrect temperature readings.
- Proper usage and reading of the thermometers. Non-contact infrared thermometers frequently used for health screening must be held at a certain distance from the temporal artery in the forehead to take the temperature correctly. Holding the device too far from or too close to the temporal artery affects the reading.
- Use of fever-reducing medications prior to screening.
- Other infections or conditions that may cause elevated temperatures.
([CDC, June 23](#); [FDA, June 19](#))

8. What should schools and school districts do if there is a positive case in a school?

Sick students and staff should always be encouraged to seek health care if needed. Individuals can work with their health-care providers to be evaluated and referred for testing as appropriate. When a school receives a report of a positive case from a family member, employee or student, talk with the family or employee first. Encourage the family or employee to see a health-care professional for care as needed. Be sure to protect their confidentiality. Contact your local public health agency to notify them. If you are asked to contact other staff members or families of students who may have been in contact with an ill or potentially exposed person make sure you have a plan to maintain confidentiality and work with your local public health agency. You may wish to vet your communications with local public health officials and/or your local counsel prior to release. Please refer to the [2019 Novel Coronavirus Resource Document](#) from IDPH.

When you call your local public health agency or the Iowa Department of Public Health they will help you determine how contact tracing should occur. Schools can also consider having procedures in place ahead of time for how to identify individuals, provide contact information and have draft notices ready in case they are needed.

9. Why does the Department's guidance advise schools to "teach and reinforce the prevention of stigma associated with the use or non-use of facial coverings"?

Regardless of a school's policy on face coverings, some students and staff will either need to wear one or will be unable to wear one at some time due to their health or other condition. In these situations individuals may be singled out or stigmatized for several reasons, among them being illness and disability. It is important that schools do not inadvertently reveal information about any students' or staff members' health or disability status through the implementation of a policy. If students and staff are taught that there is no stigma associated with face coverings - neither illness or ability - the chance of revealing such information is decreased.

10. Isn't the Department's guidance misaligned with current guidance from the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)?

All Iowa Department of Education guidance is written and released in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Public Health. We pay close attention to the CDC guidelines and adopt them in all of our training modules, as well. Our guidance on face coverings, for example, is in line with CDC [Considerations for Wearing Cloth Face Coverings](#). While the CDC and Iowa Public Health encourage the use of cloth face coverings when feasible and where social distancing is difficult to slow the spread of COVID-19, they recognize there are specific instances when wearing a cloth face covering may not be feasible. The CDC guidelines state "***CDC recognizes that wearing cloth face coverings may not be possible in every situation or for some people. In some situations, wearing a cloth face covering may exacerbate a physical or mental health condition, lead to a medical emergency, or introduce significant safety concerns. Adaptations and alternatives should be considered whenever possible to increase the feasibility of wearing a cloth face covering or to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading if it is not possible to wear one.***"

As we have previously noted, it is important to remember that several public health strategies and tools should all be used together to prevent the spread of COVID-19. And finally, continue to emphasize frequent hand hygiene and environmental cleaning to help limit the spread of COVID-19 and other diseases.

11. Does the guidance statement authorizing school boards to close a school district due to an outbreak of COVID-19 if the governor proclaims a public health disaster preclude schools from closing if a public health disaster has not been proclaimed?

A school or school district always has the authority to close, but [Senate File 2310](#) gives the board (or board's designee, such as the superintendent) the ability to do so pursuant to a public health disaster proclamation and continue to operate while meeting the instructional time requirements of [Iowa Code 279.10](#).

12. Where can concerned parents and guardians go if they believe their school district is not following proper guidance from the Department of Education or IDPH?

A parent or guardian who is concerned that a school or school district is not following Iowa Department of Education or IDPH guidance should first raise the issue to local school administration. The Department of Education may be able to provide technical assistance and support. If there is a school board decision on the matter, there may be appeal options to the State Board of Education. A parent or guardian may also contact IDPH to see if that agency has additional technical assistance or enforcement options.

Questions

If you have education related questions, please contact your [school improvement consultant](#). If they are unable to assist you, they will connect you with the appropriate person. For additional COVID-19 guidance and information, please visit the Department's [COVID-19 webpage](#).