

Interim Guidance on COVID-19 Mitigation Strategies in PreK-12 Schools

The CDC issued updated [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#) on July 9, 2021, and [IDPH](#) has adopted this guidance. Chicago schools should carefully review and adhere to the CDC guidance. Below are the key takeaways with clarifications and recommendations specific to the local Chicago context.

Key Takeaways

- Students benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person instruction in the fall of 2021 is a priority.
 - *CDPH is committed to working with schools to ensure in-person instruction for all Chicago students as our top priority. Questions may be directed to covidschools@chicago.gov.*
- Vaccination is currently the leading public health prevention strategy to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Promoting vaccination can help schools safely return to in-person learning as well as extracurricular activities and sports.
 - *Chicago COVID-19 vaccine resources may be found at chi.gov/covidvax.*
- Masks should be worn indoors by all individuals (age 2 and older) who are not fully vaccinated. Consistent and correct mask use by people who are not fully vaccinated is especially important indoors and in crowded settings, when physical distancing cannot be maintained.
 - *CDPH recommends that if a school cannot verify vaccination status for all staff and students and cannot consistently enforce masking of unvaccinated individuals, the school should maintain universal masking by all individuals, regardless of vaccination status*
 - *CDPH recognizes that vaccination coverage may vary significantly by school and is likely to continue to increase after the academic year begins. As of late July, only 47% of Chicago's 12–17-year-olds had received at least 1 dose of COVID-19 vaccine, and only 35% had completed the vaccine series. Given [Chicago's current vaccination rates](#), it may be operationally challenging to manage masked and unmasked person in the same setting. The most conservative approach to begin the academic year would be to follow the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics, found [here](#).*
- CDC recommends schools maintain at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms, combined with indoor mask wearing by people who are not fully vaccinated, to reduce transmission risk. When it is not possible to maintain a physical distance of at least 3 feet, such as when schools cannot fully re-open while maintaining these distances, it is especially important to layer multiple other prevention strategies, such as indoor masking.
 - *CDPH recommends that if at least 3 feet of physical distancing cannot be maintained in the classroom, masks should be worn by all, regardless of vaccination status.*
- 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 are also important layers of prevention to keep schools safe.


- *CDPH continues to support school screening testing programs given [Chicago's current vaccination rates](#).*
 - *See Table 1 below for CDC recommendations on frequency of screening testing.*
- Students, teachers, and staff should stay home when they have signs of any infectious illness and be referred to their healthcare provider for testing and care.
- Many schools serve children under the age of 12 who are not currently eligible for vaccination. Therefore, this guidance emphasizes implementing layered prevention strategies (e.g., using multiple prevention strategies together consistently) to protect people who are not fully vaccinated, including students, teachers, staff, and other members of their households.
 - *This includes maintaining masking for all children and staff who are unvaccinated. Particularly given the recent increases in Chicago's COVID-19 rates, CDPH does not recommended deviating from this practice.*
- COVID-19 prevention strategies remain critical to protect people, including students, teachers, and staff, who are not fully vaccinated, especially in areas of moderate-to-high community transmission levels.
 - *Chicago is currently an area of moderate community transmission. See Table 2 below.*
- Localities should monitor community transmission, vaccination coverage, screening testing, and occurrence of outbreaks to guide decisions on the level of layered prevention strategies (e.g., physical distancing, screening testing).
 - *Chicago data can be found at chi.gov/coviddash*

Table 1. Screening Testing Recommendations for K-12 Schools by Level of Community Transmission

[from CDC's [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#)]

	Low Transmission ¹ Blue	Moderate Transmission Yellow	Substantial Transmission Orange	High Transmission Red
Students	Do not need to screen students.	Offer screening testing for students who are not fully vaccinated at least once per week.		
Teachers and staff	Offer screening testing for teachers and staff who are not fully vaccinated at least once per week.			
High risk sports and activities	Recommend screening testing for high-risk sports ² and extracurricular activities ³ at least once per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.		Recommend screening testing for high-risk sports and extracurricular activities twice per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.	Cancel or hold high-risk sports and extracurricular activities virtually to protect in-person learning, unless all participants are fully vaccinated.
Low- and intermediate-risk sports	Do not need to screen students participating in low- and intermediate-risk sports. ²	Recommend screening testing for low- and intermediate-risk sports at least once per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.		

¹ [Levels 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%.)

² The NCAA has developed a risk stratification for sports. See https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/ssi/COVID/SSI_ResocializationDevelopingStandardsSecondEdition.pdf . Examples of low-risk sports are diving and golf; intermediate-risk sport examples are baseball and cross country; high-risk sport examples are football and wrestling.

³High-risk extracurricular activities are those in which increased exhalation occurs, such as activities that involve singing, shouting, band, or exercise, especially when conducted indoors.

Table 2. Indicators and Thresholds for Community Transmission of COVID-19* (reported over 7 days)

[from <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view>]

Indicator	Lowest Transmission	Low Transmission Blue	Moderate Transmission Yellow	Substantial Transmission Orange	High Transmission Red
Total new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days**	Category no longer exists. It has been merged into one low transmission (blue) category.	0-9	10-49	50-99	≥100
Percentage of NAATs that are positive during the past 7 days***		<5.0%	5.0%-7.9%	8.0%-9.9%	≥10.0%

*If the two indicators suggest different levels, the actions corresponding to the higher threshold should be chosen. County-level data on total new cases in the past 7 days and test percent positivity are available on the County View tab in [CDC's COVID Data Tracker](#).

**Total number of new cases per 100,000 persons within the last 7 days is calculated by adding the number of new cases in the county (or other community type) in the last 7 days divided by the population in the county (or other community type) and multiplying by 100,000.

***Percentage of positive diagnostic and screening NAATs during the last 7 days is calculated by dividing the number of positive tests in the county (or other administrative level) during the last 7 days by the total number of tests resulted over the last 7 days. Additional information can be found on the [Calculating Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 \(SARS-CoV-2\) Laboratory Test Percent Positivity: CDC Methods and Considerations for Comparisons and Interpretation](#) webpage.