



Updates to Guidance on Interpreting DPH COVID-19 Health Metrics

November 6, 2020

With the recent update by the Department of Public Health (DPH) to the weekly color-coded designation for communities in the Commonwealth, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is issuing updated guidance on interpreting these metrics for school settings. This replaces the guidance on *Interpreting DPH COVID-19 Health Metrics* issued on August 11, 2020.

With the change to the color-coded metrics, a community's designation of gray, green, yellow or red now takes into account the size of the community, positive COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents and the percent of tests conducted in a community that are positive.

DESE is making updates to its initial guidance on interpreting these metrics in school settings based on a growing body of evidence that students should remain in school. With numerous examples of schools reopening from around the world, across the country, and recent first-hand experience here in Massachusetts, it is increasingly clear that schools are not sources of significant COVID transmission, so long as proper health and safety protocols are followed.^{i ii iii iv} This has held true in Massachusetts even as we have seen an uptick in COVID-19 cases statewide, further indicating that with strong health and safety protocols, schools are able to operate safely for in-person learning. Moreover, we continue to observe the significant harms that come with keeping students out of school in terms of their academic progress and social emotional and physical health.

As such, after consultation with our medical advisors and public health experts, we are updating our guidance as follows. As always, districts and schools must strictly adhere to all health and safety protocols outlined in [DESE Fall Reopening Guidance](#). All individuals who are symptomatic, receive a positive COVID-19 diagnosis or are a close contact of a COVID-19 positive individual must continue follow the protocols outlined in [DESE's Guidance on Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios](#).

- Districts are expected to prioritize in-person learning across all color-coded categories, unless there is suspected in-school transmission, in accordance with DESE's *Guidance on Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios*. Transmission in schools is defined as spread of the virus between people during interactions in the school setting. While there have been positive COVID-19 cases of staff and students in schools, most of these infections have occurred outside of the school setting. If there is suspected in-school transmission, then the affected classrooms or schools should temporarily shift to remote learning, in accordance with DESE's *Guidance on Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios*. Classrooms and schools should reopen after appropriate mitigation strategies have been implemented, as determined in consultation with the local board of health, DPH, and DESE.

- Districts and schools in communities designated gray, green, or yellow are expected to have students learning fully in-person, if feasible. A hybrid model should be used only if there is no other way to meet health and safety requirements. Parents and caregivers will continue to have the option to choose a district’s remote learning program for their children.
- Schools in red communities should implement hybrid models, while maximizing in-person learning time for high-needs students.
- In those communities with the highest COVID-19 caseloads and test positivity rates (e.g. currently, Chelsea, Lawrence, and Revere), DESE and DPH will work with local school officials to develop and implement customized strategies to reduce in-school health risks, to enable as many children as possible to attend school in person and/or make a determination on the need for fully remote learning.
- Fully remote instructional models should be implemented only as a last resort in classrooms, schools, or districts when there is suspected in-school transmission or a significant municipal outbreak, in accordance with DESE’s *Guidance on Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios*. Classrooms and schools should reopen after appropriate mitigation strategies have been implemented, as determined in consultation with the local board of health, DPH, and DESE.

As a reminder, structured learning time requirements for students and related regulatory and statutory standards remain in effect for school districts, regardless of learning model.

ⁱ Ismail, S., Saliba, V., Bernal, J. L., Ramsay, M., & Ladhani, S. (2020). SARS-CoV-2 infection and transmission in educational settings: cross-sectional analysis of clusters and outbreaks in England. Public Health England. (2020). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/911267/School_Outbreaks_Analysis.pdf

ⁱⁱ Yoon, Y., Kim, K.R., Park, H., Kim, S., & Kim, Y.J. (2020). Stepwise School Opening Online and Off-line and an Impact on the Epidemiology of COVID-19 in the Pediatric Population. medRxiv (2020). Available at: <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.08.03.20165589v1>

ⁱⁱⁱ Otte im Kampe Eveline, Lehfeld Ann-Sophie , Buda Silke , Buchholz Udo , Haas Walter . Surveillance of COVID-19 school outbreaks, Germany, March to August 2020. Euro Surveill. 2020;25(38):pii=2001645. <https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.38.2001645>

^{iv} COVID-19 in children and the role of school settings in COVID-19 transmission, 6 August 2020. Stockholm: ECDC; 2020. Available at: <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/children-and-school-settings-covid-19-transmission#copy-to-clipboard>