Guidance for TK-12 Schools for In-Person, On-Site Instruction for School Year 2021-2022

July 28, 2021

This guidance was developed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) for local use. It will be posted at https://sfcdcp.org/school

AUDIENCE: Public, private, and parochial TK-12 schools in San Francisco. Transitional kindergarten (TK) programs that are not part of an elementary school should refer to SFDPH’s Guidance for Programs for Children and Youth.

Summary of Changes since the 5/20/2021 Version

Major revisions are highlighted throughout the document in blue color.

- Updated to align with CDC and CDPH Guidance for K-12 Schools for school year 2021-2022
  - Schools should prioritize a full return to in-person learning at full capacity for all grades.
  - Everyone must wear face masks indoors, even if fully vaccinated.
  - Testing recommendations updated.
  - Physical distancing and cohorting are not required. These two measures are lower priority than other prevention strategies such as face coverings and ventilation that allow for a full return to in-person instruction.
- Mitigation for wildfire smoke and poor air quality added to the Ventilation section.
- “What’s Allowed” section added.
- “New rules for quarantine” section added.
  - Modified quarantine for students with close contact to COVID-19 at school: if both the exposed student and the person with COVID-19 were wearing face masks, the exposed student may continue to attend school with testing.
  - Students with outdoor exposures at school must quarantine only if the exposure happened while unmasked and seated, or during high-contact sports.
  - Students in the same class or group as a positive COVID-19 case must quarantine only if they are known to have spent 15 minutes within 6 feet of the case.

PURPOSE: To help TK-12 schools understand health and safety practices needed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 for in-person instruction.

BACKGROUND: Given the important health and education benefits of in-person learning and the knowledge gained since the start of the COVID-19 epidemic, our priority must be to ensure a safe and smooth transition back to in-person learning for all students in San Francisco. By layering effective prevention strategies, schools can reduce the risk of COVID-19 and provide in-person instruction safely for staff and students. Effective prevention strategies include vaccination, masking indoors, ventilation, hand hygiene, physical distancing, and testing.
The recommendations below are based on the most up to date science available, and incorporate the current, lower levels of COVID-19 transmission and high vaccination rates in San Francisco. They are subject to change as new knowledge emerges, local community transmission changes, or as the percentage of staff and students who are fully vaccinated for COVID-19 increases. In addition, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) will determine no later than November 1, 2021, whether to update face mask requirements.

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Key Messages

- **As of July 9, 2021, ~75% of eligible San Franciscans are fully vaccinated.** COVID-19 vaccination of staff, eligible students, and household members is one of the most effective ways to decrease the risk of COVID-19 in TK-12 schools. Vaccinated adults and teenagers help protect younger children who are not yet eligible for vaccination.

- **The past year has reinforced the importance of in-person learning** to students’ physical and mental health, as well as their learning. Because of the importance of in-person learning to students’ health, measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 must consider and prioritize students’ access to safe and full in-person instruction, keeping them in school as much as possible and limiting unnecessary missed days at school.

- **The risk of transmission in school is low.** Schools provide layers of prevention, in a structured, supervised setting where everyone must follow COVID-19 precautions. As a result, the risk of COVID-19 in schools is often lower than in less supervised settings outside of school. During the past school year, San Francisco had less than five cases of COVID transmission with in-person learning among 48,000 students and teachers, including during the height of the winter COVID-19 surge. SFDPH recommends that families with concerns consult with their child’s doctor before deciding not to send their child to school.

Procedures and Protocols

**Apply to Reopen**

*Schools must apply and be approved by SFDPH to reopen.*

- Submit an application to SFDPH Schools Hub. For more information, email schools-childcaresites@sfdph.org.

**Establish COVID-19 health and safety protocols**

- Designate a COVID-19 staff or liaison to be the single point of contact at each site for questions, concerns, or exposures. This person will also serve as a liaison to SFDPH.

- **Create a Health and Safety Plan** describing what your school will do to follow the requirements in this guidance and any relevant Health Directives or Orders.
  - Share your plan on your website and with staff, families, and other members of your community.

- **Establish written protocols** for what your school will do if someone at school is exposed to COVID-19, has symptoms of COVID-19, and/or tests positive for COVID-19. This can be part of your Health and Safety Plan.


**Required Signs**

Programs must post the following signs, available here in different sizes and colors:

- Post at all public entrances: **Best practices for COVID-19 prevention**
- Post in staff break rooms and other staff areas: **Get Vaccinated, SF!**
Strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19

Promote COVID-19 vaccination.

- Encourage COVID-19 vaccination for staff, volunteers, students old enough to be vaccinated, and family members.
- Limit non-essential visitors who are not fully vaccinated, including volunteers and activities involving external groups, as required by CDPH.

Wear face masks indoors.

Face masks can keep infection from spreading, by trapping respiratory droplets and aerosols before they can travel through the air. Face masks promote safety and in-person learning by reducing the need for physical distancing. They are an essential prevention strategy in indoor spaces that include anyone unvaccinated against COVID-19.

For this guidance, face masks includes cloth face coverings that cover the mouth and nose. Face masks must not have an exhalation valve.

- Face masks are required indoors at TK-12 schools, even for people who are fully vaccinated for COVID-19. Adults must mask indoors when students are present.
- Face masks are not required outdoors.
- Keep a supply of face masks for people who forget to bring their own.
- Schools must develop protocols to enforce face mask requirements. Schools should offer alternative educational opportunities for students who are excluded from campus because they will not wear a face mask. However, schools are not required to exclude students who refuse to wear a face mask and do not have a medical exemption.

Exemptions to face masks

- For exemptions to face masks, see CDPH Face Mask guidance and CDPH TK-12 guidance.
- Persons exempted from wearing a face mask due to a medical condition must wear a face shield with a drape on the bottom, or other non-restrictive alternative, if their condition permits it.
- In limited situations where a face mask cannot be used for pedagogical or developmental reasons (e.g., communicating or assisting young children or those with special needs), a face shield with a drape (per CDPH guidelines) can be used instead of a face covering while in the classroom, if the wearer maintains physical distance from others. Staff must return to wearing a face covering outside of the classroom.
- When there are no students present, staff may follow Cal/OSHA Emergency Temporary Standards (ETS) on face masks.

What does it mean to be fully vaccinated for COVID-19?

A person is fully vaccinated if it's been at least 2 weeks since they got the 2nd dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, or one dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.
Improve ventilation and use outdoor spaces.

*Increasing indoor air circulation lowers the risk of infection by “diluting” any infectious respiratory droplets with outdoor air. Being outside is even lower risk.*

Outdoor spaces

- Do as many activities outside as possible, especially snacks/meals and exercise.

Indoor spaces

*Good ventilation decreases the number of respiratory droplets in the air by replacing indoor air with fresh, uncontaminated air and/or filtering infectious droplets out of the air. It is another important measure to prevent COVID-19 transmission indoors.*

- During wildfires or other times when air quality is poor, prioritize maintaining healthy air quality indoors. Your school may remain open even if you need to close your windows or decrease outdoor air intake by your ventilation system during these times. Continue other precautions, especially wearing face masks. Portable air cleaners (HEPA filters) can be helpful.

Review [SFDPH Ventilation Guidance](https://www.sfdph.org/dph/files/ig/Guidance-Shared-Outdoor-Spaces.pdf). General recommendations include:

- Open windows to increase natural ventilation with outdoor air when health and safety allow. When possible, consider also leaving room doors slightly open to promote flow of outdoor air through the indoor space.
- If open windows pose a risk of falls for children, use window locks to keep windows from opening more than 4 inches, or other safety devices to prevent falls.
- Do not prop or wedge open fire doors. Continue to follow fire and building safety requirements.
- If your building has an HVAC system (also called mechanical ventilation, forced air, or central air),
  - Have your HVAC system checked by a professional to make sure that it is working properly.
  - Open outdoor air dampers and close recirculation dampers (“economizers”). This will maximize the amount of outdoor air that the HVAC system takes in and minimize the amount of indoor air that is recirculated.
  - If you can use higher-efficiency air filters without reducing airflow or damaging your HVAC system, use air filters rated MERV13 or better.
  - Disable “demand-control ventilation controls” so fans keep running even when a room doesn’t need to be heated or cooled.
  - If your HVAC system has a timer, set it to run at least 1-2 hours before the building opens until 2-3 hours after everyone has left the building, including custodial staff.
- If your school uses fans, adjust the direction of fans to so that air does not blow from one person’s space to another’s space.
- Consider portable air cleaners (“HEPA filters”).
For more information, see:

- [www.sfcdcp.org/COVID-ventilation](http://www.sfcdcp.org/COVID-ventilation)

Stay home when sick.

* Asking people about symptoms after they arrive is not very effective in keeping COVID-19 out of programs. It is more important to tell people to stay home if they are sick.

Make sure that staff, volunteers, students, and families know the symptoms of COVID-19. Tell people to stay home if they have symptoms.

- Give a list of COVID-19 symptoms to staff, volunteers, students, and families. Make sure they know to stay home if they have symptoms. **Schools do not have to confirm that people have reviewed the list each day.** SFDPH has created a sample handout for families,
  - [For Parents and Guardians: COVID-19 Symptom and Exposure Check](http://sfcdcp.org/school), at sfcdcp.org/school
- Encourage family members of students and staff to get tested promptly if they have symptoms of COVID-19. This will lower the risk of infection spreading to people in your school.
- SFDPH does not recommend temperature checks.

Encourage staff and students who are not fully vaccinated for COVID-19 to **quarantine and test after travel**, as recommended by the CDC.

- Schools can require staff and students who are not fully vaccinated for COVID-19 to wait for the end of the CDC-recommended quarantine period before returning to school after travel.

**Testing**

*Testing is most useful when people are more likely to be infected, for example, after close contact to someone with COVID-19, with higher-risk activities like indoor sports, and when community levels of COVID-19 are high or rising rapidly. Testing is less useful when the chance of infection is very low, for example, for people who are fully vaccinated for COVID-19, with low-risk activities like classroom instruction, and when community levels of COVID-19 are low.*

**CDPH has updated the 2021-22 school year guidance to include testing considerations at K-12 schools. In San Francisco, routine testing of students without symptoms or known COVID-19 exposures over the past year has not been helpful in detecting infections. As a result, SFDPH has determined the best path forward for San Francisco at this time is the following:**

- SFDPH does not recommend **routine testing** of the following groups:
  - Staff and students without COVID-19 symptoms or known exposures.
  - Staff or students who have had COVID-19 in the last 3 months, confirmed by a lab test.
• SFDPH continues to recommend testing for the following groups:
  o People with symptoms of COVID-19 regardless of vaccination status.
  o People with close contact to someone with COVID-19 who are not fully vaccinated and have not had COVID-19 in the last 3 months.
• For information about required testing for San Francisco schools, see Health Officer Directive No. 2020-33 at https://www.sfdph.org/directives

Hand hygiene: Follow pre-COVID protocols.
• Teach and reinforce washing hands, avoiding contact with one's eyes, nose, and mouth, and covering coughs and sneezes among students and staff.
• Promote hand washing throughout the day, especially before and after eating, after using the toilet, and after handling garbage, or removing gloves.
• Ensure adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors, including soap, tissues, no-touch trashcans, face coverings, and hand sanitizers with at least 60 percent ethyl alcohol for staff and children who can safely use hand sanitizer.

Cleaning and disinfection: Follow pre-COVID protocols unless there is a COVID-19 case.
Routine disinfection to prevent COVID-19 is no longer recommended for schools. Surfaces are not a significant route of transmission.
  o Cleaning once a day is usually enough to remove potential virus that may be on surfaces.
  o Paper-based materials like books and magazines do not need cleaning between uses.
  o Outdoor playgrounds do not need cleaning and disinfection between groups.
• CDPH recommends additional disinfection in schools only after a confirmed COVID-19 case:
  o If a facility has had a sick person with COVID-19 within the last 24 hours, clean AND disinfect the spaces occupied by that person during that time.

For more information, see https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html

Cohorting is not required.
A cohort is a small, stable group with the same staff and children each day. Keeping people in cohorts lowers their exposure risk by limiting the number of people they interact with. It is less important when community transmission is low.
Cohorting is no longer required. SFDPH does not recommend cohorting if it will limit full enrollment for in-person learning. Schools should prioritize full enrollment over strict cohorting.
• Staff and volunteers may work with more than one class or group.
• There is no maximum group or class size.
Physical distancing is not required.

Physical distancing decreases the risk of COVID-19 from respiratory droplets. Physical distancing is less important in settings where people wear face masks, vaccination rates are high, and spread of COVID-19 is low.

Physical distancing is no longer required. Because of the importance of in-person learning, CDC, CDPH, and SFDPH do not recommend physical distancing if it will limit full enrollment. Schools that opt to use physical distancing to further reduce COVID-19 risk should:

- Prioritize full enrollment over physical distancing.
- Balance distancing with students’ developmental and socio-emotional needs.
- Consider strategic use of physical distancing for higher-risk activities, for example:
  - During dance, exercise or singing.
  - When unvaccinated children are not wearing masks, for example, during meals.
- In many cases, moving higher-risk activities (such as band, exercise, etc.) outside will reduce COVID-19 risk more than distancing indoors.

### Specific Situations

#### Transportation

Since vehicles are small, enclosed spaces that do not allow physical distancing, they are higher risk of COVID-19 transmission. Biking and walking are lower risk than shared vehicles.

- Carpools and shared rides
  - Tell staff and families to try to carpool with the same stable group of people.
  - Open windows and turn the fan on high, set to outdoor air.
  - Treat the vehicle as an indoor space: everyone in the vehicle should wear a face mask.
- Program Buses and Vans
  - Face masks are required for everyone riding the bus, including drivers. Bus drivers should carry a supply of face coverings in case a student forgets theirs.
  - Maximize space between people from different households who have not been vaccinated for COVID-19.
  - Keep vehicle windows open when weather and safety permit.
  - Disinfection for COVID-19 not needed unless someone with COVID-19 has used the bus within the last 24 hours.
  - You do not have to ask riders about symptoms and exposures before letting them board.
- Walking School Buses
  - Prioritize pedestrian safety.
  - Keep a record of staff and students on the walking school bus each day.
  - Outdoor equipment such as walking ropes do not need additional cleaning. Instead, have children and staff wash or sanitize their hands before touching the equipment.
• Public transit
  o Everyone must wear face masks while riding public transit or in transit stations (train stations, subway stations), even if they are fully vaccinated, as required by San Francisco’s Safer Return Together order, CDPH and CDC.

Meals and snacks
*Eating together is higher-risk for COVID-19 transmission because people must remove their face masks to eat. Children often eat with their hands and people often touch their mouths with their hands while eating. In addition, meals are usually considered time for talking together, which further increases risk, especially if people must speak loudly to be heard.*

• Eat outdoors when space and weather allow.
• Space unvaccinated students out when eating. Consider assigned seating during meals to keep track of close contacts during unmasked periods.
• Meals do not need to be individually plated or bagged.
• Consider starting lunch with silent eating time, followed by conversation time, to discourage talking while face coverings are off.
• For food service such as cafeterias, clean frequently touched surfaces. Surfaces that come in contact with food should be washed, rinsed, and sanitized before and after meals.

Students receiving special services
• Do not exclude students because of medical conditions that may increase their risk of severe COVID-19. Let the student’s medical team and family decide if it’s safe for them to attend.
• Do not limit access to essential staff that are not school employees, such as direct service providers, occupational therapists or physical therapists. Schools can ensure compliance with school visitor policies.
• Provide accommodations and related services for special education, learning disabilities and medical conditions.
• Additional accommodations may be needed for students to safely attend class. For example, students may need additional supervision and support around face masks or handwashing.
• When students are unable to attend school due to COVID-19 infection or exposure, consider remote video sessions for therapy.
Frequently Asked Questions: What’s allowed

• Parents and caregivers may enter the building for pick-up and drop-off, even if they are not fully vaccinated for COVID-19.

• Therapists who are not employees but provide direct services to children onsite, such as ABA providers, occupational therapists, and physical therapists should be allowed to provide services. Providers should also be allowed on-site for vision, hearing, and dental screening.

• Festivals, performances, and other events that involve families; tours; and open houses are allowed. Keep a log of all persons who attend. This will be helpful if someone at an event, tour or open house later tests positive for COVID-19.

• Drinking fountains can be used.

• Students can share toys, computers, books, games, play areas, and area rugs.

• All restrictions on field trips have been removed. You can go on field trips to outdoor or indoor destinations. You may use shared vehicles or public transportation following the guidance outlined in this document.

• You may resume fire drills.

• Sports, dance, exercise, wind-instruments, singing, and chanting are allowed. These activities continue to be higher-risk for COVID-19 because people breathe more air and breathe more forcefully when doing these activities. **Masks must be worn indoors for all activities.**
  
  o At this time, sports and extracurricular activities should follow the prevention strategies and policies for the school day. People who are not fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks and keep distancing during these activities.

What to do when someone has COVID-19 symptoms or confirmed COVID-19

When staff or students become sick at school

• Staff who become sick at work must notify their supervisor and leave work as soon as they can.

• Send sick students home. Keep students who are waiting to be picked up in a designated isolation space. Make sure that they keep their face masks on.

• When a parent or guardian arrives to pick up a student, have the student walk outside to meet them, if possible, instead of allowing the parent or guardian into the building. The parent or guardian may also have COVID-19, since children are most often infected by an unvaccinated adult in their home.

See the Quick Guide for Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19 for steps to take.

• See the Quick Guide with translations for what to do if someone at school tests positive for COVID-19, has symptoms of COVID-19, or has close contact to someone with COVID-19.

• Schools must report COVID-19 cases to SFDPH at cases.schoo@sfdph.org, per AB 86 (2021) and California Code Title 17, section 2500, schools.

• SFDPH staff will work with schools on case management and provide input on next steps, including isolation, quarantine, and outbreak management.
Returning to school after COVID-19 symptoms, exposure, or a positive test

For SFDPH criteria for children return to schools, see: https://sfph.org/dph/COVID-19/Schools-Returning.asp

New rules on which students must quarantine after COVID-19 exposure at school

People in the same class or cohort do not have to quarantine if the school does not know who was a close contact to a case.

In school settings, it may be difficult to know who has had close contact. People should be considered close contacts when the school or program is reasonably sure that they spent at least 15 minutes within 6 feet of the infected person during the course of a day. People are not considered close contacts simply because they were in the same group or cohort. If the program cannot determine this or does not know, the person should not be considered a close contact.

To help identify close contacts, schools may consider assigned seating, documenting who sits next to each other during meals and snacks, and other ways of tracking who is within 6 feet of others each day.

Outdoor exposures in schools and supervised programs for children and youth

Children and youth must quarantine for outdoor exposures at schools and programs for children only if the close contact happened while
- The child and infected person were unmasked and stationary (i.e. sitting or standing). Examples include eating together or singing in a group.
- During high-contact sports or dance.

High contact sports and dance are activities with frequent or sustained contact. Examples include football, basketball, soccer, water polo, and partner dancing. For clarity, quarantine is only required if the total time spent within 6 feet of the infected person was at least 15 minutes; regardless of the duration of the activity.

Modified Quarantine for TK-12 Students after Close Contact to COVID-19 in School

CDPH now allows students who are exposed to COVID-19 in school classrooms to continue attending school during quarantine, under certain conditions. This is because of the low risk of spread of COVID-19 between students in TK-12 schools, even when community levels of COVID-19 have been high, and the importance of minimizing days missed from school.

Students in TK-12 schools who are not fully vaccinated for COVID-19 and have close contact in an indoor classroom setting at school can continue to attend school during quarantine if both the student and the infected person were wearing face masks consistently and correctly during the close contact.

This “modified quarantine” applies only to students who were exposed to COVID-19 in school. It does not apply to students who were exposed to COVID-19 at home, outside of school, or during extracurricular activities like school sports.

To attend school during quarantine, the student must:
- Continue to wear a face mask in school
- Get tested for COVID-19 twice a week, and
- Remain free of any COVID-19 symptoms during this time.
Students must quarantine except to attend school. Students must not participate in activities outside of school or extracurricular activities at school, including sports, during their modified quarantine. For more information, see CDPH guidance for more information: https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/K-12-Guidance-2021-22-School-Year.aspx

Close contact is being **within 6 feet of a person with COVID-19 for a total of 15 minutes or more over 24 hours** (for example, **three individual 5-minute periods over the course of a day**), while the infected person was contagious.

People who are **fully vaccinated for COVID-19** or have had COVID-19 in the last 3 months **do not have to quarantine** after close contact as long as they do not have symptoms.

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**Resources**

San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH)

- **SFPDH Schools and Childcare Hub** for COVID19 consultation and guidance (628) 2177499 or cases.schools@sfdpd.org
- COVID-19 guidance for the public, including employers https://www.sfcdcp.org/covid19
- COVID-19 guidance for schools at https://sfcdcp.org/school
  - “Quick Guide for Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19”
  - “Parent Handout: Symptom and Exposure Check/Returning to School after Symptoms”

California Department of Public Health (CDPH)

- State of California Safe Schools for All Hub https://schools.covid19.ca.gov/
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools (updated 7/9/2021)

- Schools and Child Care Programs