San Francisco Department of Public Health Roles and Responsibilities on COVID-19 Cases, Clusters, and Outbreaks in Schools

Last updated May 16, 2022

ATTN: As of May 16, 2022, SFDPH will not be updating this document. This document will continue to be available for reference purposes for schools and programs until June 30, 2022. For more information and ongoing updates, visit: https://sf.gov/schools-childcare-and-youth-programs-during-covid-19-pandemic

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

AUDIENCE: Public, private, and parochial TK-12 schools in San Francisco.

PURPOSE: To help TK-12 schools understand clinical practices necessary when there is a confirmed COVID-19 mitigation at school sites.

Procedures and Protocols

San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) reaffirms its support for in-person learning and continues to support schools to prevent and mitigate COVID-19. The benefits of in-person learning—academic education, physical and mental health, and socioemotional development—are clear. Furthermore, multiple layers of health and safety protocols (vaccinations/boosters, masking, ventilation, staying home when sick, and testing) have kept schools open this school year despite COVID-19.

While children can get COVID-19, severe disease among kids is uncommon and deaths are exceedingly rare. Transmission can happen in any setting, including at schools, but children are often exposed to COVID-19 at home or in social settings where safety practices vary. Schools are safer settings when layered health and safety protocols are in place. Most importantly, vaccinations and boosters remain the most effective tool to protect oneself against the virus. All individuals ages 5 and older are now eligible to receive vaccinations. All those ages 12 and older are eligible to receive a booster.

The Omicron surge has brought us to a new stage in the pandemic. Cases were higher than previously seen, but symptoms are mild to moderate for most adults and children, particularly those who are vaccinated and boosted. In response to the Omicron surge, SFDPH has revised its protocols and procedures for COVID-19 mitigation in schools. These policies will continue to change and will be revisited no later than May 1, 2022.

Following are the roles and responsibilities of schools and SFDPH with respect to COVID-19 mitigation:

School roles and responsibilities:
• Schools must notify parents and caregivers if there has been a case at school. As feasible, schools may also notify parents and caregivers if individuals are contacts, as appropriate given the tracing strategy deployed by the school. SFDPH advisory templates (optional) are available for this.
• Schools communicate with SFDPH on progress toward any recommended action items needed to reduce likelihood of transmission at schools.

SFDPH roles and responsibilities:
• SFDPH provides guidance as needed to schools upon confirmation of any positive cases per the SFDPH Guidance for infections, symptoms, and exposures.
• SFDPH receives information about cases from schools through School Portal for Outbreak Tracking (SPOT) or the SFDPH exposure investigation tool.
• With the Omicron variant being so transmissible and spreading so rapidly, SFDPH no longer tracks instances of in-school transmission, clusters, or outbreaks as it is no longer an effective public health strategy because there are so many potential sources of exposure.
• SFDPH strongly recommends schools implement the group-tracing approach. This strategy allows for a quicker, broader response to cases identified in school settings through prompt notification, testing, and isolation protocols. Testing is a recommendation, not a requirement, in alignment with CDPH.
• In the event of increased case numbers in a school, SFDPH discusses these findings with school leadership and reviews whether or not any additional measures are indicated to mitigate further transmission.
• In certain circumstances, SFDPH may request that a school submit a list of close contacts, or a school may make a special request that SFDPH proactively call those identified as close contacts.

Moreover, as a matter of SFDPH policy and to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the students and schools, SFDPH does not publicly share if there has been a cluster or an outbreak at a specific school site. SFDPH does not discuss findings and processes with families that are not involved in cases or clusters to ensure patient privacy and confidentiality. Lastly, SFDPH does not publicly report any data points that are less than 5 in order to maintain privacy and confidentiality per our privacy standards as determined by the SFDPH Privacy Officer.