



Rhode Island Department of Health

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Memo

To: Pre-K-12 School Administrators

From: Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH)

Date: February 18, 2022

Subject: Guidance Updates for COVID-19 Prevention Strategies in Pre K-12 Schools

Enclosed in this memo is critical information and guidance to assist your school community in navigating upcoming changes to the COVID-19 landscape. While Rhode Island is currently in a state of high transmission as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), RIDOH has been monitoring a significant and rapid decline in COVID-19 cases over the past few weeks. Since the first week of school in January, LEAs reported about 92% fewer cases of COVID-19 among students and staff. Based on vaccination rates, availability of highly effective treatment, and the expected continuation of these downward trends in cases, hospitalizations and deaths, the following actions have been taken:

Extension of the Governor’s Executive Authority

Rhode Island’s General Assembly extended certain of the Governor’s statutory powers to manage the current COVID-19 state of emergency through at least March 31, 2022. During that time, Governor McKee will be closely reviewing the handful of Executive Orders remaining that relate to the COVID-19 state of emergency to determine whether they will expire or continue. Any changes in statewide requirements that will impact schools will be communicated in advance to provide time for districts to plan.

Sunset of statewide mask requirement

The statewide mask requirement for public K-12 schools [[Executive Order 21-87](#)] is slated to end after 5 p.m. on March 4, 2022 Please note: The federal order requiring masking on public transportation, including school buses, expires on March 18, 2022 but may be extended by the federal government. Once we receive an update from our federal partners, we will share this information with you.

Targeted approach to protect high-risk populations and detect and respond to outbreaks

National experts and public health organizations [agree](#) that we should **transition away from universal contact tracing** and implement a targeted approach based on updated data and understanding of COVID-19. Therefore, RIDOH no longer recommends that schools conduct contact tracing. RIDOH will continue to prioritize outbreak detection and response in pre K-12 school settings.

Mitigation recommendations

Based on the abovementioned data trends, we have updated our recommendations for layered COVID-19 prevention in Pre K-12 schools. Our priority remains keeping children learning in person safely.

In line with CDC guidance and updated data, RIDOH recommends that schools:

- Base decisions about the level of mitigation and prevention approaches on statewide transmission levels; and
- Maintain the current mitigation approach while transmission levels are substantial and high, including universal indoor masking.

Updated Guidance for Level of Mitigation in Pre K-12 Schools

Schools have been among the safest places for students and staff over the past two years due to layered COVID-19 prevention in schools. While case rates are currently in decline, it remains important that districts, schools, students, and families continue to layer prevention strategies in order to safeguard in-person learning for students.

In line with CDC guidance and RIDOH best practices, we recommend the following approach to mitigation in schools based on the level of statewide transmission. These are not requirements, but recommendations that range from low- to high-risk scenarios. Beginning March 4, LEAs will have the ability to implement their own masking policies in combination with other prevention strategies that best fit the needs of their school community. If you are looking for specific school-related case and vaccination data, please visit covid.ri.gov/kidsdata.

RIDOH recommends that schools implement the following strategies when statewide transmission is:

Low (Cases < 10 /100,000)	Moderate (Cases = 10-50 /100,000)	Substantial/High (Cases > 50/100,000)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Promote vaccination; ✓ Optimize ventilation in schools and on busses; ✓ Promote hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette; ✓ Maintain isolation and quarantine protocols; and • Promote use of well-fitting masks for people not up to date with their vaccine/immunocompromised. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Promote vaccination; ✓ Optimize ventilation in schools and on busses; ✓ Promote hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette; ✓ Maintain isolation and quarantine protocols; • Recommend well-fitting masks for people not up to date with their vaccine/immunocompromised; ✓ Screen for symptoms; • Weekly screening testing for students and staff who aren't up to date with their vaccine and participate in higher-risk activities (sports, band, etc.); and • Consider physical distancing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Promote vaccination; ✓ Optimize ventilation in schools and on busses; ✓ Promote hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette; ✓ Maintain isolation and quarantine protocols; ✓ Recommend universal indoor masking; ✓ Screen for symptoms; ✓ Maintain symptomatic and screening testing; and ✓ Maintain physical distancing and cohorting when possible.

Legend: ✓ Current approach • Revised guidance

Promoting Vaccination

Vaccination remains the most powerful strategy to keep children and families healthy and students learning and involved in extracurricular activities in person. Find more information at C19vaccineRI.org. RIDOH strongly encourages all eligible students, staff, and families to stay up to date with their vaccinations, including booster doses.

Implementing Isolation and Quarantine

Schools should comply with Rhode Island’s requirements for isolation and quarantine, and follow CDC and RIDOH guidance for isolation and quarantine as outlined in [memo](#) on January 6, 2022:

- Pre K-12 students and staff may shorten isolation and quarantine and participate in school-based quarantine programs (e.g., Monitor to Stay and Test to Stay) when eligible if they wear high-quality, well-fitting masks:

- **Shortened isolation and quarantine:** Students and staff who isolate or quarantine at home for at least 5 days, should wear high-quality, well-fitting masks at school for days 6-10.
- **School-based quarantine programs:** Students and staff who participate in the Monitor to Stay or Test to Stay quarantine programs should wear high-quality, well-fitting masks for the full 10 days after exposure.
- People who are unable to wear a mask at school should isolate and quarantine at home for a full 10 days and avoid people who are immunocompromised or at high risk for severe disease, and nursing homes and other high-risk settings.
- People who are immunocompromised should isolate or quarantine for at least 10 and up to 20 days. They should consult their healthcare provider about when it's safe to be around others.

Updated Guidance for Contact Tracing in Pre K-12 Schools

Universal contact tracing is no longer the optimal strategy to limit COVID-19 because the Omicron variant has a shorter incubation period and the highest risk of spread to others happens very early in the illness. A large number of cases are asymptomatic and less severe due to changes in the virus and widespread vaccination. Also, many infections aren't identified by RIDOH since people with asymptomatic or mild cases may not get tested and people are increasingly using at-home tests which often aren't reported to RIDOH.

In line with CDC guidance, Rhode Island will further focus case investigation and contact tracing response efforts on high-risk populations and outbreak detection for the next 3-4 months. RIDOH will continue to prioritize robust outbreak detection and response in pre K-12 settings, and focus case investigation efforts on people at high risk of serious disease, including people age 60 and older, unvaccinated people, and people age 45 and older in high-density communities.

RIDOH recommends that schools:

- **Limit contact tracing efforts in schools, and**
 - Consider everyone in the same classroom/group with someone who tests positive for COVID-19 to be exposed; and
 - Notify students, families/guardians of the exposure.
- **Notify RIDOH when there are outbreaks;** and
- **Reallocate resources to symptomatic testing,** symptom screening, and promoting vaccination.