

FAQs for Families, after Revised Guidance (8/14/20) from the Vermont Agency of Education

The Vermont Agency of Education recently expanded its guidance for the reopening of schools in 2020. Here are some questions and answers to keep our families and students up-to-date with the revisions.

1) What's with the revised guidance? Why are the Agency of Education and the Department of Health coming out with more information on reopening schools?

Both the Agency of Education and the Department of Health continue to refine the approach that the state and its schools will take as they explore the many different aspects and operations of schools. In addition, both consider evolving research and information on COVID-19, such as new research and recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Both Vermont agencies inform us that more guidance will come our way over the next few weeks.

2) What's the current recommendation from the state on the reopening of schools?

State agencies base their reopening determination on statewide data collected by the Department of Health. Our step level derives from the epidemiological data, including indicators that measure symptoms, cases and hospital readiness. Currently, the state recommends reopening full-time, in-person learning as soon as possible, especially for students at the younger grades. The state is opening schools at Step 2, meaning in-person instruction with enhanced physical distancing requirements. Vermont's numbers show that we could open at the less restrictive Step 3. That will occur likely in a few weeks. Busing is currently set at the less restrictive Step 3.

3) Who is the district COVID-19 Coordinator?

The COVID-19 Coordinator role is for a school nurse to help the district understand and implement the health guidance received from the state. Rutland High School nurse Justine Franko serves in that capacity for Rutland City Public Schools. She and the district's team of school nurses work together with our building staff in developing our practices aligned to state guidelines.

**4) Will there be cases of COVID-19 in our community and in our schools?
How can I as a parent help?**

The state guidance reminds schools that we should plan for the real possibility of cases among our students and staff. While the state's numbers are among the best in the nation, the health of the school community depends on the good practices of our regional community members. The state guidance notes that community transmission, not the school, will be the primary mode of infection. Thus, we need your help through a commitment at home to following health guidance, avoiding large gatherings, and instilling in our students the good practices necessary to limit the virus. With that help, schools and the Department of Health can manage any limited cases, should someone in Rutland test positive.

5) Daily health screenings: how do they work?

Students boarding a bus or arriving at school will have a temperature screening and a verbal screening. That means that a staff member will ask each student whether they have been in close contact with a person with a confirmed case of COVID-19, and whether the student demonstrates any of the symptoms of the illness. Close contact is defined as being within six feet of an infected person for longer than 15 minutes. If the screening flags a student who may be symptomatic, the school nurse will start a process to further investigate, potentially sending the student home.

6) My student appears to be sick. What do I do?

Simply stated: if you suspect that your student is ill, do not send your child to school. With the advent of online learning, students can keep pace from home until illness passes. This is another part of your role in contributing to keep our schools open. You should contact your health care provider to determine what medical course to take.

Staff and students should stay home if they have tested positive for or are showing COVID-19 symptoms, such as cough, fever (100.4 or greater), shortness of breath, chills, fatigue, muscle pain or body aches, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, congestion or runny nose, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea.

Students with fever greater than 100.4°F and no specific diagnosis should remain at home until they have had no fever for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications (e.g., Advil, Tylenol).

Students will not be excluded from school if they possess allergy symptoms (with no fever) that cause coughing and/ or a clear runny nose, or if they have the condition of well-controlled asthma. However, please communicate this information to your school nurse at the start of the school year.

If a student tests positive for COVID-19, the Department of Health is drafting protocols to support return-to-school determinations. That protocol will be communicated to families when we receive it. Students who receive a positive COVID-19 test will receive

direct support from the Department of Health on when it is safe for the student to return to school. In the meantime, know that your student will be required to quarantine at home until cleared to return. We ask that you communicate with the school to access lessons remotely in order for your student to keep pace.

Students who have had close contact with a person with COVID-19 may return to school after they have completed a Vermont Department of Health-mandated quarantine.

7) What happens if there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 in school?

If COVID-19 is confirmed in a student or staff member, our schools will work with the Department of Health to determine next steps. Identification of a student or adult with COVID-19 in the school is not an indication to close the entire school. The Department of Health is developing materials and protocols to use with schools to support response actions and decisions.

8) Would a school close if there is a confirmed case of COVID-19?

Not necessarily. Unless the Department of Health orders all schools in the state to return to Step I, the decision to close schools or certain classrooms for in-person instruction will be made by the superintendent in consultation with the Department of Health.

9) How does the Department of Health make that recommendation?

The Department of Health epidemiologists will provide guidance based on a number of factors, including the level of community transmission, the number of students, teachers, or staff infected, and other indicators the Health Department uses to assess the status of COVID-19, and the ability of the school to implement mitigation strategies.

Decisions to close for in-person instruction will be determined on a case-by-case basis. For instance, if a school is grouping students by cohort in a single-classroom, the Department of Health recommendation will most likely be to close the classroom for in-person instruction and exclude students and staff in the affected classrooms/cohorts/pod for a minimum of 24 hours while contact tracing is conducted.

If students are moving about in multiple classrooms, the Department of Health recommendation will most likely be to close all potentially impacted classrooms and exclude students and staff in the affected classrooms or the entire school for in-person instruction for a minimum of 24 hours while contact tracing is conducted.

10) What is Contact Tracing? How does it work?

If there is a confirmed case in a school, the Department of Health will convene a rapid response team with the school and will initiate the investigation, including contact tracing.

Contact tracing is a strategy used to identify people who have been in close contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19 during their infectious period. Close contact is defined as being within 6 feet for more than 15 minutes with a person with COVID-19 while they were contagious.

A contact tracing team from the Department of Health calls anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19. They ask the person questions about their activities and people with whom they have been in contact while they were contagious. These might include family members, classmates and coworkers.

The contacting tracing team will also reach out to school administration who will work with the health team to determine next steps. The contact tracing team will work with the school to notify the students and staff who were possibly exposed to the virus.

11) Must my student wear a mask in school? Outside as well? On the bus? If yes, why?

Yes, yes, and yes. Here is why. The Department of Health and the CDC state clearly that masks are very effective in limiting the spread of the virus, especially in settings in which physical distancing is difficult to maintain. We follow this guideline not only because the Governor requires it, but because in doing so, a student acts to stop the spread of the virus to someone else. It is simply a commitment to the health of the community, helping to keep schools operating in-person. If you or your student object to this rule, your next option is to commit your student to a period of remote learning.

12) Are there exceptions to the mask rule?

There may be medical reasons why a student cannot wear a mask covering. If that is the case, we expect that the parent will facilitate communication between our school nurse and the doctor's office to reach a level of understanding. We require clear documentation from a doctor. A student may have other health concerns that are associated to a student's IEP Plan, a 504 Plan, or a specific health plan on file. If that is the case, the student's school team will take on that consideration.

Of course, when students are having meals at school, each can remove a mask to eat. Teachers are also considering ways to allow a student or a group a "mask break." That might look like a short time period in a quiet setting, perhaps outside, in which a student could remove a mask. Additionally, outside activities that allow for appropriate distancing can provide students a time period to remove a mask.

13) If my student forgets to bring a mask to school?

We have a limited number of masks available to supply to students, but we ask that you include masks as one of the materials that your student needs in the return to school. Please make sure to place a name or initials on each mask so that they do not become misidentified. Please remember to clean your student's mask daily.

14) Any updates on buses and transportation?

Our buses will run under Step 3 guidelines. This means that there will be some level of distancing and other procedures. Specifically, students and the driver must wear a mask while riding the bus. Students will have assigned seats. Windows on the bus will be open unless there are unusual circumstances. We will leave space between the driver and the first row of seated students. If it is determined that a student is sick while on the bus, that student will be required to ride near the front, away from other students.

15) Has there been any change to social distancing guidelines?

Yes, the Department of Health has decreased the distancing recommendation from six feet to three feet for our younger students. Also new to the guidelines, teachers and staff can allow for brief periods of closer contact, such as when a student may need one-on-one guidance, clarification, or assistance. In these situations, the guidance recommends that staff should stand, kneel, or sit side-by-side students, rather than face-to-face, for brief amounts of time, specifically less than 15 minutes. In the cases in which social distancing is not possible, the Department of Health emphasizes the use of masks.

16) What recommendations are there for visitors, volunteers, assemblies, school-wide parent meetings, etc.

The guidance on visitors has not changed, meaning that outside visitors, including families, are not allowed in the buildings. That rule does not include contracted service providers, fire inspectors, etc., who serve to keep the schools functioning. Meetings with families will be held through video conferencing, where possible. In unique circumstances, parent meetings or visits will be held in a designated location such as a school main office. We also plan to hold events like open house and student assemblies virtually.

17) Pick-up and Drop-Off: will it be different?

There is no new guidance from the state on this, so here are a few reminders. Each building is developing new procedures for the start and the end of the day. School personnel are shifting entrances/ exits in order to decrease congestion through any one door, as well as to facilitate health screenings in the morning. In some locations in the past, especially with our older students, the buildings allowed some congregating before the start of the first class. That will change, in that students will be required to go directly to their first class or to their assigned classroom. Your student's school will communicate specifics on these practices directly to you.

18) I have heard talk of "heat days." What are they?

Because of the lack of air conditioning in almost all of our classrooms, and due to the requirement that all students and staff wear masks, we are committing to the implementation of building closure due to excessive heat. This is a common practice in

warmer parts of the country in which air-conditioned schools are not present. We will use the practice because of the challenge of facial coverings on a hot, humid day, and because we have the ability to pivot to remote learning through technology. More specifics will follow before the start of the school year. To preview though, the district will monitor weather predictions for excessive heat and humidity over a multiple-day period. If the heat index is predicted to climb into a zone that we deem dangerous, we will communicate ahead to parents that school will take place remotely. Teachers and students will then follow a regular schedule on that day through a distance learning setting.

19) We have also heard about expectations by the state regarding out-of-state travel. What are they?

The Department of Health and the Department of Labor have specific guidelines for Vermont residents traveling out of state. Depending on where and how you and your student travel, it is possible that student travel meets the expectation by the state for a quarantine at home. Please review the website below for specifics. In any quarantine time period for your student, the school would expect that the student maintains pace with lessons through remote learning.

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/response/coronavirus-covid-19/traveling-vermont>

20) My student is stressed; I am stressed! Any advice?

Our staff members in every building are considering how to make certain that we keep the pulse of our school community's social-emotional health. While the Agency of Education and the Department of Health plan to offer more guidance in this regard, each building makes this topic a priority. Buildings are developing plans for check-ins. We emphasize healthy routines, such as exercise and school-life balance. More to come from each school, but please know that this is a priority.