COVID-19 Vaccine (https://mn.gov/covid19/vaccine/find-vaccine/locations/index.jsp) – Find out when, where, and how to get your shot.

Vaccine Rewards (https://mn.gov/covid19/vaccine-rewards/index.jsp) – Your shot to a safe summer. Claim your reward by June 30.

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As Minnesota Makes Progress on Vaccinations and COVID-19, Governor Walz Announces Plan to Return More Students to the Classroom

February 17, 2021

[ST. PAUL, MN] – As hospitalizations and new COVID-19 cases decline and Minnesota makes progress vaccinating educators, Governor Tim Walz today updated Minnesota's Safe Learning Plan to allow more middle and high school students to return the classroom. Beginning February 22, all middle and high school students can return to the classroom for hybrid or in-person learning. Governor Walz expects all schools to offer their students some form of in-person learning by March 8.

"It's time for students to be back in the classroom," Governor Walz said. **"We aren't out of the woods, but our relentless progress with vaccines and Minnesotans' vigilance has put us closer than ever to the end of this pandemic. Our progress means we can get more students safely back into classrooms. As a parent and former teacher, I know how critical this step is for the economic security, well-being, and mental health of our kids and their families."**

Minnesota has made significant progress getting vaccines into Minnesotans' arms, surpassing 940,000 doses administered to over 695,000 people. Nearly 25 percent of teachers and 40 percent of seniors have been vaccinated – numbers that are growing every day. The percentage of COVID-19 tests coming back positive is now below five percent. Hospitalizations are also steadily declining.

The State of Minnesota has prioritized vaccines and COVID-19 testing for school staff. Next week, educators will have access to more than 18,000 vaccine doses at state vaccine sites and more through other providers – a significant weekly increase. On January 4, the state began its first-in-the-nation testing program in which testing supplies are delivered every two weeks directly from the state warehouse to each school district at no cost to staff or schools. Since then, more than 96 percent of Minnesota's school districts have signed up to participate. Forty-one percent of nonpublic schools and two out of four tribal schools are also participating.

"Students learn best when they're in person with their teachers," said Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan. **"For my second-grader and for students across the state, returning to the classroom has supported their overall mental and physical health, as well as their ability to learn. Getting students safely back to school is a critical piece in addressing the racial and geographic disparities that have been exacerbated by distance learning."**

Districts and charter schools that are already operating in-person or hybrid learning or have publicly announced a plan to transition to in-person or hybrid learning may continue with their plans. Families who do not feel comfortable sending their students for in-person or hybrid learning may still choose a distance learning option for their student. As always, school leaders are expected to meet with their internal incident command teams and seek input from their school communities before announcing plans to transition learning models.

In December, Governor Walz updated the Safe Learning Plan to allow every elementary school across the state to operate in person as long as they are able to implement additional mitigation strategies, which include a strong recommendation for staff to wear face shields and masks together and offering no-cost regular COVID-19 testing for school staff. Middle and high schools will be required to implement similar health and safety strategies, including updated physical distancing requirements. Safe in-person learning is a public health imperative, and the state has learned more about how to reduce the potential for spread in schools.

"As Deputy Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Education, I am excited we are bringing even more students back into the classroom, but as a mom of a senior and sophomore in high school I am thrilled," said Deputy Commissioner Heather Mueller **. "I've seen first-hand how this virus has robbed students of the special moments and milestones they have looked forward to their entire academic careers. Giving every Minnesota student an opportunity for some in-person learning is such a boost for our students' academic progress as well as their mental health and well-being."**

"Thanks to vaccines and the hard work of so many people we are getting closer to the end of this pandemic," said Commissioner of Health Jan Malcolm. **"Having more students able to be in the classroom is a positive step, and it's up to all of us to protect that progress by keeping up our vigilance."**

In addition to the new health and safety protocols, students and families who are learning in person, in a hybrid learning model, or participating in sports and activities are strongly encouraged to receive a COVID-19 test every two weeks. Families can find locations for free COVID testing on the Minnesota Department of Health's website (https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/index.html) .

The updated Safe Learning Plan is available here (https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=MDE033418&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary) as well as the updated Minnesota Department of Health 2020-2021 Planning Guide for Schools (https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/k12planguide.pdf) .

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