News

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New Jersey Department of Health Releases Updated COVID-19 School Recommendations

The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) today released updated COVID-19 K-12 operational guidance for local health departments (LHDs). The updated guidance, which reflects recent changes to K-12 recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is aligned with the Administration's goal of opening schools for in-person instruction for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year.

"Though outbreaks do occur in school settings, multiple studies have shown that transmission within school settings is typically lower than or at least similar to levels of community transmission when mitigation strategies are in place in schools," said Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli. "Based on this

data and federal guidance, the Department of Health, in collaboration with the Department of Education, has updated its guidance to help local health departments assist schools in providing safe environments for students and staff."

NJDOH's guidance is intended to offer public health recommendations and strategies for LHDs regarding K-12 school operations. However, schools that have implemented mitigation strategies that have allowed them to successfully open to full in-person instruction may generally continue to follow these strategies.

Pursuant to the updated guidance, LHDs should continue to use the COVID-19 Regional Risk Matrix to provide guidance to school districts. NJDOH's COVID-19 Activity Level Index provides information on COVID-19 transmission at the regional level, characterizing risk as low (green), moderate (yellow), high (orange), and very high (red). The critical updates to the guidance document are summarized below.

NJDOH recommends full in-person instruction with a minimum of 3 feet of physical distancing between students maintained in classrooms for elementary schools across low, moderate, and high risk and for middle/high school when the region is at a low or moderate risk level. When the region is in high risk, middle/high schools should maintain 6 feet of physical distancing between students in classrooms to the greatest extent practicable and consider in-person instruction if able to maximize physical distancing of 6 feet or more. Strict adherence to mask-wearing should be enforced at all times across all risk and grade levels. The CDC and NJDOH continue to recommend six feet of physical distancing in all settings when masks cannot be worn, such as while eating and drinking. Six feet of physical distancing is particularly important between staff members in the school building and between staff members and students, in common areas, such as school lobbies and auditoriums, and during activities when increased exhalation occurs, such as singing, shouting, band practice, sports, or exercise (even if masks are worn).

NJDOH's guidance recommends that students, teachers, and staff who are at high risk of severe illness or who live with people at high risk be offered the option of virtual instruction.

Students and staff must continue to stay home when sick. Students and staff, unless fully vaccinated and asymptomatic, should stay home if they have been in close contact with someone with COVID-19 within the past 14 days. If someone in their household is being tested for COVID-19 due to illness, students and staff, unless fully vaccinated and asymptomatic, should also stay home until the test result is received.

Educators and staff who have been fully vaccinated should follow the NJDOH Guidelines for Vaccinated Individuals. Vaccinated persons should continue to follow current guidance to protect themselves and others, including wearing a mask, staying at least 6 feet away from others while in the community, avoiding crowds, avoiding poorly ventilated spaces, covering coughs and sneezes, washing hands often, following CDC travel guidance, and following any applicable workplace or school guidance, including guidance related to personal protective equipment use and SARS-CoV-2 testing.

To reduce risk of transmission in schools, it is recommended that schools work to increase the circulation of outdoor air, by opening windows and doors, using child-safe fans and exhaust fans and also consider having activities, classes or lunches outdoors when circumstances allow.

If an outbreak is identified, schools and LHDs should promptly intervene to control spread (including consideration of a temporary transition of classrooms or cohorts to remote learning) while working to determine whether the outbreak originated in the school setting and assess potential contributors to the outbreak. The updated guidance document addresses multiple outbreak scenarios and provides the recommended responsive action.

Regional risk levels are just one tool that LHDs and schools can use when assessing COVID-19 risk. LHDs have additional knowledge of COVID-19 in their jurisdictions that can inform local planning and response

actions. Many factors need to be considered when deciding to transition entire schools, cohorts, or individual classrooms to remote learning, such as whether all close contacts of cases can be identified and excluded from school, and the distribution of cases within the school.

To view the full guidance, visit https://www.state.nj.us/health/cd/documents/topics/NCOV/RecommendationsForLocalHealthDepts_K12Schools.pdf

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