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All educators to be offered vaccine by end of March; schools to move rapidly to expand in-person learning

Goal: All schools in full reentry no later than April 5

SANTA FE — All New Mexico school staff members will be offered a COVID-19 vaccine before the end of March as a gateway to further expanding safe in-person learning with a goal of reaching full reentry by April 5, the Public Education Department and Department of Health announced today.

"I bring you good news today — news you've been waiting to hear for a year: We're going back to school," Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart said. "The time has come to get back to the gold-standard in education, which is students and teachers together in classrooms. Our message to New Mexico public schools is that you can and should move as quickly as possible to get everyone who wants it back for in-person learning."

Additionally, all schools may immediately begin offering New Mexico Activities Association-sponsored activities, including sports, and may resume other curricular and extracurricular activities such as band, choir and drama.

The announcement moves New Mexico public schools to the third and final stage of the Public Education Department's COVID-19 Safe Operating Categories. All schools were in the remote category until Sept. 8; most elementary schools were eligible for the hybrid category in the fall; all schools became eligible for the hybrid category Feb. 8; and all schools are now eligible for full reentry, which means all students can return to their school buildings for in-person each school day.

COVID-Safe Practices will remain in place, including mask-wearing, frequent hand-washing, enhanced indoor air quality and social distancing to the greatest extent possible. Schools will be encouraged to use large communal spaces and outdoor spaces to maximize social distancing, especially during meal times.

Vaccinations for school staff members

Based on an increase in supply of vaccines, the state's substantial progress in vaccinating priority groups and recent federal guidelines on vaccine priority, New Mexico is offering vaccines to every school staff member in the next three weeks. This week, vaccines will be offered to all school staff members who are registered for the vaccine and are outside the Albuquerque metro area. Next week, vaccines will be offered to all registered school staff members in the Albuquerque metro; school staff members not currently registered and who register in the interim will be offered vaccines in the week ending March 26.

“As part of New Mexico’s nation-leading vaccine distribution effort, DOH is focusing on vaccinating K-12 educators, early childhood professionals and staff. We are eager to support the safe return of educators and students to the classroom,” Department of Health Secretary Dr. Tracie Collins said.

“Our goal has always been to welcome students back to school as quickly and safely as possible. The statewide mobilization to vaccinate all school staff is a game-changer in creating increasingly safe working conditions and school environments for all,” Stewart said.

More than 45,000 New Mexicans have registered as educators to receive the vaccine, which includes those in early childhood and higher education. Of the registered educators, almost 15,000 have already received the vaccine as members of previously eligible groups — health care workers; those 75 and older, and those with certain health conditions that place them at high risk for serious outcomes should they become infected.

New Mexico currently has 50,864 K-12 school staff members — including classroom teachers, administrators, bus drivers and food handlers.

Once school staff members provide evidence of full vaccination, they will no longer be required to participate in asymptomatic surveillance testing, which is used to prevent outbreaks. Since school reentry began Sept. 8, the overall positivity rate of school staff surveillance testing is 1%, well below the state’s 5% target. The positivity rate since the expansion of in-person learning on Feb. 8 is 0.3%.

Moving quickly to full reentry

The PED and schools have been working since summer to make this return possible, with longstanding requirements for surveillance testing, case monitoring, improved air quality and evidence-based COVID Safe Practices like mask-wearing, hand-washing and social distancing. Before moving into hybrid, districts had to sign assurances that those practices would continue, and site visits by either PED officials or fire marshals were conducted to assure readiness.

With those protections in place, 52,200 of New Mexico’s 330,000 public school students are already attending in-person learning, most in the hybrid mode, which means they attend school in person two days a week and study remotely the other three days. Of the 50,000-plus people who staff public schools, 17,000 have already returned to in-person work.

PED is urging districts and schools to move quickly to get many more educators and students through school doors in the coming weeks, with an expectation that all schools will be in full reentry no later than April 5.

“While we know our communities need time to plan, we expect them to move quickly. As a state, our expectation is for all schools to be offering in-person learning for every family that wants it. You tell us your start date, but that start date should be soon,” Stewart said.

Families still may choose for their students to study remotely, and if any district has a significant portion of students making that choice, the Public Education Department will provide whatever flexibility is needed.

“We are phasing out what we’ve been calling ‘hybrid’ learning, although there will continue to be a fully remote option for those families who choose it,” Stewart said.

In no case will a student be required to return to in-person learning if doing so would violate the requirements of a sovereign tribe or nation, some of which are still in a “lockdown” environment.

Extracurricular activities and sports

Sports and other extracurricular activities may resume immediately at all schools, with explicit safety precautions in place.

For sports, precautions include no congregating during warm-ups or breaks in play; no overnight travel, and masks required for all except when eating or drinking. A complete list of sports guidelines is available on P. 23 of this document.

Choir and band will be allowed outdoors. Students may not share instruments and must follow COVID-safe practices such as the use of cloth bell covers on wind instruments. Both singers and musicians must be appropriately masked and must maintain enhanced social distancing of 9 feet when playing or singing in groups. A complete list of music guidelines is available on P. 22 of this document.

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