

Reopening Washington Schools: Questions & Answers for School Districts

ABOUT THIS Q&A

This document is intended to answer common questions from school and district leaders about the [Reopening Washington Schools 2020: District Planning Guide](#) released on June 11, 2020. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) will publish additional questions and answers over the summer and will continue to prioritize our support of school districts as the most critical work we can do right now.

HEALTH & SAFETY

The questions and answers in this Health and Safety section are under the jurisdiction of the Washington State Department of Health (DOH), and in some cases, the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries (L&I). The majority of the health and safety guidance covered here comes from DOH's [K–12 Schools – Fall 2020–21 Guidance](#).

Phasing

1. Is school reopening directly linked to the particular phase of the county in which the school district resides?

No. The reopening guidance aligns with all four phases of [Washington State's Safe Start Plan](#). As a reminder, even in Phase 4, individuals and employers must engage in appropriate physical distancing (6 feet or greater), use of personal protective equipment (PPE), illness monitoring, handwashing and other personal hygiene practices, and cleaning activities.

Screening

2. Do all students and staff members need to be screened for illness each day? Yes. Both DOH and L&I require students and staff to receive a health screening before entering a school. DOH and L&I follow guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which allows for health screening to be performed at home before school **or** on-site. If health screenings are done at home, the process needs to include an attestation confirming the child or staff member does not have fever, shortness of breath, or cough. Whether screenings occur at home or on-site, school personnel should always be looking for visual signs of illness (flushed cheeks, rapid or difficulty breathing, fatigue, and cough) throughout the school day.

3. Is there a preferred screening methodology?

No. There is no specific screener required by DOH or L&I. School districts should review the general screening procedures included in [DOH's fall guidance](#) along with the CDC examples, and develop procedures appropriate for the grade band, school schedule and delivery model, facility configuration, and other local factors or considerations.

4. Are temperature checks a required element of screening?

Yes. Whatever screening methodologies are used by a school district, they must include a temperature check in either the attestation or the on-site screening.

Face Coverings

5. Are face coverings required to be worn at school by students and staff? Yes. DOH requires everyone in a school building or on a school bus to wear a face covering, with specific exemptions identified in the guidance.

6. Can students use a face shield instead of a cloth face covering? Yes, though cloth face coverings have a superior ability to capture more droplets from speaking, coughing, sneezing, etc.

7. Can staff use a face shield instead of a cloth face covering?

Yes, in certain circumstances. L&I has updated their guidance to allow staff to wear face shields when a face covering reduces the effectiveness of instruction (for example, during speech therapy, demonstrating enunciation, or language instruction). This is determined by the educator leading the instruction. For all other activities (staff meetings, hallway monitoring, playground or cafeteria monitoring, etc.), staff must wear a cloth face covering unless they fit into one of the exemption categories.

8. What is a cloth face covering?

According to DOH, [a cloth face covering](#) is fabric that covers the nose and mouth. It can be:

- A sewn mask secured with ties or straps around the head or behind the ears.
- Multiple layers of fabric tied around a person's head.
- Made from a variety of materials, such as fleece, cotton, or linen.
- Factory-made or made from household items.

9. How can districts address concerns families may have about face coverings? Before the school year begins, districts should be communicating information with families about the health and safety requirements of face coverings as one of several mitigation strategies. The American Academy of Pediatrics [has information about face coverings for children](#), including tips for helping children become comfortable wearing them. Schools should also be careful about comparing this requirement to a dress code. Schools may remind families that schools have many health and safety requirements that require students and staff to wear protective equipment, such as in lab science classes, career and technical education courses, or in physical education classes.

10. What steps should schools take if a student will not wear a face covering? For students who are not exempt from the face covering requirement, schools should take steps to educate the student on safety compliance, implement positive behavior interventions, recommend alternative face coverings (such as a face shield instead of a mask, which can feel more comfortable), and, when appropriate, consult with the student's parent or guardian. Only as a last resort may districts consider excluding a student for refusing to wear a face covering. If a student is excluded, the school must provide the student with an opportunity to receive educational services during the exclusion and then return the student to their regular educational setting when the exclusion ends. Students who are unable to

consistently wear a face covering due to sensory, behavioral, or other disabilities must not be disciplined or denied access to educational services as a result.

Physical Distancing in School Buildings

11. Is six feet of physical distancing required as part of a school reopening plan? Yes. Districts must arrange their physical spaces to accommodate six feet of distance when all students and staff are seated.

12. With respect to physical distancing, DOH says, “as much as possible,” and L&I says, “to the maximum extent feasible.” Do these terms have different meanings for schools?

No. For the purposes of school facilities, districts must have a plan to maintain six feet of distance when all students and staff are seated. Both DOH and L&I recognize that some tasks and movements will require proximities closer than six feet, including passing in the hallway or a teacher’s moving around in the classroom.

13. When students are wearing face coverings, is six feet of distance still the expectation?

Yes. Face coverings combined with physical distancing increases health and safety, and both are DOH requirements.

14. Can we install plexiglass or other partitions in order to reduce the six-foot physical distancing requirement?

No. The six-foot planning framework is a mandate, regardless of other health mitigation strategies that a district may choose to add.

Health Protections on School Buses

15. Are face coverings required on buses?

Yes. Like classrooms and common spaces in school buildings, students, drivers, and aides must wear face coverings while on the bus.

16. If students are wearing face coverings on buses, can the bus be at normal capacity?

Yes. Unlike classroom time, which can be in excess of six hours a day in some schedules, bus rides are typically short in duration and are often essential for students to access their basic education. However, multiple additional health mitigation strategies such as health screening, face coverings, hand hygiene, frequent cleaning, and maximum air circulation are necessary when riders cannot follow the six-foot social distancing rule on buses.

17. What about bus routes where some students are riding for longer durations? Buses can be occupied at normal capacity, but districts should have clear protocols for students to maximize physical distance on the bus for as long as possible until it is necessary to fill in the last of any available seats.

18. What are some other strategies school districts should consider in reducing the number of students on buses as much as possible?

Districts should:

- Encourage walking, biking, or being driven by caregivers as much as possible.
- Reexamine bus policies and consider encouraging more families to drop-off and pickup students.

- Reexamine their pick-up radius.
- Reconsider bus routes to ensure that the furthest pick-ups and drop-offs have the fewest students on the bus.

For students who are required by state or federal law to receive transportation services (e.g., students with transportation on their Individualized Education Program (IEP), students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, students in out-of-home care), school districts are required to provide transportation for the student.

Protecting High-risk Employees

19. What is the definition of a “high-risk” employee?

The guidance is based on the [CDC definition of “high risk.”](#)

20. Can a high-risk employee choose to come to work without additional accommodations?

Yes. The employee does not have to identify as high-risk, and even if they do, they may choose to engage in regular employment without additional accommodations.

21. Can a high-risk employee ask for additional protections?

Yes. Districts must continue to follow existing law on reasonable accommodations. L&I has [long-standing guidance](#) regarding workers’ rights in work environments where they feel unsafe, and the employer’s role in addressing their concerns. This information is also briefly covered on page 18.

22. Can a high-risk employee ask for an alternate work assignment if additional protections cannot be provided?

Yes. This information is also included in [L&I’s long-standing guidance](#) on workers’ rights.

23. If a high-risk employee cannot be provided additional protections and there are not alternative job assignments, can the employee access eligible forms of leave? Yes. Employers must provide high-risk individuals with their choice of access to available employer-granted accrued leave or unemployment benefits if an alternative work arrangement is not feasible.

24. Are school districts required to provide an accommodation to employees if they are not high-risk themselves, but they live with someone who is? No. Rights for high-risk employees under Governor Inslee’s Proclamation 20-46, as well as workplace safety regulations provided by L&I, do not extend to family members of employees.

Confirmed Case Processes & Virus Spread

25. What is the process that schools should take if a student or staff member is diagnosed with COVID-19?

If a student or staff member is diagnosed with COVID-19, their family should notify the school. The local health authority will advise the district on next steps, and it is likely that many of the other students or staff who were in close contact with the infected individual will need to self quarantine for 14 days. More information is included in [DOH’s fall guidance](#).

26. Do schools have to close when there is a suspected or confirmed case of COVID? Not necessarily. Once a case has been confirmed, local health authorities will take over any contact tracing strategies. Districts should plan for and follow the elements outlined in [DOH's fall guidance](#), including developing (in partnership with the local health authority) a response and communication plan specific to this situation. Response activities will depend on the number of cases, the extent of the exposure, and whether the virus appears to be spreading within the school. It is imperative districts work now with their local health authority to plan for the possibility of confirmed cases.

27. If COVID cases emerge, who is responsible for making the final decision about whether a school must close due to a confirmed case?

Both the local superintendent and the local health officer have the authority to close a school, with the local health officer holding ultimate authority to order a closure. The process will depend on the circumstances. It is imperative districts work now with their local health authority, including determining communication protocols, to plan for the possibility of confirmed cases and the need to close one or more schools.

DISTRICT & SCHOOL OPERATIONS

Students Returning

28. Are schools required to bring all students back to campus?

No. The goal is to get our schools open for face-to-face, in-person instruction for as many students as we can safely. However, the requirements to protect health and safety, specifically the six-foot rule, will make it difficult for many districts to accommodate all students in the traditional school day at the same time.

29. If districts cannot bring all students back to school each day, does OSPI have expectations for prioritizing services?

Yes. Students furthest from educational justice and those who require in-person services to fulfill their basic education needs should be districts' highest priority. Students with disabilities and those who did not or cannot have equitable access to learning with remote technologies should be prioritized for in-person services.

Funding for the 2020–21 School Year

30. Will apportionment be provided to districts next year regardless of instructional modality?

Yes. Whether students are learning in a face-to-face or a continuous remote learning model in the 2020–21 school year, OSPI expects that districts will receive their state funds as if they were operating in the traditional face-to-face environment. OSPI controls this decision at this time. As it is with any fiscal consideration, the Legislature has the ultimate authority to determine appropriations for K–12 schools. OSPI does not anticipate a reduction of state appropriated funds, but OSPI cannot guarantee anything that is directly subject to legislative authority or their future considerations.

31. Will districts receive additional state funding to pay for mandatory employer provided PPE?

No. At this point, the only additional funds provided for COVID-related expenses are the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. These one-time funds are flexible, and districts could choose to use them to purchase PPE.

32. Will districts receive federal CARES Act funds?

Yes. OSPI received partial approval to release federal CARES Act ESSER funds to school districts on June 15. Funds will not be available to districts in time for June apportionment payments. The deadline to claim funds in iGrants for payment in July apportionment is July 25.

Attendance and Enrollment Reporting

33. In the 2020–21 school year, will districts be required to take attendance? Yes. Districts will be required to take attendance and maintain those attendance records regardless of the model of instructional delivery.

34. Will daily attendance impact apportionment payments?

No. Apportionment will be based on budgeted enrollment September through December, and actual annual average enrollment January and August.

35. Whether students are in continuous remote learning part- or full-time, will it count for the instructional days and hours requirements?

The State Board of Education (SBE) is responsible for defining what constitutes an instructional hour for the purposes of compliance with 1,027 annual average instructional hours. The SBE is underway in defining this for 2020–21. OSPI has authority to waive days and hours, as was done in the 2019–20 school year, and OSPI is prepared to do so again if SBE or the Legislature does not offer clarification on what constitutes an instructional hour in continuous remote learning models.

36. Is OSPI encouraging districts to build extra “snow days” into their calendars for COVID closures?

Yes. OSPI is encouraging districts to build in additional non-student, non-work days into their calendars in the event a school or a district must close for a very short time to address COVID cases, and they do not want to “flip” to online learning for just a day or two.

37. If a school or district has a plan to immediately shift to online Continuous Learning 2.0 in the event of a closure, do they need to convert non-student, non-work days to instructional days?

No. Districts are encouraged to plan for efficient transitions from traditional face-to-face instruction to hybrid delivery, avoiding any disruption in educational service delivery. If built-in make-up days are not needed, districts may treat such days as non-student, non-work days.

Written Plan

38. Are districts required to formally adopt their reopening plan? Yes. School districts’ boards of directors must adopt a reopening plan and then the district must provide it to OSPI and SBE no later than two weeks before the district’s first day of school.

39. Will districts be required to use the OSPI template for their reopening plans? Yes. Districts will be required to use the template that OSPI is developing in collaboration with SBE.

Cleaning

40. Is there specific guidance on what the cleaning expectations are for after school each day and for buses after each run?

Yes. Information on cleaning procedures, including links to the [CDC's recommended cleaning](#)