



StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit (K-12) Frequently Asked Questions

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I have specific questions about my child and my school. Where can I find more information on how my school will take action on the public health guidance provided by NCDHHS?

Every child and every school is unique. NCDHHS issued statewide public health guidance through the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit \(K-12\)](#). NCDPI has since issued ongoing operational guidance, [Lighting Our Way Forward](#), as a reference for schools to support their implementation of the public health requirements and recommendations. School districts and schools are building their own plans in response to the requirements and recommendations set forth in the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit and the DPI operational guidance in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our public schools. Contact your school and/or district to find out more information on how they are planning to reopen their facilities to students and staff.

Are face coverings/masks required at all times for North Carolina's students, teachers, and staff when school buildings reopen?

See page 5 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) for statewide requirements and recommendations on cloth face coverings.

We know that wearing a cloth face covering is one of the best tools we have for reducing the spread of COVID-19. When schools reopen across NC, face coverings will be required for all K – 12th grade students, teachers, staff and adult visitors unless the person (or family member, for a student) states that an exception applies, or the person is eating, drinking, or strenuously exercising. Face coverings must be worn by K-12 students, and all teachers, staff, and adult visitors inside school buildings, and anywhere on school grounds, including outside. They will also be required while traveling on buses or other school transportation vehicles.

While the June 24, 2020 [Executive Order 147](#) notes that children above the age of 11 must wear masks in public places across the state, it does not include public schools within its scope. The StrongSchoolsNC public health guidance applies to children from Kindergarten through 12th grade when in public school buildings, school transportation vehicles, or outside on public school grounds.

Our statewide public health guidance requires cloth face coverings for our K-12 students and staff because it is important to mitigate the spread of the virus by providing this barrier for transmission, as well as requiring social distancing of 6 feet under Plan B. Individuals may unintentionally come closer together for periods of time throughout the day; with required cloth face coverings for all, our public schools are better protected from spread in those circumstances. The guidance is not intended to allow for the taking on and off of cloth face coverings when sitting at desks 6 feet apart in classrooms for extended periods of time, for example.

The State is providing five cloth face coverings for every student, teacher, and school staff member in our public schools. Schools are required to share information on the proper use of cloth face coverings. [Click here for more information on NCDHHS guidance on face coverings.](#)

Cloth face coverings should not be placed on:

- Anyone who has trouble breathing or is unconscious.
- Anyone who is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the face covering without assistance.
- Anyone who cannot tolerate a cloth face covering due to developmental, medical or behavioral health needs.
- Any child under the age of 2

Are Face Shields an allowable substitute for a Cloth Face Covering?

There is evidence that face shields can protect the wearer from respiratory droplets spread by others. Unlike with face coverings, it is not known if face shields provide any benefit in controlling the spread of respiratory droplets to others (source control). CDC does not currently recommend a face shield as a replacement for a cloth face covering.

However, for certain individuals, the use of cloth face coverings by teachers or others may pose a challenge, such as students who are deaf or hard of hearing, students receiving speech/language services, infants and young students in early education programs, students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and English-language learners. There are products such as transparent/clear masks or face coverings with a see-through panel in the front, but availability may vary depending on the setting and supply. If available, a transparent face mask may be a better option for protection that allows visibility. However, if a transparent face mask is unavailable, a face shield may be used as a substitute until or unless a transparent mask becomes available.

In addition, per Governor Cooper's Executive Order No. 147 [frequently asked questions](#), face shields are an allowed substitute for individuals who have difficulties wearing a cloth face covering.

If face shields are used without also wearing a mask, they should wrap around the sides of the wearer's face and extend to below the chin. Disposable face shields should only be worn for a single use. Reusable face shields should be cleaned and disinfected after each use.

I'm worried about my child wearing a face covering all day. Are there any times when they can take it off?

See page 5 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) for updated statewide requirements and recommendations on cloth face coverings.

Wearing a cloth face covering is required for all students K – grade 12, and for all teachers and school staff, unless a stated exception applies, or the individual is eating, drinking, or strenuously exercising. Schools/districts can also consider building in time throughout the school day when students, teachers, and staff can take short breaks from wearing cloth face coverings at times and in settings where risk for transmission is lower (e.g., outside and all people are consistently 6 feet apart). Mask breaks are recommended, but not required.

Do preschool programs have to adhere to the requirements listed in the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit (K-12)?

We know that preschool programs are an important part of our public schools across the state. We wanted to prevent any confusion in the release of this guidance regarding what public health requirements those preschool programs located in public schools should follow.

[The memorandum linked here](#) was issued on June 8th, 2020 jointly between the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Department of Public Instruction. It states that preschool programs located in public schools,

including NC Pre-K, EC, Title 1, and Head Start, should follow the [Interim Guidance for Child Care Settings ChildCareStrong](#), updated frequently. While similar to the K - 12 public health guidance, the child care guidance is better suited for early learning.

However, the memo notes that preschool programs located in public schools may be asked to take additional precautions on their campus, such as social distancing in the cafeteria. Outside of a public school setting, we would not ask very young children to keep 6 feet apart from each other - however, if possible, preschool programs should follow campus-wide health protocols if asked to do so, especially in shared settings like hallways and the cafeteria. Students, families, and staff should consult local restrictions as they plan for the new school year.

Which operational plan will my child's school reopen under?

See pages 1, 2, and 14 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) for more information on Plans A, B, and C, and the process for determining them.

On July 14, 2020, the Governor and NCDHHS, in coordination with state education leaders, announced that schools will be allowed to re-open this fall under Plan B. Under Plan B, districts are required to limit the total number of students, staff and visitors in a school building to the extent necessary to ensure that 6 feet of distance can be maintained between individuals when students/staff will be stationary (when seated in classrooms, waiting in lines, other indoor school settings where people congregate, etc.). In addition, all K-12 students, teachers and other staff will be required to wear cloth face coverings when in school buildings. Lastly, in addition to implementing other health and safety protocols, schools will also conduct symptom screenings, including temperature checks, of any person entering the building or school transportation vehicle including students, staff, family members and other visitors. Future decisions to increase or ease restrictions will be made if the state's or a region's COVID-19 metrics change. It's important to understand that school districts may choose to implement a more restrictive plan than Plan B, including Plan C that calls for complete remote learning but may not choose to implement a less restrictive plan, such as Plan A, than determined by NCDHHS, NCSBE, and NCDPI.

For transportation requirements under Plan B, see page 12 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) for the statewide requirements and recommendations.

NCDHHS continues to work closely with our partners at NCDPI and the State Board of Education to ensure that all public health guidance for K – 12 schools is operationalized thoughtfully across the state. NCDHHS updated the Plan B transportation guidance section as of June 30, 2020 to support greater operational feasibility in school transportation that will still require mitigation efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The revised requirements for school transportation under Plan B are:

- All passengers must wear face coverings when they are, or may be, within 6 feet of another person on a bus or other transportation vehicle, unless the person (or family member, for a student) states that an exception applies.
- No more than one passenger can be seated per school bus seat (considerations for family members to share one seat).
- No more than two passengers can be seated in a contracted vehicle.

You should contact your child's school to learn more about the operational procedures your campus is planning.

Are school districts allowed to provide remote learning during the 2020-21 school year?

School districts and charter schools are required under legislation to develop remote learning plans for the 2020-21 school year. Under the guidance for Plan B, all school districts are encouraged to provide a remote learning option for all families, and all schools are required to provide remote learning instruction for students who (or a family who) identifies as high-risk for severe disease due to COVID-19. Based on an [advisory letter](#) from the NC Department of Justice, school districts do have the authority under existing legislation to schedule remote learning days as needed based on health and safety needs of students and teachers, including prior to August 24.

Can school districts re-open in remote learning only (Plan C)?

Under the NCDHHS guidance, school districts or charter schools may choose to be more restrictive than the announced Plan B requirements when re-opening (for instance, schools may choose to open fully in remote learning). However, school districts or charter schools may not choose to be less restrictive than Plan B.

What are the requirements for school sports and physical education?

Schools can continue sports activities in person in accordance with [NCDHHS Interim Guidance for Administrators and Participants of Youth, College, and Amateur Sports Programs](#) (also available in [Spanish](#)).

For school year requirements and recommendations, see page 4 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) on social distancing and minimizing exposure.

Schools are required to choose physical education activities that limit the use of shared equipment and any close contact between students during those activities is limited and brief. Additionally, schools are required to discontinue in-person activities that involve bringing together large groups of people or activities that do not allow for social distancing.

What guidance is provided for “specials,” such as music class, band, and art?

See page 4 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) for recommendations on screening on careful consideration of music and band – limiting activities is recommended when there may be singing or the playing of wind instruments. Cleaning is required of any shared materials, such as instruments, or art supplies, noted on page 7 of the Toolkit.

Can Jump Start or summer school activities continue in-person prior to school start?

School-based programs that have smaller cohorts of students, like Jump Start or summer school, can continue in person in accordance with the [NCDHHS Interim Guidance for Day Camp or Program Settings Serving Children and Teens](#) (also available in [Spanish](#)). For more information on your school’s plans, reach out to your school leadership.

What is required for COVID-19 screening and monitoring symptoms among students and staff at schools?

See page 8 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) for the statewide requirements and recommendations on screening for and monitoring COVID-19 symptoms.

Any student, staff member, or any other person entering a school facility, such as a school building or a transportation vehicle, must be screened for COVID-19 symptoms and have their temperature checked. For students boarding school transportation on the way to school, a school may institute a parent/guardian attestation form that states their child does not have COVID-19 symptoms. However, this student must be screened for COVID-19 symptoms and have their temperature checked prior to entering the school building. Frequency and process is up to that school/district, such as paper versus an electronic form and if a school/district chooses to implement a parent/guardian attestation form. To learn if your school/district is using a parent/guardian attestation form, reach out to your school leadership.

Will students and teachers need to be tested for COVID-19 before they come back to school?

No, students and teachers will not need to be tested for COVID-19 before they come back to school. Schools are required to conduct symptom screenings, including temperature checks, of any person entering a school building or school transportation vehicle including students, teachers, staff, family members and other visitors.

How should North Carolina schools support the health and wellbeing of students and staff who might be at high-risk for severe disease due to COVID-19 as they plan for reopening?

See page 6 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) for the statewide requirements and recommendations.

Protecting vulnerable populations is critical to support the health and safety of our students, their families, and our staff across North Carolina's public schools. You should connect directly with your school for support as they finalize their plans for returning to school buildings. Remote learning options must be provided for students who are at high-risk for severe disease due to COVID-19, or whose family members are at high-risk.

Individuals who are considered high-risk for severe illness due to COVID-19 include people who:

- Are 65 years of age or older
- Have a high-risk condition that includes:
 - chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
 - heart disease with complications
 - compromised immune system
 - severe obesity
 - body mass index of 40 or higher
 - other underlying medical conditions, particularly if not well controlled, such as diabetes, renal failure or liver disease

If you are interested in more information on who is at higher risk for severe illness due to COVID-19, please take a look at these links available from the [CDC](#) and [NCDHHS](#). You should also view the [operational guidance](#) provided by the Department of Public Instruction with resources for how schools can take these requirements and implement them on their campuses.

Do the requirements in the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit (K-12) apply to charter schools?

Yes - These requirements apply to public schools across North Carolina, including all charter schools, regional schools, and lab schools.

How can non-public schools use the guidance in the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit (K-12)?

While these requirements apply only to public schools across North Carolina, we hope they serve as a set of guidelines for nonpublic schools to help minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposure and spread.

How will we keep schools clean enough to reduce the risk of COVID-19 exposure and spread?

See page 7 of the [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) for the statewide requirements and recommendations.

The [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit \(K-12\)](#) lays out a comprehensive set of health practices that public schools must follow to minimize risk of exposure to COVID-19 for students, staff, and families. The Toolkit outlines actions that schools must take to minimize spread of COVID-19 while allowing in-person teaching to resume, such as social distancing requirements, screening protocols for COVID-19 symptoms, and thorough cleaning and hygiene routines.

Schools are required to take the following actions, among many more, to keep buildings, surfaces, objects, and hands clean:

- Provide adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors (e.g., soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol for safe use by staff and older children, paper towels, and tissues).
- Teach and reinforce handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and/or the safe use of hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol by staff and older children. Younger children should be able to use alcohol-based hand sanitizer, as long as they are doing so under adult supervision, and the bulk containers are being stored away from students.
- Provide hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol) at every building entrance and exit, in the cafeteria, and in every classroom, for safe use by staff and older students.
- Establish a schedule for and perform ongoing and routine environmental cleaning and disinfection of high-touch areas, such as faucet handles, EPA approved disinfectant
- Limit sharing of personal items and supplies

Alcohol based hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol are known to be effective against SARS-CoV-2 virus and can be placed in dispensers and other containers that are readily available for student use. This availability of hand sanitizer should not be considered a violation of 15A NCAC 18A .2415(b). While Executive Order No. 116, (Declaration of a State of Emergency to Coordinate Response and Protective Actions to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19) or another State of Emergency declaration is in effect during this school year, such hand sanitizer dispensers may be used by students without being considered a violation of Rule .2415 if handled in a safe manner supervised by teachers or other adults in accordance with the directions on the label, and bulk containers of hand sanitizer are stored according to manufacturer's instructions when not in use.

The NC Department of Health and Human Services is asking people to remember these three things as we stay strong and continue to flatten the curve and slow the spread of COVID-19: Wear, Wait, Wash. Wear a cloth face covering if you will be with other people. Wait 6 feet apart and avoid close contact. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer. These actions can protect our families and neighbors as the state takes a cautious step forward to ease restrictions while the virus is still circulating.

You should also view the [operational guidance](#) provided by the Department of Public Instruction with resources for how schools can take these requirements and implement them on their campuses.

How will new cases of COVID-19 be handled in our schools?

NCDHHS released the [Reference Guide for Suspected, Presumed, or Confirmed Cases of COVID-19](#). The guide details how schools should handle these scenarios and should be used in schools across the state.

Specifically, this reference guide outlines protocols that staff should follow when interacting with students or staff who:

- 1) Share they were exposed to someone with COVID-19 (defined as having close contact of less than 6 feet distance for more than 15 minutes) but have no symptoms
- 2) Share they were diagnosed with COVID-19 less than 10 days ago but are not symptomatic,
- 3) Present with at least one of the following COVID-19 symptoms (fever, chills, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, new cough, new loss of taste or smell).

Where can I find more guidance about the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and infection control materials recommended for schools and ordering information?

NCDHHS partnered with NCDPI, NCDOA, and the Office of Emergency Management to release [StrongSchoolsNC Infection Control and PPE Guidance for K – 12 schools](#). This document provides detailed guidance, information on ordering using state contracts, and distribution of two-month PPE starter packs for school nurses and delegated staff, as well as information on cloth face coverings provided for all students, staff, and teachers at public schools across North Carolina.

My company manufactures PPE and/or infection control materials, such as cloth face coverings. How can I be considered as a vendor for the state?

North Carolina needs companies and manufacturers that can produce and provide critical supplies to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please complete the form below. All required fields must be completed in order to be considered for a procurement.

<https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/procurement-form>

Where can I find Spanish versions of the Public Health Toolkit and other resources?

It is important that all families of our students know what to expect when their children return to school, including our Spanish-speaking communities. [Click here for the Spanish version of the Strong Schools NC Toolkit](#). Check back regularly on the [NCDHHS guidance page](#) under Schools for additional translated documents.

My question has not been answered here. Who should I contact?

For questions specific to your child's school, such as scheduling, operations, remote learning options, and specifics about screening procedures, reach out to your local school leaders, such as your school's principal.

For questions about your child's school's adherence to public health guidance, contact your local school board, your school district leadership (superintendent), or the NC State Board of Education.

For questions about NCDHHS statewide guidance related to reopening NC's public schools not covered in this FAQ document, email StrongSchoolsNC@dhhs.nc.gov.