

CDC Releases New Guidelines for Reopening Schools

The suggestions address social distancing, mask wearing and more.

By QUINN FISH Updated: MARCH 19, 2021

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released updated guidelines for reopening schools on Friday, March 19, that allow elementary students to stay only *three* feet apart while wearing masks indoors, rather than the six feet previously recommended for social distancing, *The New York Times* reports.

The revision might aid in speeding up the reopening process throughout the country and will help parents get back to work, experts hope. High schoolers and middle schoolers might also follow the three-foot rule if community transmission is low. In high-transmission communities, older students must remain six feet apart when indoors, unless taught in cohorts, *The Times* notes. Adults must also remain six feet from students in all schools, regardless of transmission rates.

This policy update comes after the CDC published guidelines for opening K-12 schools on February 12.

The original plan includes instructions on how to keep students, teachers, staff and families safe in deciding when and how schools should reopen, or, in some cases, remain open. However, for parents hoping this means their kids will be back in the classroom next week, it might not be the green light they wanted.

"CDC is not mandating that schools reopen," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said in February. Instead, the CDC is suggesting that if procedures are carefully followed, schools can reopen safely in much of the US.

Each school district was broken down into a zone depending on transmission rates. The four school zones are:

- Red (100+ new cases per 100,000 in the last seven days): Elementary schools may consider limited reopening, but physical distancing is required. The CDC recommends middle and high schools continue to be fully virtual unless mitigation strategies can be met.
- Orange (50-99 new cases per 100,000): With "layered" safety strategies, like hand-washing, physical distancing, mask-wearing, etc., they may still consider a limited reopening.

- Yellow (10-49 new cases per 100,000): Encouraged to consider reopening for full-time, in-person schooling.
- Blue (0-9 new cases per 100,000): Encouraged to consider reopening for full-time, in-person schooling.

The CDC provided guidelines for opening schools back in May 2020, but recent data allowed them to provide more specific guidance in the February 2021 update. Some new procedures include:

- Improved ventilation: Schools are advised to open windows and doors to increase circulation, unless it isn't safe.
- Physical distancing: Schools should put in place "structural interventions to promote physical distance of at least 6 feet between people" where transmission is substantial or high. Interventions include cohorts, alternate scheduling and physical barriers.
- For Red and Orange school districts: sports and extracurricular activities should be virtual-only.
- For Blue and Yellow school districts: sports and extracurricular activities should only occur "if they can be held outdoors, with physical distancing of 6 feet or more."

Other guidelines focus on improving hygiene practices, respiratory etiquette, contact tracing and ensuring proper mask-wearing. The plan also suggests vaccinating teachers and other school personnel should be a top priority for schools reopening, though it is not a requirement.

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