

DHHS Shares Health Guidance to Re-Open Public Schools *Guidance formed through collaborative process with DHHS and School Leaders*

Raleigh
Jun 8, 2020

New health guidelines released Monday represent a first step to help North Carolina K-12 public schools find a safe way to open to in-person instruction for the 2020-21 academic year, health and education leaders announced Monday.

The [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit \(K-12\)](#) lays out a comprehensive set of baseline health practices that public schools should follow to minimize risk of exposure to COVID-19 for students, staff, and families. In addition to specific requirements, the Toolkit recommends practices that schools should implement to minimize spread of COVID-19 while allowing in-person teaching to resume.

Governor Roy Cooper, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mark Johnson, State Board of Education Chair Eric Davis, and NC Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Secretary Mandy Cohen shared the guidance Monday.

“Getting children back to school to learn is a high priority, but they must be able to do so in the safest way possible,” said Governor Cooper. “Every child, family and public school educator in North Carolina deserves strong protection to lower the risk of virus spread.”

Schools are asked to plan for reopening under three scenarios – Plan A: Minimal Social Distancing, Plan B: Moderate Social Distancing, or Plan C: Remote Learning Only. NC DHHS, in consultation with the State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction, will announce by July 1 which of the three plans should be implemented for schools to most safely reopen. The remaining plans may be needed if the state’s COVID-19 metrics change over time.

“Opening schools will be possible if we keep working together to slow the spread of COVID-19. We will each need to do our part and practice the 3 Ws – Wear a cloth face covering. Wait six feet apart. Wash your hands frequently. These easy actions will have outsized impact in keeping viral spread low to in order to help get our children back to school,” said Cohen.

The Public Health Toolkit was developed collaboratively by DHHS and DPI with input from a range of stakeholders across the state, including local superintendents, State Board of Education members, the Governor’s Teacher Advisory Council, and members of the Governor’s COVID-19 Education and Nutrition Working Group.

“We are working together to balance the need for all of our children to get back to school – especially children who rely on public schools for their education, health, safety and nutrition – while at the same time proceeding cautiously and deliberately to protect their health and safety,” said Chairman Davis. “I know meeting these public health requirements will take a tremendous effort by our schools – but I also know we are doing the right thing and that our schools will rise to the challenge.”

The StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit will be a companion to operational guidance under development by DPI that will offer strategies for how to implement the public health guidance, and cover other non-health areas for reopening planning, including scheduling, instructional practice, and staff training.

"Today, North Carolinians have the important first step of returning to schools in the fall with this release of the final health guidance for schools from the NC Department of Health and Human Services," Superintendent Johnson said. "In addition, the North Carolina education agency has already been leading workgroups, comprised of diverse stakeholders from teachers to school staff to superintendents to other support professionals, to create draft operational strategies that will help our school systems prepare for the fall. We will now seek feedback on the draft operational strategies from other stakeholders across the state to ensure that we best capture the needs of all our schools.”

The [StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit](#) (K-12) was developed using the most current CDC guidance for schools and includes requirements and recommendations for eight areas: Social Distancing and Minimizing Exposure; Cloth Face Coverings; Protecting Vulnerable Populations; Cleaning and Hygiene; Monitoring for Symptoms; Handling Suspected, Presumptive or Confirmed Positive Cases of COVID-19; Communication and Combating Misinformation; Water and Ventilation Systems; Transportation; and Coping and Resilience.

For example, it requires students and others to be screened for illness before entering school, and requires floor markings to maintain social distance. It also includes sample screening symptom checklists in English and Spanish, a flow chart protocol for handling suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19, and a checklist of infection control supplies schools may need. The Toolkit will be updated as new health guidance is released by the CDC and additional resources are added.

Questions about the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit (K-12) should be directed to StrongSchoolsNC@dhhs.nc.gov (in English or in Spanish).

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