

Interim Operational Guidance for K-12 Schools & Childcare Programs

Updated December 2022

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SUMMARY OF KEY CHANGES

DATE	CHANGE
December 28, 2022	Added Summary of Key Changes section
	Updated Introduction to include considerations for other respiratory diseases
	Added Frequently Asked Questions section

INTRODUCTION

This guidance provides schools and childcare facilities in Dane County with tools to limit the impact of COVID-19 on the health and safety of children and staff, while still prioritizing in-person learning.

Schools and childcare programs offer safe spaces for children to grow socially, emotionally, and academically. Schools and childcare also provide crucial services, such as meal programs, mental health services, and extracurricular activities. In-person learning environments benefit parents and families as well by allowing caregivers the opportunity to work while children attend school or childcare.¹

With increasing vaccination rates in Dane County and the availability of vaccinations for school-aged and young children, the risk of hospitalization and death from COVID-19 has significantly declined since the beginning of the pandemic. However, bivalent booster uptake is relatively low, and some children and staff members may still be at an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19 due to age, underlying health conditions, and social inequities.^{2,3} Consider these factors when applying the strategies outlined in this document to different facilities and classrooms.

While the following infection control strategies focus on preventing the spread of COVID-19, these strategies are also effective in reducing the spread of other respiratory pathogens, like [influenza](#) and [Respiratory Syncytial Virus \(RSV\)](#). Levels of the flu and RSV have been unusually high throughout the 2022-2023 respiratory season in Wisconsin.⁴ Vaccination helps control the spread of COVID-19 and influenza; however, an [RSV vaccine is not yet available](#).

We developed this guidance from information provided by the [Centers for Disease Control](#) (CDC), [Wisconsin Department of Health Services](#) (DHS), and the [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#) (DPI).

COVID-19 INFECTION PREVENTION STRATEGIES FOR ROUTINE SCHOOL & CHILDCARE OPERATIONS

Schools and childcare programs should implement the following practices regularly during day-to-day operations to limit the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.

Encourage COVID-19 Vaccination

Achieving high levels of COVID-19 vaccination among eligible children, as well as teachers, staff, and household members, is the most critical strategy to ensure the continuity of operations among schools and childcare programs.

Anyone 6 months and older is eligible for COVID-19 vaccination. Schools can promote vaccinations among teachers, staff, families, and eligible students by providing information about COVID-19 vaccination, encouraging vaccine trust and confidence, and establishing supportive policies and practices that make vaccination as easy and convenient as possible. See the CDC's page on [Promoting COVID-19 Vaccines for Children & Teens](#) for more resources.

Keep Sick Children & Staff at Home

Children, teachers, and staff who have symptoms of any infectious illness should stay home. Staying home when sick with COVID-19 is essential to keep infections out of schools and prevent spread to others. If a person

develops symptoms of COVID-19, they should [get tested](#). To determine who should be excluded from in-person school or childcare, see the [COVID-19 Health Screening](#) handout in this guidance. For more information on staying home when sick with COVID-19, see the [Isolation](#) section of this guidance and the CDC's page on [Isolation and Precautions for People with COVID-19](#).

Improve Ventilation

Improving ventilation can reduce the number of virus particles in the air. Circulating fresh outdoor or filtered air within the facility helps keep virus particles from concentrating inside. Open multiple doors and windows (weather permitting), use child-safe fans to increase the circulation of outdoor air, or make changes to the HVAC or air filtration systems. See the CDC's page on [Ventilation in Schools and Childcare Programs](#) for more information.

Encourage Hand Hygiene & Respiratory Etiquette

Handwashing is critical to preventing the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. When handwashing is not an option, provide hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol. Hand sanitizers should be stored out of reach of young children and children under 6 years of age should only use them with adult supervision. Model and practice respiratory etiquette (covering coughs and sneezes) to decrease spread of illnesses, including COVID-19. Staff should monitor and reinforce those behaviors and provide adequate, easily accessible hand hygiene supplies.

Clean Spaces at Least Once a Day

Cleaning once a day is generally sufficient to remove potential COVID-19 virus particles and other germs that may be on surfaces. Childcare programs should follow the [Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting Guidance](#) provided by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families.

ADDITIONAL PREVENTION MEASURES FOR HIGH COVID-19 COMMUNITY LEVELS & FACILITIES WITH ACTIVE OUTBREAKS

The CDC tracks [COVID-19 Community Levels](#) and provides recommendations on prevention measures based on if a community is Low, Medium, or High. These levels are informed by three factors within each county: the 7-day average of new COVID-19 cases, the number of hospital admissions due to COVID-19, and the percentage of hospital beds occupied by COVID-19 patients.

Schools and childcare facilities should implement the following prevention measures when Dane County is experiencing a High COVID-19 Community Level. However, you may also use these additional prevention measures when your facility has an outbreak or active transmission of COVID-19, or when there is increased transmission of other influenza-like illnesses. For continuity of operations, you may choose to continue using these additional prevention measures when Dane County moves from a High to Medium COVID-19 Community Level. You may choose to remove these measures after several steady weeks at the Medium level or if the COVID-19 Community Level moves to Low.

Masking

Properly wearing a high quality, well-fitting mask reduces the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus. Different [types of masks](#) can offer the wearer increased protection against getting sick.

- **When Dane County’s community level of COVID-19 is High:** Implement universal masking for all teachers, staff, and children over the age of 2 in indoor settings, regardless of vaccination status.
- **When Dane County’s community level of COVID-19 is Medium or Low:** Universal masking is not required, but anyone who chooses to wear a mask should be supported in their decision to do so.
- **When a child or staff member has been exposed to COVID-19:** Anyone who is a close contact to someone with COVID-19 should wear a mask for 10 days after their exposure. See [Special Considerations for Those Who Cannot Safely Wear a Mask](#), such as children under the age of 2 or people with certain disabilities.
- **When a child or staff member tests positive for COVID-19:** They should [isolate](#) at home for at least 5 days. Once they meet the [criteria](#) to be released from isolation, they may return to school or childcare but should wear a mask around others through the 10th day after their symptom onset (if they never developed symptoms, they should mask through the 10th day after their positive test was collected). If unable to safely wear a mask when around others (e.g., children under 2 or people with certain disabilities), they should continue to isolate at home for 10 days.

If a child or staff member at the facility is immunocompromised, the school or childcare program may choose to implement universal masking regularly during day-to-day operations in the classroom or during indoor activities to protect those at risk for severe illness and ensure equitable access to in-person learning environments for all children.

Special Considerations for Those Who Cannot Safely Wear a Mask

CDC does not recommend that children younger than 2 years old wear a mask, and it may be difficult for very young children or for some children with disabilities to wear a mask safely. Since CDC no longer recommends quarantine for people exposed to someone with COVID-19, we recommend your facility take additional precautions. This includes but isn’t limited to: increased ventilation, universal masking among their group or classroom, and screening testing among their group or classroom. Parents and guardians who choose to quarantine their child at home after an exposure should be supported in their decision to do so.

Testing

Diagnostic Testing

Offer or encourage diagnostic testing to any child or staff member who has symptoms of COVID-19 or was exposed to someone with COVID-19 and it has been at least 5 days since their exposure. Encourage staff or parents and guardians of children reporting a positive home test to your facility to seek follow-up testing at a [clinic or community testing site](#). Encourage them to [report their COVID-19 home test results to Public Health](#).

Screening Testing

Screening testing identifies people with COVID-19 who do not have symptoms or known exposures. At the High COVID-19 Community Level, consider implementing screening testing, particularly for high-risk activities (e.g., contact sports, band, choir) and after large events (e.g., sporting events, school dances) or extended breaks from class (e.g., beginning of the school year, after winter break).

See the DHS webpage on the [K-12 School Testing Program](#) for more information about testing options within school settings.

RESPONDING TO A COVID-19 CASE AT THE FACILITY

If a student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19, notify us:

- Through the Wisconsin Electronic Disease Surveillance System (WEDSS)
- By contacting the facility's assigned Site Investigator
- By calling us at (608) 266-4821 and asking for the Communicable Disease Nurse on-call.
 - Our voicemail is confidential, so if you leave a message, include your facility's name and contact information and the case's name and date of birth.
- Childcare programs may also use this [online survey](#) to report cases.

You **do not** need to report cases that were solely excluded for having COVID- or flu-like symptoms; only cases with positive tests collected at the facility or positive at-home tests should be reported to us. If a case does not live in Dane County, you can still report the case via WEDSS or by calling the individual's [local health department](#). By reporting the case in WEDSS, the case will be referred to the individual's local health department.

We receive notification of all positive cases within Dane County, except people who have a positive at-home test. When an individual tests positive at a testing center, pharmacy, or health care center, their health care provider, testing center, or Public Health Madison & Dane County will notify them of their test result and provide isolation instructions.

Unfortunately, we are not able to follow up with all individuals who test positive. We send out a link via text message to the COVID-19 Case Questionnaire to all clients that have a valid cell phone number on file. This questionnaire asks about the individual's illness, as well as any work, school, or activities they may have attended where they could have been exposed or possibly exposed others. A person must be 18 or older to complete this survey, so children must have a parent or guardian complete it for them. If a case attended in-person instruction while infectious in **K-12 school settings only**, we will notify the school through secure email. In other childcare facilities, we will contact the facility when necessary.

If a parent, guardian, or staff member reports a positive at-home test to the facility, encourage them to [report their results to us](#). Any person who tests positive for COVID-19 or has symptoms of COVID-19 should follow the isolation guidelines below. See the [COVID-19 Health Screening](#) handout in this guidance for more information.

Isolation

Children and staff with symptoms of COVID-19 should stay home and be tested for COVID-19. Anyone who tests positive for COVID-19, regardless of whether they have symptoms (including people who are waiting on test results), must:

- Isolate at home for at least 5 days (symptom onset being day 0 OR specimen collection date being day 0 for those who do not have symptoms).
 - They may return to school or childcare on day 6 or later if they have been fever free without the use of fever-reducing medications for 24 hours AND have had improvement of other symptoms.
- Wear a high quality, well-fitting mask through day 10* when around others.
 - If unable to safely wear a mask when around others (e.g., children under 2 or people with certain disabilities), the individual should continue to isolate at home for 10 days*.
 - Avoid high-risk activities where they cannot wear a mask (e.g., band, swimming) until after day 10.
- If a person develops symptoms after testing positive, the 5-day isolation period should start over (symptom onset being day 0).

* If the child or staff member has access to antigen tests, they may be able to remove their mask sooner than day 11 (or return to the facility sooner than day 11 if unable to safely and consistently wear a mask). See our [Using Testing to End Masking After Isolation](#) webpage and the CDC's [Isolation and Precautions for People with COVID-19](#) page for more information.

Broad Exposure Notification

In accordance with CDC, we no longer recommend individual contact tracing and notification by schools and childcare facilities. Instead, consider sending letters or emails to staff and families when a case is identified at the school or childcare program. Depending on the size of the facility and the movement of children between rooms, the exposure notification letter could be sent to a specific group, classroom, or to the entire facility. See the [example template letter](#) in this guidance.

What to do if Exposed

Children and staff who have a suspect or confirmed exposure to someone with COVID-19 within or outside of the facility should take the following precautions:

- Wear a high quality, well-fitting mask through the 10th day after exposure when around others (with the date of last contact being day 0); see [Special Considerations for those who cannot Safely Wear a Mask](#), such as children under the age of 2 or people with certain disabilities.
 - Avoid high-risk activities where they cannot wear a mask (e.g., band, swimming) until after day 10.
- Get tested on day 5 after exposure or later OR as soon as symptoms develop.
- If positive, isolate away from others immediately.
- Continue to monitor for symptoms of COVID-19 through day 10.
 - Isolate and get tested if any symptoms develop; see the [COVID-19 Health Screening](#) handout in this guidance for a list of symptoms.

For additional information on exposure, please see our [What to do if You are Sick or Possibly Exposed](#) webpage.

APPENDIX I: RESOURCES & REFERENCES

References


1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, August 11). *Factors That Affect Your Risk of Getting Very Sick from COVID-19*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/risks-getting-very-sick.html>
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, August 11). *Operational Guidance for K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education Programs to Support Safe In-Person Learning*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-childcare-guidance.html>
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, July 28). *Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death By Race/Ethnicity*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>
4. Wisconsin Department of Health Services. (2022, November 16). *DHS Health Alert Network*. Retrieved from Wisconsin DHS Health Alert #51: Increased Circulation of Multiple Respiratory Viruses Among Children and Adults in Wisconsin: <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/WIDHS/bulletins/33822c4>


Resources


- [CDC: Operational Guidance for K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education Programs to Support Safe In-Person Learning](#)
- [CDC: Resources to Promote COVID-19 Vaccines for Children & Teens](#)
- [CDC: Isolation and Precautions for People with COVID-19](#)
- [CDC: Ventilation in Schools and Childcare Programs](#)
- [CDC: COVID-19 by County](#)
- [CDC: Types of Masks and Respirators](#)
- [DHS COVID-19: K-12 Schools](#)
- [DHS COVID-19: K-12 School Testing Program](#)
- [DHS: Influenza \(Flu\)](#)
- [DHS: Respiratory Syncytial Virus \(RSV\)](#)
- [DPI: COVID-19 Infection Control and Mitigation Measures for Wisconsin Schools 2022/2023](#)
- [Wisconsin Department of Children and Families Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting in Child Care Settings](#)
- [PHMDC: What to Do if You are Sick or Possibly Exposed](#)

APPENDIX II: COVID-19 HEALTH SCREENING CHECKLIST

The purpose of this checklist is to help staff, parents, and guardians decide when children and staff should be excluded from school, childcare, or other activities.

Step 1: Testing	Yes	No
Has the individual tested positive for or been diagnosed with COVID-19 by a health care provider in the last 10 days*?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 If YES, the individual should isolate at home.		

Step 2: First Symptom Check	Yes	No
In the past 24 hours, has the individual had any of these symptoms (new or different from what they usually have [†])?		
• Cough	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Loss of sense of taste or smell	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Shortness of breath/trouble breathing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• New confusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Persistent pain or pressure in the chest	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Pale, gray, or blue-colored skin, lips, or nail beds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Inability to wake or stay awake	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 If YES to any of the above, the individual should isolate at home and be tested for COVID-19; if yes to any of the symptoms bolded in red, call 911.		

Step 3: Second Symptom Check	Yes	No
In the past 24 hours, has the individual had any of these symptoms (new or different from what they usually have [†])?		
• Fever >100 °F and/or chills [‡]	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Sore throat	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Runny nose and/or nasal congestion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Nausea and/or vomiting [‡]	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Fatigue (feeling overly tired)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Muscle aches	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Headache	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Diarrhea [‡]	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 If YES to two or more of the above, the individual should isolate at home and be tested for COVID-19.		

* Individual may be able to return after 5 days if able to consistently wear a high quality, well-fitting mask.

[†] When considering symptoms, determine if they are “new and different” from how the individual usually is, taking into account any symptoms they normally have every day (e.g., runny nose or congestion due to allergies).

[‡] Fever, vomiting, and diarrhea - alone or together - should exclude a person from school, childcare, or work.

APPENDIX III: TEMPLATE EXPOSURE NOTIFICATION LETTER

[Date]

Dear parent or guardian,

This letter is to notify you that your child may have been exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID-19 at [school/program].

Next Steps

Have your child wear a high quality, well-fitting mask when attending [school/program] and when around others for the next **10 days**. If your child is unable to safely wear a mask due to their age (under the age of 2 years) or a disability, contact [school/program] so they can take additional precautionary measures in the classroom. Monitor your child for the symptoms listed below and keep them home if any symptoms develop. Your child should be tested for COVID-19 at least 5 days after they were exposed or as soon as they develop symptoms.

About COVID-19

COVID-19 is an illness caused by a coronavirus. It spreads from person to person through droplets created when we cough, sneeze, talk, sing or laugh. Most people—especially young people—who get COVID-19 have mild illness, similar to having a cold or the flu. However, in others it can cause severe illness, such as pneumonia. Symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- Fever (temperature 100°F or higher)
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Chills
- Sore throat
- New loss of taste or smell
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Muscle/body aches
- Congestion or runny nose
- Headache

For more information on COVID-19, see Public Health Madison & Dane County's website:

publichealthmdc.com/coronavirus

Prevent Further Spread

The following guidelines will help to prevent further spread of illness at [school/program]:

- Notify [school/program] if your child tests positive for COVID-19.
- Keep children home from [school/program] if they are sick.
- Keep yourself and your family up to date on [COVID-19 vaccinations and boosters](#).
- Encourage good habits (frequent handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, using masks in indoor public spaces in areas of Medium or High COVID-19 [community levels](#)).

If you have any questions, please call [full name and position] at [phone #].

Sincerely,

[Print name, Title]

APPENDIX IV: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are the recommendations for children and staff who have recently tested positive for COVID-19 and are exposed or experiencing symptoms again?

Though not likely, it is possible for someone to get sick with COVID-19 again within 90 days of their last infection. It may be difficult to tell if another positive test within 30 days of being sick with COVID-19 indicates a new infection. Molecular (PCR) tests can detect an infection up to 90 days after a person has recovered. Though not as sensitive as PCR tests, antigen tests, including at-home tests, can sometimes detect an infection for several days after someone has recovered. If someone has been exposed to a person with COVID-19 within 30 days of their last infection **and** is experiencing symptoms, we recommend:

- Staying home until symptoms begin to improve (if they had a fever, waiting at least 24 hours after they are fever-free to be around others) and
- Wearing a high quality, well-fitting mask when around others for 10 full days after the exposure.

If it has been more than 30 days since their last infection, they can use an antigen test (such as a rapid at-home test). More than one antigen test may be needed to get an accurate result – [the FDA explains](#) more about why this is necessary.

Regardless of their vaccination status and whether they've been exposed or infected in the past, if the person has a new exposure to someone with COVID-19, they should wear a high quality, well-fitting mask when around others for 10 full days after their exposure. Read more about [what to do after exposure to COVID-19](#).

Should schools and childcare programs require a negative test for children and staff before returning to the facility after they have been sick with COVID-19?

No, we do not recommend requiring a negative test before returning to school, childcare, or work. Research suggests that an individual can continue to test positive long after they are considered to be [contagious](#).

Should children or staff members use at-home tests to determine whether they have COVID-19?

At-home COVID-19 antigen tests are widely available and often more convenient than provider-based tests; however, they are less accurate than laboratory-based PCR tests. If children or staff members choose to use at-home tests, the [FDA recommends](#) using more than one at-home test to reduce the chance of receiving a false negative result.

Those with [COVID-19 symptoms](#) should take **2 at-home tests at least 48 hours apart**:

- The first test should be **early on** in their illness, such as the first day they experience symptoms or the day after.
- Those that have a known exposure to someone else with COVID-19 AND are experiencing [symptoms](#) should follow [isolation precautions](#) until receiving both test results.

- If both tests are negative, they may return to school or childcare as long as they have been fever-free for at least 24 hours and their other symptoms are improving.
- If either test is positive, they must follow [isolation precautions](#).

Those without symptoms who have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 should take **3 at-home tests, waiting at least 48 hours in between tests**:

- They may attend work, school, or childcare as long as they wear a high-quality, well-fitting mask when around others for 10 full days after their exposure (see our [Special Considerations](#) for those who cannot mask due to age or disability).
- The first test should be taken at least 5 days after exposure.
- Even if all 3 tests are negative, the individual should mask when around others for 10 full days after their exposure.
- If any of the tests are positive, they must follow [isolation precautions](#).

NOTE that at-home tests are not authorized for use on children under the age of 2 years.

What are the COVID-19 testing options for very young children?

Pharmacies, such as [Walgreens](#) and [CVS](#), can test children aged 3 years and older. The [Public Health Madison & Dane County](#) clinic can test children aged 1 year and older. Parents of children under 1 year who need to get their child tested should contact their pediatrician.

How should meal breaks (lunches, snack time, etc.) be handled for children who are wearing masks due to a recent COVID-19 exposure or infection?

Consider implementing additional precautionary measures during meal times due to the fact that children who were recently exposed to or infected with COVID-19 will be removing their masks to eat.

These measures include, but are not limited to:

- Increasing ventilation in the classroom or cafeteria
- Creating smaller cohorts for meal time periods
- Ensuring proper hand hygiene before and after eating
- Cleaning the classroom or cafeteria daily
- Maximizing social distancing up to six feet

Find additional information and diagrams [on the CDC's website](#).