



Fall 2021 School Opening Plan

Revised August 26, 2021

TO: Needham School Committee
FROM: Dan Gutekanst, Superintendent of Schools
DATE: August 26, 2021

Introduction

This fall, following the most recent Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) [guidelines](#), the Needham Public Schools will provide all students with learning in-person, five days per week, and according to the School Committee approved [2021-22 school calendar](#). We expect to open our schools, programs, activities, and schools to full participation and inclusion for all students, staff, and families.

We are not simply transitioning out of the pandemic; we are taking with us valuable experiences and lessons learned that will forever shape us, our perspective, our leadership, and how we prepare our students for their future.

I am proposing a district Fall 2021 School Opening Plan¹ that outlines how we will respond to the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of our students, particularly those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. This plan is partially funded by the federal government's [American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief \(ESSER III\) grant](#), which makes it possible to invest further in equity and our [Portrait of A Needham Graduate Strategic Plan](#). At the same time, our fall plan maintains the district's focus on the health, safety, and wellbeing of all students and staff.

¹ *It is important to note that this plan can be adjusted at any time based on guidance from DESE, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, or due to factors related to the health emergency.*

Guiding Principles for Fall 2021 School Opening Plan

Anticipating a new year of uninterrupted learning in the Needham Public Schools, we are planning for opening in the fall within the following guiding principles:

- We will continue to prioritize the health and safety of students, staff, and the community.
- We will continue to partner with the Needham Education Association (NEA) to ensure a safe and educationally appropriate return in the fall.
- We will emphasize the academic, social, and emotional wellbeing of our students with an emphasis on building community and nurturing strong, healthy and positive peer and teacher/student relationships.
- We will address the immediate and long-term instructional needs of our students by making necessary curriculum and program adjustments for the 2021-2022 school year and beyond.
- We will emphasize the priorities and action steps within the [District's 2021-2022 Strategic Plan: Portrait of a Needham Graduate](#) in our planning.

Updated Health and Safety Planning

The district continues to emphasize and prioritize the health and safety of all students and staff. These efforts will continue into the new school year, and we will collaborate with families, staff, and public health professionals to ensure our school environments remain healthy.

Throughout this summer and into the fall, and in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and MA Department of Public Health (MADPH), DESE is expected to provide updated guidance and requirements for a safe return to school. As the district receives further information and guidance, we will adjust planning accordingly. However, there are some measures and steps we know we can take now and into the new school year to ensure our schools remain healthy and safe.

- **Joint Committee on Health and Safety** The [Joint Committee on Health and Safety](#) met over 30 times this year to prioritize and discuss plans to ensure the health and wellbeing of students and staff. While we do not anticipate the need to continue to meet as regularly or often as we did this year, we will depend on the Joint Committee to provide advice and input into our health and safety planning. The Joint Committee met at least three times in August 2021 to review

the most current COVID-19 information and [recommendations from DESE](#) and Needham Public Health. Furthermore, the Joint Committee will recommend appropriate next steps to take in regards to COVID-19 surveillance testing.

- **DESE Health and Safety Guidance** From late spring until as recently as August 20th, we have received updated guidance and mandates from the Department of Secondary & Elementary Education (DESE):
 - On May 27th DESE shared [health and safety requirements](#) for the summer and for summer educational programming.
 - On July 30th DESE issued [new guidance](#) to districts for a safe reopening of schools in the fall. This was precipitated by the increase statewide and locally of COVID-19, specifically the so-called Delta variant which has led to the increase in cases, including in those individuals who have been fully vaccinated. These “breakthrough” cases have been a tiny fraction of the total number of those vaccinated; but coupled with the strength of the Delta variant and the reality that young children in grades PreK through 6 are not yet eligible for the vaccine, it now makes sense to consider carefully how we will continue to emphasize safety measures as a prerequisite to a successful and healthy school opening this fall and throughout the year.
 - On August 25th the Commissioner of Education announced [new requirements](#) for masks in all schools.

We will continue to review DESE guidance and take appropriate action.

- **Face Coverings/Masking** Based on [recent state guidance](#), the Joint Committee on Health and Safety recommends all students and staff, Preschool through Grade 12, wear appropriate face coverings on buses, in all school buildings and classrooms:
 - **PreK - 6 Students and Staff** will wear face coverings until such time as the Joint Committee recommends and circumstances allow for face coverings to become optional (e.g., the availability of vaccines for children under age 12). Students/staff do not need to wear masks while eating, drinking, during mask breaks, or learning outside.
 - **Grades 7 - 12 Students and Staff** will wear face coverings until such time as the Joint Committee recommends and circumstances allow for face coverings to be optional. Students/staff do not need to wear masks while eating, drinking, during mask breaks, or learning outside.
 - During the first two weeks of October, and consistent with state guidelines, the Joint Committee on Health and Safety will re-evaluate the need for and efficacy of grades 7-12 vaccinated students and staff to continue to wear face coverings in school during the school day. The Joint Committee

will consider the health and safety situation both statewide and locally to determine if face coverings can be optional for vaccinated individuals. The Committee will develop benchmarks or milestones to guide its recommendation to the superintendent for face coverings to become optional for vaccinated individuals.

- The Needham School Committee revised the [Face Coverings policy](#) to reflect the expectations outlined above.
- **Building Maintenance** The town will ensure buildings are kept clean and maintained throughout the summer and into the new school year, although some of the mitigation strategies (e.g., disinfectant teams) will not continue. The Town’s Building Maintenance Department will continue to maintain ventilation strategies that will enhance air quality. These include 4-6 air exchanges per hour supplemented, as necessary, by HEPA filters, fans, and open windows.
- **Distancing** The district will provide a layered approach to health mitigation strategies, including face coverings, hygiene, and ventilation. While the district will no longer require students to be seated three or six feet apart in classrooms or in the cafeteria, we are committed to ensuring students have safe and clean places in which to learn, play, and enjoy a meal. Appropriate seating plans, school routines, and hygiene practices will continue to be emphasized for all students and staff. We will [optimize distancing during lunch](#) as a way to help reduce the risk of students becoming infected with COVID-19.
- **Surveillance and Diagnostic COVID Testing Program** The district has applied for the [state’s](#) testing program including weekly Surveillance Testing and the “Test and Stay” Diagnostic Testing for asymptomatic close contacts exposed at school.
 - **Surveillance Testing** The Joint Committee researched and studied the efficacy of providing surveillance testing to students and/or staff for school year 21-22. The report can be accessed here: [June 7, 2021 Draft Surveillance Testing Report](#). The presentation to the Joint Committee can be accessed here: [June 7, 2021 Preliminary Surveillance Recommendation](#).

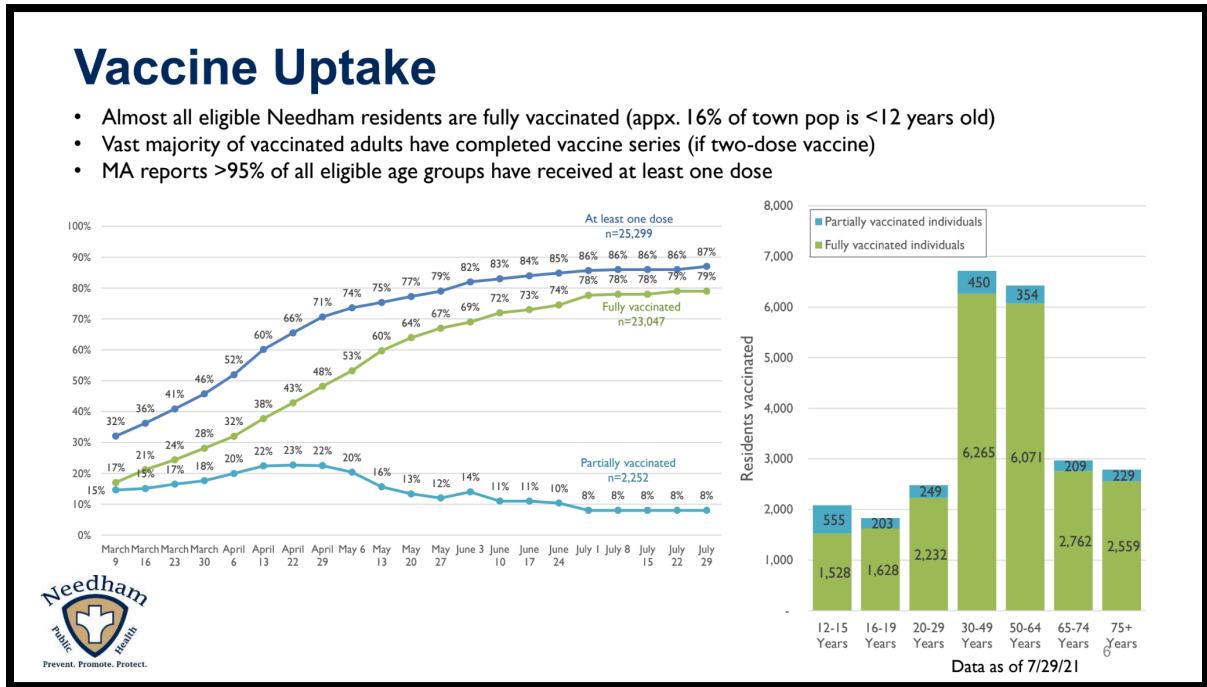
The recommendation from the Joint Committee is to initiate surveillance testing based on infection rates and local data on the virus. Additionally, The district, the Joint Committee on Health and Safety, and the [Needham Board of Health](#) may require surveillance testing for certain reasons and populations (e.g. after school activities and athletics) based on the local board of health assessment of community needs. The district will ask families to give consent for this testing procedure at the start of the year so the program could be easily deployed should infection rates require it.

- **Diagnostic Testing** Additionally, the district plans to implement the [“Test and Stay”](#) program, which will allow asymptomatic close contacts

exposed at school to remain in school in lieu of quarantine as long as they are asymptomatic, wear masks at all times, and take a rapid antigen test on each school day through day 7 from the date of the exposure and receive a negative result. The district will ask families to give consent for this testing procedure along with Surveillance testing mentioned above.

- Vaccines** As we approach the beginning of the school year we know that most Needham teachers and staff are vaccinated, and most students in grades 7-12, per public health data, are also vaccinated. In fact, over 96% of eligible Needham residents (ages 12 and up) have received [at least one dose of the vaccine](#). This is good news, and provides protections for our students and staff.

Town of Needham Public Health Vaccine Data



The district will continue to consult with our health professionals, including the Needham Department of Public Health and Human Services and School Physician, to review and implement any requirements related to vaccines for students and staff. The Joint Committee on Health and Safety, following advice from the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), strongly urges eligible students and staff to receive the vaccine in order to ensure a healthy school environment and keep our schools open. Should the vaccine become a requirement for school entry in the fall, the district will work closely with health services staff and families to implement this requirement thoughtfully and carefully.

Learning Uninterrupted: Supporting All Students in the Transition Back to School

In this most unusual school year, students faced an interruption to learning unknown to generations before them. School closures and instruction that moved online impacted students both academically and socially-emotionally. [Recent literacy and math data](#) show that the academic impact for some of our elementary students was greater than for others. The data also confirms that this year's interruption to learning exacerbated existing inequities for our students of color and historically underserved communities. Unlike previous years, the number of students who will be returning to school in the fall will present with greater variability in their academic and social-emotional needs than ever before.

For all these reasons, our district must ensure that there is a continuum of instruction and support that is intentional, purposeful, evidence-based, universally designed and targets the needs of all students. Our focus will be on ensuring consistent time on learning at all grade levels and strengthening evidence-based instructional practices with data-driven decision-making, progress monitoring, and appropriate supports. Equally important, our staff will be prepared to address a range of student needs through their participation in professional learning, collaboration, and teaming.

To address the variability in student academic needs, we will be focusing on ensuring that all students receive a high-quality grade level curriculum that is coherent, consistent, accessible, standards-based and focused on high-leverage content & skills. Teams of educators will use multiple data sources to determine what supports will be provided to students should they show a need. Sources of data could include student work, discussions, and peer interactions, in addition to screeners, diagnostics, progress monitoring, and summative assessments. The use of these data during team planning time will allow teacher teams to ensure that all students will be treated equitably and have what they need to achieve their highest potential.

In addition to a quality curriculum and data-informed practices, we will be focused on ensuring that our classrooms are inclusive and lessons, materials, scaffolds and supports are universally designed, culturally relevant, and available to every student through the general education program.

Academic Supports

Starting this summer and continuing throughout the upcoming school year, Needham Public Schools will use a systematic approach to instruction that optimizes data-driven decision making, progress monitoring, and evidence-based supports. The specific Summer programs and School Year Interventions are described below.

- We believe a variety of **Summer Learning Programs** can support and enrich students' academic success and growth, particularly at a time when learning has been interrupted and disrupted due to the health emergency. The Summer Learning Programs we are providing for 2021 include:
 - The **Extended School Year (ESY)** program is for designated children with special needs in grades PreK to 12. This program takes into consideration the unique needs of each child and is provided as a continuation of the education benefits accrued to a child during the regular school year.
 - **Summer Bridge** is an intensive 4-week program designed to boost the reading and math skills of rising students in grades 1-5 who require targeted instruction.
 - **METCO Jumpstart** is a comprehensive orientation program provided for new Boston resident students and their families in grades K and 1.
 - There is an elementary **Newcomer Camp** for our English Language Learners, designed to support young students to help build a foundation for success in the new school year.
 - At the secondary level, summer **Tutoring** is available and a **Summer Credit Recovery** program specifically for high school students who need to make up credit towards their graduation requirements.

- We also believe that it does not make sense to put all of our resources into summer learning, knowing that not all students can participate and students will need additional time during the school year to receive appropriate support and interventions. The Summer Learning Programs complemented and enriched learning, and **School Year Interventions** will provide a holistic and systemic approach for all student learners. Some of our plans include:
 - At our five elementary schools, additional Math Specialists will support student learning. The Literacy and Math fall benchmark data will identify areas of student need. To complement these strategies, teachers will participate in professional learning focused on providing in-class “just in time” interventions, and they will routinely set aside time for review, practice, and extension in identified areas of student need.
 - At High Rock, Literacy and Math fall benchmark data will be used to identify areas of student need and a new Math Interventionist will provide “just in time” in-class student support.
 - At Pollard, a new Literacy Interventionist will join the current Math Interventionist in supporting identified students.

- At Needham High School, all teachers will use the initial weeks of school in the fall to assess and address areas of student need. In addition, there will be an expansion of our Personal Learning Center designed to support student learning with emphasis on executive function, coping, and study skills.
- Additional teachers will be hired to reduce class size and expand special area offerings in order to provide greater consistency of instruction for students and expanded opportunities to address post-COVID learner variability.

We propose to use one time funds, grants, including the [ESSER III](#) Federal grant, to hire up to 30 full time equivalent (FTE) teachers and support staff to assist with the implementation of this ambitious plan. All of these positions will be temporary and for one year based on the availability of continued grant funding.

Finally, in order to ensure elementary classroom teachers have the necessary support and time to provide uninterrupted learning for their students, the district will consider how elementary schedules and programs can be adjusted to better meet student needs. For example, the Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Music (STEAM) program that is provided for our youngest elementary students may be pulled out of the regular schedule and instead incorporated into the elementary science program. In this way, classroom teachers will be able to capture that time to work more intensely with their students without an interruption to the class schedule. Also, we are evaluating where we can tighten up programming (e.g., Spanish, art) to enable classroom teachers to have the necessary time to collaborate and spend additional time with their students.

Professional Development

The goal for our professional development is to ensure that it is relevant to what all staff need to engage all students and provide equal access to tier one curriculum and instruction. Topics for professional development will be guided by district goals, school improvement plans, student learning and professional practice goals developed by teachers. Effective professional development can include, but is not limited to: workshops/webinars, outside consultants, participating in a book group, and/or taking a graduate-level course.

Examples of professional learning include:

- Attend Acceleration Roadmap implementation workshops provided by the DESE
- Create an elementary/secondary meeting/PD calendar
- Align professional development topics with district goals, school improvement plans and individual professional practice goals;
- Use instructional coaches to provide job-embedded coaching to all teachers

The district will use professional development days, collaboration time, and other opportunities to ensure staff have the resources, knowledge and tools to help students grow and learn.

Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning

In recognition of the mental health challenges that students and families have faced due to the pandemic, economic uncertainty brought on by the health crisis, and the increased incidences of racial bias and hate nationally, the district is widening our mental health safety net for students and staff. We are developing a well-articulated and comprehensive system of mental health support, and we plan to increase capacity through robust professional learning for staff and families, as well as mental health support through clinical consultation. For students returning from prolonged absence from school, additional staff support will be provided.

Some of our plans include:

- Assess the proficiency and growth of over 150 English language learners in the Needham Public Schools in order to determine their additional learning and social and emotional needs.
- Throughout the Needham Public Schools, a [tiered system of Social & Emotional Learning \(SEL\) support](#) is used to provide all students with a range of learning opportunities and interventions.
- SEL student surveys inform our direct support and intervention. An SEL needs assessment conducted in June 2021 and the [MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey for grades 6-12](#) in Fall 2021 will inform choices for next year's programs and practices, including the need for additional SEL programs (e.g., [Inner Explorer Mindfulness Program](#)) and the expansion of Restorative Justice Practices for students in grades 6-12.
- Ensuring [equity](#) and anti-racist practices are embedded in our programs will continue to be prioritized for all learners.
- A District-Wide Mental Health Team has been formed to provide guidance and support to schools on the implementation of a comprehensive mental health plan
- Additional clinical supports to assist with strengthening, aligning therapeutic programs and services for our most vulnerable students
- Professional development for educators will focus on trauma-informed practices, Social-Emotional Learning and Positive Behavior Strategies, restorative practices, and equitable systems of support

Student Support Services

We recognize that not all students experienced the pandemic in the same way and may require additional support upon their return to school. All schools include the supports and services that students will need to be successful both academically and social & emotionally. Students eligible for special education, 504 accommodation plans, medical plans, or English Language Education will continue to receive the supports and services outlined in their educational plans. Families concerned that their child may have a learning or emotional disability or who have questions about available supports for their child should contact their school principal and/or guidance counselor.

Some of our plans include:

- Assess the proficiency and growth of over 150 English language learners in the Needham Public Schools in order to determine their additional learning and social and emotional needs
- Prioritize family engagement through communications, the continuation of in-person and virtual IEP meetings, and access to Building Based Special Education Administrators with oversight of special education programs and services, and our continued strong partnership with the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC)
- Supporting ELL families through language assistance support including translation and interpretation services, ELL supports in all schools, and development of the English Language Parent Advisory Committee (ELPAC)
- Additional support service personnel in all schools including special educators, counselors, nurses, and teaching assistants

Student Support Service needs can be met by funding and hiring 7.9 FTE Special Education teachers and teaching assistants, plus 1.9 FTE Nursing staff.

In addition, we are very pleased that additional funding is already confirmed from the [U.S. Department of Agriculture so we are able to extend free school meals](#) for all students over the summer and through the end of the 2021-22 school year.

Educational Services for Students Unable to Attend School for Medical Reasons

According to [DESE guidance](#), while last school year families were given the opportunity to choose remote instruction, that provision no longer exists and schools are expected to provide full-time, in-person learning for all students for school year 2021-2022. A very small number of students due to documented medical reasons may be unable to return

to in-person learning during the upcoming school year because of their medical condition. In these few cases, families must provide documentation from their student's physician ([Physician's Affirmation Form](#)) verifying medical eligibility for an educational alternative and contact the school principal. For students who require an educational alternative, the [TECCA Program](#), an online/virtual program is available. Medically eligible students who enroll in TECCA will remain Needham Public School students for the 21-22 school year and will have access to extracurricular activities, special education, and English language learner services through the Needham Public Schools, but will not be affiliated with their local school (e.g. Eliot or Pollard).

Funding the District's 2020-2021 Fall Opening Plan

The district's Fall 2021 School Opening Plan is partially funded by the federal government's [American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief \(ESSER III\) grant](#). Needham's allocation from ESSER III is \$681,191 which may be spent through September 30, 2024. As priorities shift and unforeseen needs arise, we will be able to exercise flexibility with the use of the ESSER III funds. However, the immediate needs for the grant and our proposed plan are summarized below:

- \$500,046 for summer and school year instructional interventions - During the summer, these interventions will take the form of Tutoring at the secondary level and the Summer Bridge program at the elementary level. During the school year, 4.9 FTE math and literacy coaches and intervention specialists will be hired K-8 and a 1.0 FTE teacher is planned for the NHS Personalized Learning Center.
- \$171,000 to replace Kindergarten iPads (1:1)
- \$10,145 for other needs ([Primary Source](#) subscription)

Beyond the ESSER III grant, the district proposes carrying forward resources from FY21 as well as budget savings from a holdback of school supply budgets to help cover expenses for unbudgeted needs. A total of 17.79 FTE staff are proposed to be hired on a temporary basis in FY22 to provide the learning interventions described in this plan. Additional funds are needed for the student support services described in this plan and operational subsidies to the Transportation, Graphic Arts, and Theater programs which might continue to experience revenue deficits due to reduced participation.

While the funding for our planning efforts continues to evolve and be developed, preliminary budget and financial information is included here: [Financial Planning for Opening School in 2021](#).

FY22 Actions in Support of the District's Strategic Plan

The priorities for the 2021-2022 school year are guided by the [Portrait of A Needham Graduate](#), our district's 5-year strategic plan. The Portrait provides a framework of

equity in education, with students in the role of drivers of their own learning. The learning experience during the pandemic heightened the district's awareness of the need to fully develop students' Portrait competencies as Creative Thinkers and Problem Solvers, Communicators and Collaborators, Socially and Culturally Responsive Contributors, Responsible and Resilient Individuals, and Empowered Learners.

To bridge the gap between where we are today and where we want to be to prepare our students for their future, we will work in FY22 to scale and optimize the actions for going forward. Here are a few examples from the [Strategic Plan: FY22 Actions](#):

- Align social studies curriculum with racial literacy curriculum and expand to all grade levels.
- Support personalized learning and allow room for student agency, voice, and choice - such as project-based learning experiences and independent study.
- Expand Interdisciplinary Learning (e.g., by developing grade 10 and 11 courses, a plan for an Innovation cluster, a K-5 curriculum mapping across disciplines of math, science, social studies, and literacy, etc.).
- Design and implement a new elementary schedule for consistent time on learning, a focus on strong Tier 1 inclusive practices supporting academic and social emotional needs of all students, plus time for supportive re-teaching/intervention in a general education setting.
- Provide Family Education on the Portrait and the Needham Public Schools' curriculum in order to engage parents in partnering with staff to prepare students for their future.
- Diversify the educator workforce through targeted and measured recruitment and retention.

We are committed to making progress on each of the district priorities as we roll out the Fall 2021 School Opening Plan.

Stakeholder Feedback

The district gathered written feedback on this plan from various stakeholders, including staff and families. Additionally, the district held two family open houses, one on June 14th and the other on August 23rd, to review this plan and receive feedback and comments. We will continue to gather feedback and share information as the school year unfolds. Your voice is important in representing the needs of our students.

The Needham Public Schools: *Healthy. Safe. Open for Learning.*

With deep respect for the work of a talented and resilient staff; appreciation to our families for their ongoing support and assistance; and gratitude for serving the exceptional young people of this community, I am proud to report that while we faced many challenges in the last 15 months, and we remain vigilant about the spread of the virus, we also made significant progress and finished up the 2020-2021 school year strong. I believe we are poised to set up our students for success by implementing this plan in the fall.

I anticipate an uninterrupted year of nurturing relationships, focusing on teaching and learning, and making significant strides toward equity and our shared vision of preparing all students for their future.