



**Recommendations for the Start of the School Year
from the Medical Advisory Group
August 9, 2022**

Medical Advisory Group (MAG) Members

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Recommendations

1. The MAG strongly endorses the principle that in person learning and other activities in the Newton Public Schools (NPS) for the upcoming year should be the paramount goal with the fewest possible restrictions.
2. Keeping up to date with vaccinations and boosters when eligible is still the most important way to minimize the risks of serious COVID infection.
3. School is not a uniquely risky environment for acquisition of the virus compared to the community.
4. Staying abreast of rates of infection in the community and in venues that students and staff are visiting is also important in making individual risk assessments.
5. In keeping with the goal of in person schooling, much of the work to limit the exposure to the viral variants causing COVID will rely on parents and staff not to come to school if sick.
6. Testing asymptomatic individuals is no longer recommended except in cases of known exposure.
7. Masking except in school health offices and when returning from a COVID infection is no longer required, but optional masking at the discretion of the individual should be supported.
8. All recommendations from the MAG are subject to revision depending on what is happening in NPS and what guidance is issued from the MA Department of Public Health (DPH) and the CDC.

The group addressed a number of specific questions from NPS in a meeting held virtually on August 9, 2022. Below by topic are the questions and discussion that led to the above consensus recommendations.

What to expect by way of guidance from DESE/CDC?

The CDC issued new guidance on 8/11/22 after the MAG meeting but as discussed that night, it was expected that restrictions would be loosened. The new CDC guidance discusses isolation, quarantining and testing. NPS adheres to guidance from DESE/DPH, which at times has differed from the CDC. DPH issued guidance for childcare, K-12, out of school time and recreational camps on 8/15/22, again after the MAG meeting. The guidance did not significantly differ from that issued on 5/25/22, but these consensus MAG recommendations take into account the document released on 8/15/22.

MAG requesting data on newest vaccination rates for students and staff

The latest data will be forthcoming. Nearly all staff were vaccinated as reported in the end of the school year statistics. Student figures were also excellent although lower for boosters than the first two shots. MAG continues to emphasize being up to date with vaccines and boosters for all eligible. While vaccination may not prevent acquisition of infection especially with the omicron variants, it does appear to significantly lessen severity of infection and risk of death. Newer vaccines and recommendations for boosting are likely forthcoming, and MAG endorses vaccination for all eligible.

Testing

The state has discontinued its testing program and is no longer supplying tests to school departments. NPS has a limited supply of tests remaining from the previous program and is continuing to monitor expiration dates which have been extended several times. NPS is asking MAG how best to deploy these tests. MAG noted the increased availability of home test kits but noted they are not always free. Antigen testing in the home kits yield rapid results and have largely replaced PCR testing. The rapid test is considered more predictive of infectiousness than the more sensitive PCR test which can remain positive for viral fragments well after an individual can transmit the virus. However, antigen tests perform less well in asymptomatic individuals, and routine screening asymptomatic people is not recommended.

All NPS staff and students should do a quick daily health assessment. If symptoms are present, a home antigen test should be performed. If fever is absent, symptoms are mild and the antigen test is negative, the individual may come to school. For those with fever or more severe symptoms, a second test should be done 48 hours later if the first test is negative.

MAG does not recommend a policy of testing individuals who develop symptoms in school. Anyone with a fever should be sent home to be tested there. If there is a hardship accessing home testing kits, the school nurse may decide that it is appropriate to give tests for home use

to that student or staff member. The nurse also has the discretion to perform the test in school in selected cases and must report positive test results. DPH notes that individuals tested in school with mild symptoms and a negative test can remain in school. If fever is present, symptoms would not be considered mild, and the person should be sent home.

Any questions that arise about symptoms, testing, return to school, or vaccination should be addressed to the person's pediatrician or primary care provider.

It is important to note that these changes in testing policy make it highly probable that there will be COVID cases in school that are not diagnosed. The tools of testing should be used throughout the system in service of the goal of maximizing in-person learning.

Isolation Requirements

While MAG expects that guidance of ending isolation will move toward doing so when symptoms resolve such as is recommended for influenza, this is not the position of DPH at this time.

No one should return to school after a COVID infection until fever has been absent for 24 hours without use of fever-suppressing medication such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen and symptoms have improved. Isolation can end on day 6 as long as the individual wears a mask through day 10. Rapid antigen testing is not required if indoor masking can be done. If a test is done and negative after day 5, masking through day 10 is not required. If someone cannot wear a mask, an antigen test should be negative prior to returning to school after day 5.

The nature of symptoms should be the deciding factor for when to return to school. The individual may return to school when fever has disappeared for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications and symptoms have improved. If a medical professional makes an alternative diagnosis to COVID, the individual may also return to school depending on the diagnosis.

Quarantining for individuals with known COVID exposure is no longer required regardless of vaccination status. As long as the exposed individual remains asymptomatic, they may attend school. Indoor masking is recommended for 10 days following exposure to someone with symptoms or a positive test. If symptoms develop, the person should follow the steps above for determining whether or not they have COVID and when it is appropriate to return to school.

While COVID surges have occurred and appear likely to continue to occur, the virus does not seem to exhibit the same regular winter seasonal pattern that is seen with influenza. It would not be surprising to see more cases of flu and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) this year because these viral infections seemed to decrease in frequency with routine masking in place for the last two years. Reminders to get the annual flu vaccine and continue good hand washing practices should be emphasized this school year.

Are notifications to staff and families about a case of COVID necessary?

Given a reliance on home testing, MAG does not expect NPS to keep a running total of COVID cases within the system. When an individual tests positive at home, it is encouraged to notify the school nurse. Decisions about notifying individuals about exposure to a case or cases should be left to the judgment of the school nurses. The most likely situation in which the school nurse would notify is when a cluster of three or more cases have occurred in a setting where close exposure might result in secondary cases. One example might be a cluster of cases in a classroom where families could monitor even more carefully for symptoms and/or choose whether or not to wear masks for a period of time.

With cases at moderate to high levels in the community, it is important for all NPS employees and students to do the daily health assessment. Anyone who is sick should stay home until they have had no fever for 24 hours without use of fever-suppressing medication and symptoms have started to improve regardless of whether or not COVID has been confirmed.

Are there any situations in which masks are required?

Masks are required in the school health offices. These facilities are considered healthcare settings, and federal and state agencies are still requiring masks in all healthcare facilities. Masks should be of the highest quality possible for filtering small viruses from the environment.

Masks are also required when returning to school on day 6 after a COVID infection as long as the person has been without fever for 24 hours without fever-suppressing medications and symptoms have improved. Masking indoors should be continued for a total of 10 days from the time of symptom onset or a positive test whichever is earliest. If a home antigen test is done before returning on day 6 and is still positive, the return to school should be delayed. DPH guidance states that a child with COVID and a negative test after day 5, the child may stop masking although continuing to mask through day 10 is preferable. If a child is not able to wear a mask indoors and has COVID, the child should remain in isolation for 10 days unless an antigen test is negative after day 5 at which time the child may return to school without wearing a mask.

Asymptomatic individuals with a known close COVID exposure should wear a mask indoors for 10 days following the exposure.

Optional indoor masking is at the discretion of the individual and may take into account personal medical risk factors, risk factors in family contacts, or any other personal risk assessment. The person's healthcare provider can be consulted about these decisions. No one within NPS should comment or criticize someone else's decision to wear a mask.

Modifications for lunch/meals?

MAG suggested no modifications to pre-pandemic routines other than that the ventilation systems be checked on a regular basis and that portable air purifiers continue to be used. No one needs to wear a mask while eating or drinking, even those wearing masks indoors at other times.

Ventilation

Well functioning ventilation systems with frequent air exchanges are a practical means of decreasing risk of acquiring air borne infections without requiring individual actions such as wearing a mask.

MAG recommends that NPS continue routine surveillance of the ventilation systems in the schools and publicizing results of periodic testing to reassure the school community.

Advice for minimizing student and staff absences? Lessons learned for minimizing spread?

Responsibility for isolating in the case of symptoms and performing home antigen tests will rest with staff and families. Hopefully, with reduction in time missed, individuals with symptoms will have the incentive to test for COVID and self-isolate according to the recommendations. The time out of school has been greatly reduced in recommendations since the beginning of the pandemic. While the risk of acquiring the virus is probably less in school than in the community, attention will need to be paid to trends in the community. If case numbers are high, consideration should be given to increasing mitigation measures such as masking before large indoor school events. DESE/DPH/CDC guidelines may be revised depending on local conditions. MAG will continue to follow trends and make recommendations following DESE/DPH guidelines.

Visitors in Schools?

No visitors who have symptoms should come to visit schools. Otherwise, there should be no limitations to visitors due to COVID.

Field Trips (international or overnight)

International travel should be addressed differently from overnight field trips. No special precautions are required for overnight trips although conditions at the destination site should be investigated. NPS should require vaccination for international trips because it may be required to visit certain countries and one would not want trip participants to develop serious illness while abroad. While vaccination doesn't prevent acquisition of virus or spreading the virus, it greatly lessens the chance of developing serious disease. NPS should also be aware of any

requirements for testing or quarantining in other countries before embarking on an international field trip.

Monkeypox

Schools are low risk environments for the transmission of monkeypox virus. The infection is much less contagious than COVID; infection principally occurs through skin-to-skin close contact; airborne spread generally requires prolonged close face-to-face contact more like for the spread of chickenpox. NPS can make use of information from CDC/DPH/Newton HHS for parents if cases rise among children in MA.