

# El Paso County Public Health In-Person School Guidance



## Introduction

El Paso County Public Health's (EPCPH) mission is to promote and protect public health and environmental quality across El Paso County through people, prevention and partnerships. Our role in assuring public health and safety has never been clearer and more immediate than during our current and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While much of this effort is focused on disease mitigation, our actions are always guided toward addressing the social determinants of health, helping our citizens fulfill their mental, physical and emotional potential.

Please note: K-12 schools are considered Critical Businesses per Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Public Health Order 20-36. Local districts can make determinations regarding the structure and format of education based on local factors.

Such institutions are required to work with state and local public health officials and follow case and outbreak guidance for schools when cases of COVID-19 are suspected or confirmed in students or staff. This process determines transmission mitigation strategies, the need for isolation and quarantine and shifts to remote learning. Review the recommendations in this document to help create safe practices for in-person learning.

This is an incredibly challenging time for schools and as our rate of community spread climbs rapidly, difficult decisions are being made by our education partners. The following public health recommendations are based on these facts:

- 1) In-person learning provides the optimal environment to maximize each child's potential
- 2) In addition to providing educational services, in-person learning also provides irreplaceable social-emotional supports, food security, social safety monitoring and services, and child care for younger children, allowing health care and critical workers to contribute to the community's pandemic response efforts
- 3) The value of in-person learning is magnified for younger students
- 4) Current exponential viral spread in our community, number of staff and children currently infectious or potentially infectious, and the mitigation efforts necessary to prevent out of control spread in the school setting makes maintaining in-person learning exceptionally challenging
- 5) Given current viral transmission trajectories and the likelihood of holiday family and social gatherings impacting accelerated transmission in the community, keeping enough staff and children healthy and without viral exposure outside school will present an increasingly difficult challenge
- 6) Current contact tracing infrastructure is being strained in schools, local public health departments, and at the state level which makes these valuable tools less effective
- 7) School outbreaks, while being adequately controlled by school efforts, have exponentially accelerated in total number resulting in large exclusions of critical workforce and students
- 8) All schools are not experiencing the same impact of the pandemic and therefore, each district and school must make their own decisions based on resources, prior performance and experience
- 9) El Paso County Public Health will continue to fully support school districts in their approach to handling the pandemic and in determining which learning modalities are achievable and best for their community

# Recommendations for Determining Educational Modality During Times of Higher Viral Transmission

While no remote or hybrid learning strategy can fully replace the benefits of in-person learning, schools with higher rates of viral transmission should consider a range of strategies to best support students, families and their communities. This includes:

- 1) Prioritizing in-person learning for specific populations based on need and risk
- 2) Eliminating or greatly restricting extracurricular activities
- 3) Implementing additional protective measures within the school

## **Prioritizing In-Person Learning based on Need and Risk**

Targeting specific populations for limited in-person learning is an important strategy to promote continued, safe in-person learning during times of increasing COVID-19 cases. As both case and outbreak data demonstrate, the risk of in-person learning is lower for younger students, especially elementary-age students, as they are better able to cohort and maintain stable groups of students and staff. These students are also the least likely to participate meaningfully in remote learning without close parental supervision, and may not be safe left alone if their parents work outside the home. With this in mind, some schools may determine that elementary schools should continue in-person learning longer than middle or high schools based on their local needs and levels of COVID-19 transmission.

Students receiving special education services or who require higher levels of caregiver supervision are another group with a diverse set of needs who may be disproportionately impacted by virtual learning. Depending on students' specific needs, schools should consider a range of supports, including maintaining in-person learning for these students.

Schools may also consider offering on-site remote learning for middle or high school students who struggle with internet connectivity or other access issues. Ideally, these students would be supervised in small groups (for example, five to 10 students) with a single in-person proctor to reduce exposure and transmission risks.

## **Eliminating or Greatly Restricting Extracurricular Activities**

Schools should recognize the additional risk posed by extracurricular activities, whether these activities are directly affiliated with schools or not. Even if conducted with optimal risk reduction measures in place, extracurricular activities present another venue in which COVID-19 transmission may occur. Further, schools may have less control of risk reduction measures in these activities. Large outbreaks associated with sports teams have resulted in the suspension of in-person learning for entire school districts in Colorado.

While extracurricular activities have value for participants, they are not integral to the core educational mission of schools. They should not be prioritized at the expense of in-person learning, the health of school community members or the need to control transmission of COVID-19 in El Paso County.

## **Implementing Additional Protective Measures in School**

Schools that choose to continue in-person education during times of high community transmission will need to adopt both curricular and operational strategies to reduce both the risk and disruption caused by individuals

with COVID-19. Diligent adherence to the guidelines developed jointly by ECPH, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the Colorado Department of Education will lower, but not eliminate, the risk of disease transmission in the school.

Understanding that close contacts of sick individuals will need to quarantine, all schools should proactively adopt class schedules that limit the number of close contacts each individual has. Adoption of scheduling modalities such as block schedules, alternating in-person/remote scheduling, and small cohorts of fewer than 30 individuals (including teachers, students and support staff) will be not only prudent, but necessary, for any continuity of in-person learning to be possible.

### **Other Considerations**

Schools will also need to evaluate the means available to them to support the emotional and mental health of the school community. Schools should develop tools and protocols (such as regularly scheduled check-ins, peer mentorship, individual learning plans/goal setting and outreach for identified concerns) to support the school community. This is especially true as decisions are made to move to remote learning.

### **In light of the current situation, the following specific strategies are also recommended:**

- 1) K-5 in-person learning is still encouraged if the school still has appropriate staffing and mitigation efforts in place. This decision should be based on prior performance of the school community, contact tracing resources, ability of the school, student and family population to perform high quality remote learning, and special needs of the student and family population that cannot be met in remote learning modalities
- 2) High school and possibly middle school students who have the ability to remote learn may be best served by switching to that modality as experience has proven that this population has larger social networks, increased exposure risks, is more likely to spread the virus, and contributes to larger outbreaks
- 3) For schools focusing on maintaining in-person learning, minimizing or eliminating extracurricular activities to include off-season group workouts will be a critical tool in limiting exposure and spread. These interactions have caused the largest outbreaks locally and often span across multiple cohorts resulting larger exclusions
- 4) Because current exclusion criteria at our high rate of viral spread necessitates exclusion of full cohorts, minimizing cohorts and strict enforcement of separation is critically important
- 5) Schools currently dealing with large exclusions or staffing shortages should consider a limited remote learning period between Thanksgiving and winter break as all indications point to increased spread, cases, and outbreaks over the coming month
- 6) Schools could consider a self-imposed post-holiday quarantine period of remote learning as a means to monitor school community spread from holiday travel and social gathering before returning to in-person learning
- 7) All contact tracing and outbreak monitoring efforts should continue during the holiday break to allow for evidence-based decisions concerning returning to in-person learning for spring semester if desired and feasible
- 8) We strongly encourage students over the age of 3 to utilize face masks to the fullest extent possible

Each school must make decisions that are appropriate for their community, staff, students, and families weighing the various risks, benefits, and viability of each learning modality. El Paso County Public Health will support these decisions and continue to work with each and every school to implement the strategies most appropriate for their specific situation.

Finally, regardless of what strategy schools adopt, communication and coordination with stakeholders in the school community is paramount. Individuals with medical vulnerabilities and other safety concerns should continue to receive support if they choose to learn or work remotely.

### Resources

- [COVID-19 Dial Framework](#)
- [Cases and Outbreaks in Child Care and Schools](#)
- [El Paso County Public Health COVID-19 School Guidance](#)