



August 19, 2021

Dear Superintendents and School Administrators:

Thank you for all you are doing to keep schools safe and open.

We have become aware of some confusion about the expected procedures for case reporting, contact tracing, and quarantine of students. Communication about cases and coordination of follow-up with parents and staff are to be carried out in partnership with your District Public Health office. We stand ready to support you in these efforts to minimize challenges, and to provide in-school staff for contact tracing if necessary.

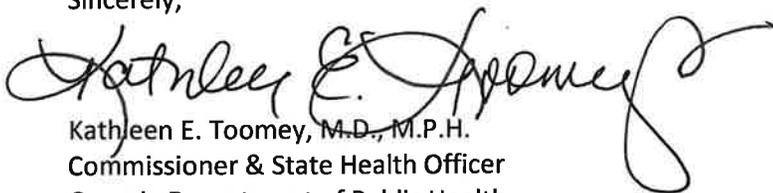
While the Administrative Order permits schools to implement modified quarantine requirements for children exposed in the school setting, DPH strongly recommends that schools choosing to use this flexibility to allow in-school quarantine require the exposed individual to use a mask for the short time the individual is in school until his or her quarantine period is completed. This is consistent with the guidance for critical infrastructure workers, which was successfully used in other situations. Regardless of your general masking recommendations, DPH strongly recommends that schools' modified quarantine plans require masking during the time of quarantine to ensure the safety of children and staff in the schools and reduce the spread of COVID-19 that we have already seen in the schools statewide. If masking is unacceptable, then DPH recommends standard at-home quarantine be required.

Our goal is to continue in-person learning throughout Georgia while working to ensure a safe school environment with flexibility where possible. We have already seen that following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance as closely as is possible and requiring masking as part of a modified quarantine plan offers the safest path forward for schools to remain open without outbreaks or quarantines.

Thank you for your support. The enclosed letter from the State Epidemiologist outlines the expectations and alternatives in more detail.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Kathleen E. Toomey, M.D., M.P.H.
Commissioner & State Health Officer
Georgia Department of Public Health



August 19, 2021

Dear Superintendents and School Administrators:

The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) recognizes that students, families, and communities benefit from in-person learning. Safely returning to in-person instruction is a priority. However, COVID-19 cases in Georgia are rapidly rising, including large increases in cases and hospitalizations among children; most cases are caused by the Delta variant. This virus is twice as contagious compared to previous strains, may cause more severe disease, and can be transmitted by all infected individuals. Vaccination remains the best method for preventing illness; however, given the rapid spread of the Delta variant and variability in vaccination coverage, masks are an important tool for preventing transmission particularly in indoor environments. Children under 12 years remain especially susceptible to infection because they are not currently eligible for vaccination. Therefore, to maintain in-person instruction, it is imperative to reduce the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission within schools and school-related activities. This can be achieved by rapidly identifying infected individuals and following isolation requirements, identifying close contacts and providing appropriate quarantine guidance, and following current CDC K-12 guidance¹.

To protect the health and safety of Georgia students and school staff, public and private K-12 schools are **required** by law to report all confirmed or suspected cases of notifiable diseases to DPH, including COVID-19². In addition, DPH requires schools to supply data to our office that are deemed necessary and appropriate for the prevention of COVID-19 under O.C.G.A. 31-12-2(a). This data includes identifying close contact exposures that occurred in the school setting and providing District Public Health offices with contact information for both cases and close contacts.

The following steps are required by all schools after the identification of a case of COVID-19 in a student or school staff member in the school setting or at a school-sanctioned event.

1. Report the case immediately to the DPH District Health Office

- Schools are **required** to notify their District Public Health office **immediately** when a positive COVID-19 **case, cluster, or outbreak** is identified in the school setting (as required by § OCGA 31-12-2 and Ga. Comp. R. & Regs. 511-2-1-.01(h), -.02(1-2)).
- Schools are also **required** to provide data on close contacts that were exposed in the school setting. Please work closely with the District Health staff to ensure coordination of reporting.

2. Exclude the case from in-person learning or work for the duration of their isolation period. Arrange for transportation home if they are identified while at school.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html>

² O.C.G.A. §§ 31-12-2; Ga. Comp. R. & Regs. 511-2-1.02(h), -02(1).

Symptomatic persons with confirmed or probable COVID-19 **regardless of vaccination status**, can return to school after:

- At least 10 days³ have passed since symptoms first appeared **AND**
- At least 24 hours have passed since last fever without the use of fever-reducing medications **AND**
- Symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath) have improved.

Asymptomatic persons with confirmed COVID-19, regardless of vaccination status, can return to school after at least 10 days³ have passed since the positive laboratory test **AND** the person remains asymptomatic.

- Asymptomatic persons who test positive and later develop symptoms should follow the guidance for symptomatic persons above.

3. Determine whether the case was present at school while contagious.

The contagious period includes 2 calendar days before the onset of symptoms (e.g., if symptom onset occurred on a Wednesday, the case would have been contagious at school both Monday and Tuesday, regardless of the time of symptom onset), or if no symptoms, 2 calendar days prior to the day they tested positive.

4. Identify close contacts and notify parents/guardians

A **close contact** is defined as an individual that was within 6 feet of someone with COVID-19 (laboratory-confirmed or a clinically compatible illness) for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period (for example, *three individual 5-minute exposures for a total of 15 minutes*) unless the person meets one of the following exemptions.

Regardless of which quarantine option is used by schools, the following three **exemptions for close contacts** apply:

- Asymptomatic individuals who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 with an exposure to someone with confirmed or probable COVID-19 are NOT required to quarantine if it has been at least 14 days (2 weeks) since the completion of the COVID-19 vaccination series (two doses in a two-dose series OR one dose in a one-dose series).
 - Fully vaccinated individuals should get tested 3-5 days after exposure and should continue to wear a mask for 14 days when indoors or until they receive a negative test result.
 - Schools that allow fully vaccinated students and staff to be exempt from quarantine should work with DPH to verify the vaccination status of those individuals. Schools are encouraged to seek voluntary verification of COVID-19 vaccination in students, teachers, and staff, ideally at the beginning of the school year or as soon as students and staff receive their full vaccination series.
 - i. Schools should advise parents/students that they may obtain proof of COVID-19 vaccination by:

³ A limited number of persons with severe illness (those admitted to a hospital and needed oxygen) or persons with a weakened immune system (immunocompromised) due to a health condition or medication may produce replication-competent virus beyond 10 days that may warrant extending the duration of isolation for up to 20 days after symptom onset. Consider consultation with a medical provider and/or infection control expert for these patients.

1. Contacting their child's healthcare provider or the local County Health Department (<https://dph.georgia.gov/media/65151/download>) for vaccination records.
2. Requesting the information from DPH using this form: <https://dph.georgia.gov/document/form/immunizationrecordrequestformfinal42020pdf/download>
 - a. Email the completed form to dph-immreg@dph.ga.gov

Additional information can be found at <https://dph.georgia.gov/immunization-section/immunization-faq>

- Individuals who had COVID-19 within the previous three months and are asymptomatic are NOT required to quarantine but should continue to wear a mask for 14 days when indoors.
- An asymptomatic K-12 student who was between **3-6 feet of a student with confirmed or probable COVID-19 in the classroom setting** is NOT required to quarantine, if both students were consistently and correctly wearing well-fitting masks at the time of exposure.
 - This exception only applies to **students in a classroom setting** and does not apply to teachers, staff, or other adults in the classroom setting.
 - A flow chart for determining this exemption is shown below.

5. Exclude close contacts from the school setting and extracurricular activities unless the school has implemented modified quarantine requirements.

Quarantine of Close Contacts

At-home quarantine for 14 days after exposure to an individual with confirmed or probable COVID-19 is the safest way to prevent further spread of the virus. However, DPH recognizes the importance of in-person learning in the K-12 setting and the need to minimize disruptions in academic instruction as well as nutritional and other health services. **Therefore, although not optimal public health practice, schools may decide to allow students to return to school early based on the criteria under the Standard Quarantine, or they may decide implement a Modified Quarantine (see below) for K-12 students as stated in the DPH Administrative Order⁴.**

Standard Quarantine

During standard quarantine all close contacts in private and public schools must be quarantined and excluded from the school setting and all extracurricular activities (see quarantine exemptions above), according to the Public Health Administrative Order⁴.

Close contacts who are asymptomatic can return to school after one of the three following options:

Option 1: The safest option is to quarantine 14 days. NOTE: The day of exposure is day 0.

Option 2: Test out of quarantine after 7 full days have passed since the most recent exposure, if they fulfill all THREE of the following criteria:

- i. Remain asymptomatic AND

⁴ Please find the updated DPH administrative orders at <https://dph.georgia.gov/administrative-orders>

- ii. Are tested for COVID-19 (PCR or antigen) on or after day 5 of quarantine AND
- iii. Receive a negative result.

Option 3: If unable to be tested, discontinue quarantine after day 10 if they remain asymptomatic.

For Options 2 and 3, close contacts should monitor for symptoms and follow mitigation strategies (correct and consistent mask use, physical distancing, hand and cough hygiene, avoiding crowds, etc.) until 14 days after exposure. Close contacts should not participate in any in-school or extracurricular activities that cannot be performed while masked or distanced until completion of the 14-day period.

Modified Quarantine

Similar to the protocol for “essential infrastructure workers,” close contacts from an exposure in the K-12 school setting may be allowed to follow a modified quarantine protocol if provided as an option in the school’s policies. **This allows students and staff to continue to attend school in-person during the quarantine period. It is strongly recommended that only students be offered the modified quarantine because risk of transmission is potentially higher among adult staff⁵.**

Pursuant to the terms of the DPH Administrative Order, students and staff that are exposed outside of the school setting (e.g., at home, during non-school community activities) are not eligible for modified quarantine and are required to follow the standard quarantine protocol above.

Attending school in-person during the quarantine period will increase the risk of exposure to students and staff, therefore, additional prevention measures are crucial to prevent secondary transmission. If close contacts are unable to comply with the requirements outlined below, then DPH recommends that standard quarantine procedures be followed. As more is learned about the Delta variant, or other variants of concern, **the option to implement a modified quarantine may be suspended by DPH.**

Schools may decide whether to allow participation in extracurricular activities during the modified quarantine period; however, exposures that occur during close contact team sports, indoor sports, or other indoor extracurricular group activities that involve shouting and singing are more likely to result in transmission⁶. It is **strongly recommended** that close contacts from these types of exposures follow the standard quarantine procedures above.

During the entire 14-day modified quarantine period, close contacts are **required** to:

- **Follow standard quarantine protocol when not attending in-person instruction or school-related activities and are not permitted to participate in other community activities for the duration of the 14-day period.**

During the modified quarantine, close contacts are allowed to attend school for in-person learning. During the entire 14-day period, in addition to the requirements above, close contacts are **strongly encouraged** to:

- **Correctly and consistently wear a mask (except while eating and drinking), regardless of the school’s mask policy.**

⁵ https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/science-briefs/transmission_k_12_schools.html

⁶ https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/science-briefs/transmission_k_12_schools.html

- Physically distance from other students and staff for the entire 14-day period.
- NOT participate in any extracurricular activities until after day 7 or 10 (see below).
- Participate in daily symptom monitoring and not attend school if symptomatic.
- Participate in testing as recommended in the quarantine guidance below.

Close contacts in modified quarantine are recommended to only resume extracurricular activities after one of the following two options:

Option 1: Test out of quarantine after 7 full days have passed since the most recent exposure, if they fulfill all THREE of the following criteria:

- i. Remain asymptomatic AND
- ii. Are tested for COVID-19 (PCR or antigen) on or after day 5 of quarantine AND
- iii. Receive a negative result.

Option 2: If unable to be tested, discontinue quarantine after day 10 if they remain asymptomatic.

6. Report aggregate counts of new cases, new contacts, and clusters weekly to DPH

- Schools are also required to report aggregate counts of new cases, contacts identified, and clusters in the school setting to DPH weekly. **This mechanism does not replace reporting individual cases and outbreaks to your local public health department.**

— Public Schools: <http://sendss.state.ga.us/survey/form/14139>

— Private Schools: <http://sendss.state.ga.us/survey/form/14179>

DPH strongly encourages schools to consider implementing surveillance testing to rapidly identify cases and further reduce the spread of COVID-19 within schools. Through the CDC funding for COVID-19, DPH is offering a voluntary program that allows schools to provide routine, **on-site COVID-19 screening testing** of students, teachers, and other staff members free of charge. Schools are strongly encouraged to participate in this free service in order to best protect students, teachers, and staff from exposure to COVID-19.

There may also be opportunities to provide diagnostic testing services for symptomatic or exposed students, teachers, or staff members. **Contact your local health district or covid-k12-testing@dph.ga.gov if you are interested in learning more about options for on-site screening or diagnostic testing.**

Working together with schools statewide, DPH is committed to keeping students and staff safe during this COVID-19 pandemic. Schools are strongly encouraged to develop and maintain open lines of communication with their local public health districts. The public health districts are a source of information and support for addressing cases within schools. Open and timely communication with your local public health teams will facilitate a rapid response and help prevent further transmission of this virus within your school.

Sincerely,

Cherie L. Drenzek, D.V.M., M.S., State Epidemiologist, Chief Science Officer

Flow Chart for new CDC K-12 Close Contact Exemption

