

Recommendations for Safer School Operations during COVID-19

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Michigan.gov/Coronavirus

This guidance supports K-12 school settings to provide safer in-person learning environments by outlining mitigation strategies for school administrators, staff, students, and families. When layered prevention strategies such as vaccination, masking, distancing, testing, and isolation are applied consistently, school-associated transmission of COVID-19 is significantly reduced.

MDHHS recommends that all schools adopt policies and practices to:

- Promote and support **vaccination** efforts for eligible students, staff, and families.
- Have a COVID-19 response plan that includes **layered prevention measures** outlined below.

While specific to K-12 schools, these recommendations are also relevant for other sites that serve children—including [child care](#) and after-school providers.

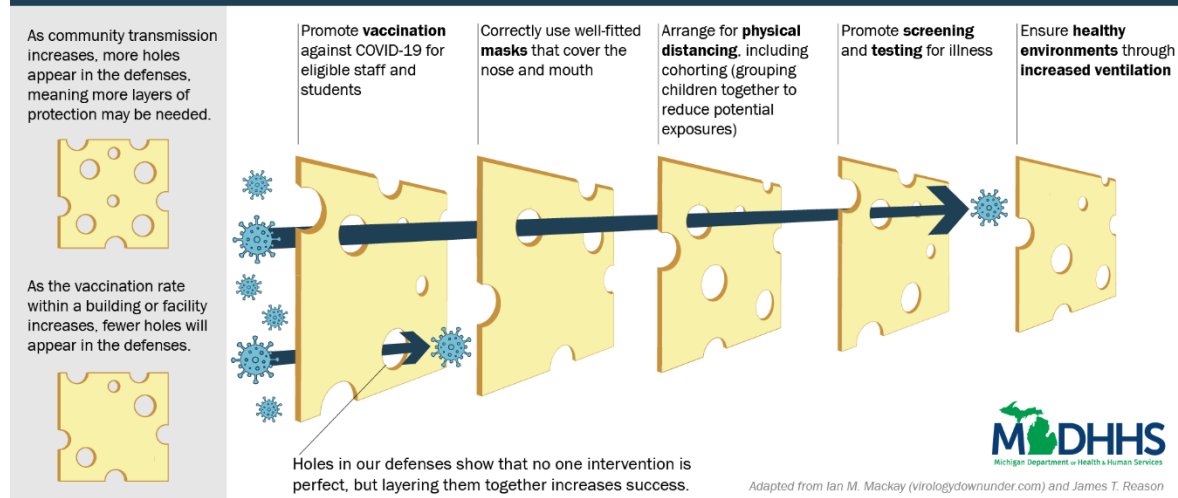
LAYERING PREVENTION MEASURES

These strategies can be tailored based on building, district, and local community conditions and needs. The main goal of implementing prevention measures is to create a safer environment for students, and staff, and maintain in-person learning.

The most effective way to prevent transmission within school buildings, reduce disruptions to in-person learning, and help protect people who may be at higher risk for severe disease is to layer multiple [prevention](#) strategies recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). All prevention strategies provide some level of protection, and layered strategies implemented at the same time provide the greatest level of protection.

Layers of Defense Against COVID-19 in Schools

CDC recommended prevention strategies can be layered in different ways – the number and intensity of the layers can increase if community transmission increases



CDC COVID-19 PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The key strategies recommended by the CDC to keep schools safer are listed below:

1. **Stay Home When Sick and Get Tested**

- a) Emphasize to students and staff the importance of staying home if sick or if they have [COVID-19 symptoms](#).
- b) Encourage students and staff, regardless of vaccination status, to get tested for COVID-19 if they have [symptoms](#) or if they are a close contact of someone who has COVID-19.

2. **Promote Vaccination** against COVID-19 for eligible staff and students. Vaccination has proven incredibly effective as the leading public health prevention strategy. Promoting vaccination can help schools more safely maintain in-person learning, extracurricular activities, and sports.

3. **Support Masking** by making it accessible for staff and students.

- a) Establish a supportive setting that encourages students and staff to make choices that best protect themselves and families.
- b) Local health departments should work with schools to adopt masking policies based on local conditions.
- c) Mask use has been proven to substantially reduce transmission in school settings.
- d) CDC has recommendations for [proper use of masks](#).

4. **Physical Distancing** as CDC recommends for schools. Schools should implement physical distancing to the extent possible but should not exclude students from in-person learning to maintain minimum distances.

- a) A distance of at least 3 to 6 feet between individuals is recommended for all students, educators, and staff.
- b) Increasing other prevention layers, such as masking, testing, and ventilation, should be considered when physical distance cannot be maintained.

5. **Screening Testing** identifies infected people, including those without symptoms who may be contagious, and can be used to prevent further transmission or outbreaks.

- a) To support schools that incorporate COVID-19 testing into their safer school prevention plans, MDHHS is offering rapid antigen testing and at home testing to Pre-K-12 schools through the [MI Safe Schools Testing Program](#) and the [MI Backpack Program](#).

6. **Ventilation**

- a) [Improve ventilation](#) by opening multiple doors and windows, using child-safe fans to increase the effectiveness of open windows, and making changes to the HVAC or air filtration systems.
- b) Avoid crowded and/or poorly ventilated indoor activities. Instead, engage in outdoor activities when possible.

- c) Open or crack windows in buses and other forms of transportation to improve air circulation, if doing so does not pose a safety risk.

Detailed ventilation guidance is available from the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) [Guidance for Building Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) [has a program to assist Michigan K-12 public schools](#) by providing recommendations to reduce infectious aerosol transmission via the heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems.

- 7. *Promote Handwashing and Respiratory Etiquette*** by encouraging frequent [handwashing and covering coughs and sneezes](#).
- 8. *Cleaning and Disinfection***: cleaning once a day is usually enough to sufficiently remove potential virus that may be on surfaces. Disinfecting (using disinfectants on the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Disinfectants for COVID-19](#)) removes any remaining germs on surfaces, which further reduces risk of spreading infection. CDC has information on routine [cleaning](#) to help maintain healthy facilities.

HOW TO ASSESS RISK

Together with local public health officials, school administrators should consider multiple factors when they make decisions about implementing layered prevention strategies against COVID-19. Since schools typically serve their surrounding communities, decisions can be based on the school population, families and students served, as well as their communities. Robust layering strategies will consider the following primary factors:

- COVID-19 [Community Levels](#) and local impact from current transmission. Community Levels are a measure of impact of COVID-19 illness on health and health care systems.
- [COVID-19 vaccination coverage](#) in the community and among students and staff.
- Use of a frequent SARS-CoV-2 screening testing program for students and staff. Testing provides an important layer of prevention, particularly in areas with medium to high community levels.
- COVID-19 outbreaks or increasing trends in the school or surrounding community.
- Ages of children served in the school and risk associated with school, extracurricular, and social activities.
- Consideration for medical vulnerability of student population.

Increasing Layers of Mitigation During Periods of Increased Risk

COVID-19 prevention strategies are critical to protect students and staff, especially in areas of medium-to-high [Community Levels](#) and impact. The CDC recommends using more strategies

when community levels are higher, especially if [vaccination rates](#) are low. Prevention strategies can allow in-person learning to be maintained.

Schools are encouraged to consider using and layering on additional measures during higher risk periods, such as when Community Levels are medium or high, when special events are taking place that bring together larger groups of students, staff and/or community members (e.g., prom and other dances, graduation events, tournaments and competitions, etc.), or times when schools are returning to in-person learning after a break period (e.g., first days of school in the fall, after holiday breaks, etc.). [Additional mitigation strategies may be suggested if the state moves from a Pandemic Phase of “Recovery” to “Readiness” or “Response”.](#)

Encouraging and supporting increased testing is a critical tool during large events and periods of higher risk. Testing can be provided by the school where feasible through onsite antigen testing and/or through at-home testing.

Schools should work with local health departments for additional guidance on prevention strategies if there is an [outbreak](#) in a facility. Some communities may have additional public health requirements as directed by the school administration and/or the local health department.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information, please visit the following resources:

- [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools | CDC](#)
- [CDC Guidance for Fully Vaccinated People](#)
- [COVID-19 Guidance for Safe Schools \(aap.org\)](#)
- [Guidelines for Safe Child Care Operations During COVID-19 \(LARA\)Ventilation in Buildings | CDC](#)
- [Clean Air in Buildings Challenge | US EPA](#)
- [Michigan.gov/COVIDtest](#)