



COVID-19 FAQ Back to School 2021

**Please note this guidance will be updated as new information becomes available from state and/or federal health and education officials.*

MASKS/FACE COVERINGS

Q: Can school districts or career technology centers require masks or face coverings for students, employees or visitors?

Not at this time. SB 658, which went into effect July 1, generally forbids school districts from considering a face covering mandate unless the governor has declared an emergency. Currently, no emergency order is in place.

Following are the specific provisions of SB 658:

- Prohibits school boards for school districts and technology centers (as well as public and private higher education institutions) from:
- Implementing a mask mandate for students who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19;
- Requiring a vaccination against COVID-19 as a condition of admittance to or attendance of the school or institution; and
- Requiring documented proof of COVID-19 vaccination.
- Allows a board of education for a school district or technology center to implement a mandate to wear a mask or “any other medical device” **only** under the following conditions:
- The board must first consult with its local county or city-county health department; and
- **The area where the board is located is under a state of emergency declared by the governor;** and
- The mandate must include its purpose; and
- The mandate must specifically include what masks or medical device would meet the mandate’s requirements; and
- The board must reconsider the mandate at each regularly scheduled board meeting.

Q: Can a school district or career technology center encourage students, staff and/or visitors to wear a mask or face covering?

Yes. School districts can encourage mask usage, especially if current CDC guidance advises mask wearing as a health and safety measure.

VACCINATION

Q: May school districts encourage students, faculty and staff to be vaccinated against COVID-19?

Yes. State health officials and the CDC recommend vaccination as a key prevention and mitigation strategy against transmission of COVID-19. School districts can and are encouraged to offer -- in partnership with county health departments or private partners -- vaccination opportunities for eligible students, staff and members of the community to reduce disease spread and protect those who aren't eligible to be vaccinated.

Q: Can a district pay a stipend to school district employees who receive a COVID-19 vaccine?

Yes. Districts can encourage employees to receive the COVID-19 vaccine by paying a stipend to those who choose to become fully vaccinated. We'd recommend a district choosing to offer a stipend make the opportunity available to all employees for the same amount.

Q: Can school districts provide paid leave for educators and staff to receive a vaccine?

Yes. Offering paid administrative leave to staff is one way to incentivize employees to become vaccinated. Hosting a vaccine clinic for employees could be a great way to encourage vaccination.

Q: What role does vaccination status play in quarantine and other mitigation recommendations?

Current CDC guidance exempts fully vaccinated individuals identified as close contacts from potential quarantine. Please note that even if school districts are eventually able to enact a mask mandate in accordance with SB 658, the law also prohibits school districts from implementing a mask mandate for students based on vaccination status and from requiring a COVID-19 vaccine as a condition of school admittance or attendance. Current CDC guidance recommends fully vaccinated individuals get tested 3-5 days after exposure to someone with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and wear a mask in public indoor settings for 14 days after exposure or until they receive a negative test result.

Q: Can school-based health professionals check the state's online immunization records system to determine a student's vaccination status?

Schools must have parental consent to check vaccination records in the Oklahoma State Immunization Information System (OSIIS). [Authorization forms](#) are provided by the Oklahoma State Health Department on its website.

CONTACTS, CONTACT TRACING, ISOLATION AND QUARANTINES

Q: Who is a "[close contact](#)"?

A person who was within 6 feet of someone who has COVID-19 for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period

- **Exception:** In a classroom setting, this excludes students (but not teachers, staff or other adults) who were within 3 to 6 feet of an infected student where both students were correctly and consistently wearing a mask **and** other prevention strategies (universal masking, distancing, increased ventilation) are in place. (Please see masks/face coverings section).

[\(CDC guidance\)](#)

Q: What is contact tracing?

Contact tracing is the process public health officials use to identify people who may have had close contact with an infectious person. School districts may be asked to assist health officials in identifying those who may be close contacts.

[\(CDC contact tracing guidance\)](#)

Q: Are districts required to identify students who have been exposed to COVID-19 based on the close contact definition and notify families of the exposure?

No, but there are good reasons to do so. State health officials have recommended school districts develop and communicate a contact tracing process for those exposed to a person who is ill or tests positive for COVID-19. Notifying families of students who would qualify as a close contact of the exposure allows families to make important health and safety decisions, which may include close monitoring for symptoms, self-quarantine, consulting with a health official and limiting contact with high-risk family and friends.

Q: What is the purpose of isolation?

Isolation keeps someone who is sick or tested positive for COVID-19 without symptoms away from others, even in their own home. Students or staff who are isolated due to a positive COVID-19 test should not be at school until the isolation period is complete. [\(CDC isolation guidance\)](#)

Q: How long is an isolation period?

Health officials determine the length of an isolation period. Generally, a COVID-19 isolation period is a minimum of 10 days from the date symptoms started or, for those with no symptoms, from the date of a positive test. Those with symptoms, who were severely ill or have a weakened immune symptom may need to isolate for longer than 10 days. Symptomatic individuals should remain in isolation until after 10 days since symptoms first appeared have passed, **and** at least 24 hours with no fever without fever-reducing medicine, **and** if other symptoms of COVID-19 are improving. [\(CDC isolation guidance\)](#)

Q: What should parents/guardians do if their student is asked to isolate by health officials?

Those in isolation should stay home (unless in need of medical care) and separate themselves from others by staying in a specific “sick room” or area and using a separate bathroom (if available). [\(CDC isolation guidance\)](#)

Q: Must school districts report positive cases to the health department?

School-based testing results must be reported to the state Health Department through the State Infection Reporting System. Refer to state Health Department [guidance](#) or contact your county or state health officials for additional details. School districts must have parental consent before minors are tested at school for COVID-19. The district may wish to report other positive cases it learns of among students and staff to health officials, as well.

Q: What is the purpose of quarantine?

Quarantine is used to prevent disease spread and keep someone *who might have been exposed to COVID-19* away from others, *unless the person is fully vaccinated or has had COVID-19 within the previous 3 months, has recovered and has no symptoms.* ([CDC quarantine guidance](#))

Q: How long is a quarantine period?

Health officials determine the length of a quarantine period. Current CDC guidance suggests a 10-day quarantine, which may be shortened to 7 days after receiving a negative test result if the test occurs on day 5 of quarantine or later. Quarantines are not recommended for fully vaccinated individuals who have no symptoms or those who have had COVID-19 within the previous 3 months, have recovered and have no symptoms. However, the CDC recommends fully vaccinated monitor themselves for symptoms for 14 days after exposure, get tested 3-5 days following a known exposure to someone with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and wear a mask in public indoor settings for 14 days or until they receive a negative test result.

([CDC quarantine guidance](#))

Q: Does a school district decide who must quarantine or isolate or for how long?

No. State law empowers the state Health Department with the exclusive authority to issue an isolation or quarantine order. Health officials will determine the length of an isolation or quarantine period. School districts are obligated by law to respect and cooperate with the orders of health officials. ([Health Department Legal Citation](#)) School districts should consult with county or state health officials on recommended quarantines/isolation periods.

Q: What should parents/guardians do if their student is asked to quarantine by health officials?

Students asked by health officials to quarantine should stay home, separate themselves from others, monitor their health, and follow any other directions from their state or local health department. ([CDC quarantine guidance](#))

Q: If a student is in quarantine or isolation, may the student's siblings continue to attend school?

Yes, as long as they meet the criteria above and other circumstances don't prompt local health officials to require the sibling and/or other family members to quarantine. ([CDC quarantine guidance](#))

Q: Will quarantine decisions look different this school year compared to the 2020-2021 school year?

Yes. Districts are urged to consult with their county health departments regarding quarantines. State health officials have not issued explicit rules or guidelines for schools on quarantines and are not expected to routinely issue quarantine orders that will affect school operations. Instead, state health guidance advises schools to develop and communicate written processes for contact tracing and quarantines and review current health guidance surrounding quarantines in schools, which can change over time. It is important that employees, students and families are informed of the district's protocols and any changes that may be made to protocols based on new guidance or data.

Q: What if health officials decline to order a quarantine for a student who is unvaccinated and not showing COVID-19 symptoms, but the district believes should be considered a close contact of a someone who is COVID-19 positive?

Without a health department order, the district can encourage but not require students identified as close contacts to self-quarantine and offer educational options that will allow students to self-quarantine while minimizing disruptions to student learning.

Q: Can a school exclude a student from school and school activities who shows COVID-19 symptoms even if they haven't tested positive or been identified as a close contact?

Yes. The state's [administrative rules](#) allow a superintendent, teacher, or other official in charge of any school to exclude any child suffering from or exhibiting the following symptoms:

- (1) fever alone, 100 degrees Fahrenheit;
- (2) sore throat or tonsillitis;
- (3) any eruption of the skin, or rash;
- (4) any nasal discharge accompanied by fever;
- (5) a severe cough, producing phlegm; or
- (6) any inflammation of the eyes or lids.

Q: Can schools provide COVID-19 testing?

Yes. State health officials recommend school-based diagnostic testing for ill staff and students. In addition, districts can offer random testing called screening testing. School-based testing results must be reported to the state Health Department through the State Infection Reporting System. Refer to state health department [guidance](#) or contact your county or state health officials for additional details. School districts must have parental consent before minors are tested for COVID-19.

Q: If a student or staff member is waiting on COVID-19 test results, should they attend school?

No. Symptomatic students or staff members should not attend school while awaiting test results, especially if they are unvaccinated. ([CDC waiting for test results guidance](#))

STUDENT ISSUES

Q: Will the school be notified by health officials if a student tests positive?

When possible, yes. The Oklahoma State Department of Health confirmed that school officials will be contacted by county health officials as part of their investigation if the child attended school while positive. We encourage school administrators to communicate with their county health officials in advance to ensure they have updated contact information for the appropriate school representative.

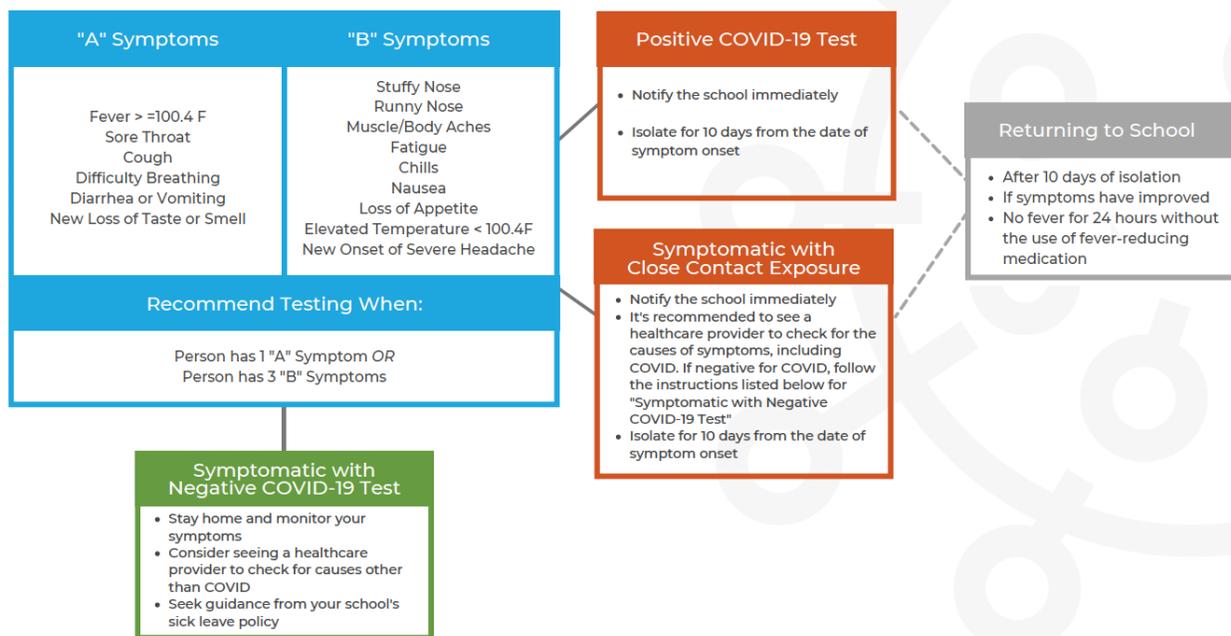
Q: Can school officials conduct health screenings for students when they arrive at school?

Yes. There is no legal prohibition that would prevent a school district from taking student temperatures or inquiring about other COVID-19 symptoms. While the screening can take place on campus, many districts are asking parents to conduct health screenings at home before sending their children to school each day.

State health officials have noted the difficulty in checking for COVID-19 symptoms, as many symptoms now are similar to those from seasonal allergies. They have provided the following assessment to assist in determining whether someone should be kept home, sent home from school, and/or tested for COVID-19.



COVID-19 Symptomatic Illness Assessment



Please click the image to see a full-size version.

Q: If a student is unable to attend school due to a positive test or quarantine, how can a district minimize the disruption to student learning?

The school district must continue to provide educational services, which may be delivered via distance learning or a virtual learning program. If the student is on an IEP, the student's IEP team must determine

the new placement and decide which services are necessary to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education.

EMPLOYEE ISSUES

Q: Can a school district provide paid leave for employees who require isolation or quarantine as a result of a positive test or COVID-19 exposure?

Yes, if they choose. Districts need employees to stay home when they are sick and potentially ill with the virus. Identifying options to continue to provide paid leave helps protect the health and safety of students and staff and promotes a positive, employee friendly work environment.

Districts may give employees flexibility for how to use their accrued local leave and/or grant paid administrative leave to those who contract the virus and must isolate and those who are exposed and must quarantine. District officials may wish to establish administrative guidelines outlining flexible leave criteria so the benefit is applied consistently to qualifying employees.

Additionally, districts can enter Memorandums of Agreement with their local employee associations to extend benefits.

Q: Can districts differentiate the availability of paid administrative leave to employees who require isolation or quarantine depending on the employee's vaccination status?

Yes; however, this is a local control decision. A school district may choose to offer paid administrative leave to only fully vaccinated employees as an incentive for school employees to be vaccinated. If the vaccinated employee requires leave for an isolation or quarantine, this would allow the employee time without use of their personal sick leave. On the other hand, unvaccinated employees who receive medical advice to quarantine or isolate may be required to use their personal sick leave for the necessary time period.

If district officials decide to **require** a quarantine of an employee, it may be best to provide paid administrative leave for all employees, rather than distinguishing between those who are vaccinated or unvaccinated. District officials should establish administrative guidelines outlining flexible leave criteria so the benefit is applied consistently.

Q: Can a school district implement a work-from-home option for employees who require quarantine or isolation as a result of COVID-19 exposure?

Yes. If an employee's job responsibilities are conducive to working from home or they can be given adjusted responsibilities to serve the district, they can be allowed to work from home and should not be docked leave. Districts may ask employees to document their work progress or hours while at home for accountability and record-keeping purposes.

Q: What if a teacher or other employee has a health concern about reporting to work?

Some employees may be particularly susceptible to COVID-19, such as those with underlying health conditions. These issues should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, but districts are encouraged to be flexible with use of sick and other available leave. Also, some of these cases may include issues covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). School districts are encouraged to contact their retained counsel for advice on specific issues that may be covered by the ADA.

Q: If an employee tells me they have a chronic condition and cannot work, what questions can I ask them to determine how to proceed?

If an employee has a chronic health condition, documentation should be provided by the employee's physician. The district will need to determine whether the condition qualifies for coverage under the Americans with Disabilities Act and, if so, whether a reasonable accommodation can be provided that allows the employee to perform their specific job duties for the school district.

Q: May a district require an employee to return to work if the employee has a fear of contracting COVID-19 but would not qualify for an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act?

Yes. School districts must take reasonable steps to protect employees. Notwithstanding the employee's use of appropriate leave which may be available to them, an employee cannot refuse to return to work simply due to a generalized fear of contracting COVID-19. Additionally, a public school cannot legally pay an employee who refuses to return to work unless they have paid leave available to them.

Q: Can a school district require students to wear masks as part of an ADA accommodation for an at-risk employee?

No because of SB 658. If a teacher requires an ADA accommodation, students may be encouraged to wear a mask. In the absence of sufficient mask-wearing, districts should talk with the employee to consider the full range of alternative accommodations to ensure the teacher can safely perform their job duties. It should be noted that the inability to require masks may require districts to more closely consider certain accommodations that were considered unreasonable in the past.

Q: Should an employee notify their employer if they test positive?

Yes, an employee should notify the school district if they test positive. This will allow the school district to work quickly with the county health department in an effort to protect students, staff and the community.

Q: Must a district provide internet access to a teacher required to work from home?

If a teacher does not have internet access and internet access is required to complete his/her assigned duties, the district would be required to provide the employee with a mobile hot spot or other internet access alternative.

Q: What if the employee's regular duties are not conducive to working from home?

Many school districts have allowed employees to perform needed duties other than those they are regularly assigned while working from home. For example, a paraprofessional could be asked to make

phone calls to parents of children in the virtual program to check on their progress. OSSBA encourages this practice because it allows the employee to continue to support the district's mission and to complete work that benefits students.

OTHER HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS

Q: Should schools encourage students and staff who are feeling ill to stay home?

Yes! Students, teachers, and staff should stay home when they have signs of any infectious illness and be referred to their healthcare provider for testing and care.

Q: Can a school district prohibit visitors from being inside the building or classrooms?

Yes. A school district can legally control who enters school property and who has access to its students and staff. A school district may legally prohibit all unnecessary visitors to the school campus. We encourage you to communicate with parents and community members that this guideline has been implemented to protect the safety and health of students, staff and visitors.

Q: Should districts communicate with parents and the public when students or staff members test positive?

School officials must protect the identity and confidentiality of students and staff members who test positive for COVID-19; however, we encourage you to communicate with your staff, parents and community when a case is relevant or may be perceived as relevant to their health and safety. It is best to be transparent. Open, honest and sincere communication helps school districts gain and strengthen the trust of their communities.

Districts are encouraged to share with parents and community members in advance how they will communicate about COVID cases. Because COVID cases have become more common, it may not be necessary to send mass communication for every situation. Parents should be assured, however, that they will be contacted directly if there is an exposure that involves their child.

Last year, many school officials provided transparent information to stakeholders by creating a page on their website with updated COVID-related information, including the number of students and staff currently in isolation or quarantine. Personal communication was then only sent to those who were impacted or potentially impacted.

OSSBA has developed [templates](#) to help with COVID-related communication needs. Additionally, you are welcome to contact our Communication Team for personalized assistance – Christy Watson, Director of Marketing and Communications and Amber Graham Fitzgerald, Director of Member Engagement.

Q: Has the state Health Department provided reopening guidance for schools?

Yes. You can find it [here](#).

Q: Are there circumstances under which school districts must report cases directly to county health officials?

Yes. The state Health Department has asked school districts to notify the county health department immediately if two or more cases from different households are identified within the same classroom or within the same cohort outside of the classroom such as the lunchroom or extra-curricular activities (sports, music, after school clubs, etc.) Health officials may recommend additional mitigation efforts.

Q: Can a school district change a class, school or the entire district from in-person to virtual learning?

Yes. Unfortunately, the spread of COVID-19 may require a move to virtual learning to protect students and staff. If and when to do so is a matter of local control. If a district has metrics or a decision tree in place that would trigger such a change or if such a change seems possible based on changing health concerns, those should be communicated with families as soon as possible.