



Full Reentry for Public Schools Frequently Asked Questions

Updated March 8, 2021

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Why is this happening now?

New Mexico is ready! We've spent months developing and implementing the protocols to make our schools safe. Viral transmission and case numbers are down. About 15,000 New Mexico educators — approximately a third of our public school workforce — have already received at least one shot of the vaccine. We're offering all educators a first shot by the end of March. And the federal government is doing all it can to help us reopen quickly and safely. It's time to go back to school!

Do schools that are currently in hybrid mode have to transition to full reentry?

Yes. We are phasing out the hybrid model of instruction and returning to full reentry. However, districts and schools will maintain a remote learning option for families who are not ready to send their children back.

How is this being operationalized? Do districts need to submit a plan for full reentry to the PED? If so, by when?

Districts and charter schools will determine their start date and inform the PED. Before that date, they will submit a document assuring that all COVID-safe protocols are in place and will be enforced, triggering a site visit by a PED official or fire marshal to confirm readiness.

How will janitorial staff keep up with sanitizing demands with students and staff being on campus full-time?

All schools are required to maintain adequate supplies and implement daily cleaning protocols. While we now know that surface transmission is rare and that airborne respiratory droplets drive the spread of COVID-19, students and staff will continue washing hands frequently, and facilities will be thoroughly and regularly cleaned.

How will cafeteria procedures be affected?

Eating and drinking are high-risk activities for spreading the virus. For that reason, students must be physically separated to the extent possible while eating meals. Districts and schools will decide how best to achieve that, considering options like eating in well-ventilated, socially-distanced classroom settings;

eating outdoors; spreading students out to eat in hallways, libraries, gyms, and other larger, well-ventilated areas.

What if staff or students get sick?

Ensuring strict adherence to the COVID-safe practices outlined in the PED's Reentry Guidance and COVID-19 Response Toolkit is the best defense in mitigating community spread within schools. In addition, each school has established an isolation room. A student or staff member who begins exhibiting COVID-19-like symptoms will go there without interacting with anyone except the isolation room monitor. The symptomatic individual should remain in the isolation room until a parent or guardian or a school administrator or health care provider with appropriate PPE can transport the individual safely away from the facility.

Will the Rapid Response program remain in effect? Will schools have to close again if COVID cases emerge?

The Rapid Response program will remain in effect in order to identify cases and quickly contain spread. Schools will have to return to remote-only/small group instruction if they reach the threshold of four rapid responses in a 14-day period. A rapid response consists of all of the cases that a school is notified of on a date and any that are identified from testing up to one day after that school notification date.

What safety precautions will be required when students return for in-person learning?

Schools must strictly enforce the COVID-safe practices (CSPs) outlined in the PED Reentry Guidance and COVID-19 Response Toolkit. CSPs include, but are not limited to mask-wearing, handwashing and social distancing to the greatest extent possible. [A full list of CSPs for schools is available on page 9 of this document.](#)

Do schools have to offer a full day of instruction every day?

We are returning to full reentry, which means all students may return to their school buildings for in-person learning up to five days a week.

Will schools have adequate PPE to protect everyone?

Every school is required to maintain a PPE supply that includes, among other things, two multi-layer cloth masks per staff member, additional disposable masks, bottled hand sanitizer, and soap and water hand-washing stations. [A full list of required PPE is available on page 12 of this document.](#)

Many tribal communities remain closed. Will children living in those communities be required to come to school?

In no case will a student be required to return to in-person learning if doing so would violate the requirements of a sovereign tribe or nation. In addition, public schools operating within tribal communities or on sovereign lands must engage in consultation with tribal leadership regarding local public health orders and the re-opening of school facilities.

FAMILY QUESTIONS

When will my school open?

The governing board of your district or charter school will make that decision after working through many complex considerations like bus routes, space assignments and lunch schedules, to name just a few. Nevertheless, the Public Education Department expects all schools to reach full reentry by April 5.

Will my child be safe?

Schools have in place protocols like mask-wearing, social distancing, and appropriate air filtration upgrades to greatly reduce the likelihood of viral spread. Additionally, while children can and do contract COVID-19, with very few exceptions their cases are mild compared to adult cases.

Will my school provide an appropriate face mask for my child?

Schools may require families to provide masks for their students. Schools also must have on hand a sufficient quantity of masks for students who have left their masks at home.

What options do I have if I'm not ready to send my child back for in-person learning?

Your child may continue learning remotely through the current school year if that is your choice.

What about sports and other activities?

Sports, New Mexico Activities Association–sponsored activities, and other extra-curricular activities may resume with strictly enforced precautions in place including mask-wearing by all and social distancing to the extent practical. Locker rooms can be used as long as they have sufficient air filtration systems and supervision to ensure social distancing. Spectators are allowed within capacity limits linked to a county's color on the [Department of Health's COVID-19 heat map](#).

What about music and choir?

Music education may resume with strictly enforced precautions in place. Students may not share instruments and must use cloth bell covers on wind instruments. Both singers and musicians must be appropriately masked and must maintain enhanced social distancing of 9 feet when playing or singing in groups — which is limited to outdoor venues.

What about transportation?

Bus routes will resume. Bus drivers and school bus assistants will implement social distancing rules to the greatest extent possible, require students to remain 6 feet apart at bus stops, and limit riders to two students per bus seat, to the greatest extent possible. Smaller vehicles pose more risk, but if there is no alternative, SUVs should be used with as few passengers as possible. The windows should be open, and masks must be worn by all.

TEACHER QUESTIONS

How will you know that someone who signs up as an educator for the vaccine really is an educator?

We are grateful that educators and school staff vaccines are a top priority in New Mexico. At the vaccination site, school staff members may be asked to show a current school ID or other proof of employment. Additionally, anyone who forges their employment or other personally identifying information when signing up [through the Department of Health portal](#) to receive a vaccine could be fined up to \$5,000. The Department of Health takes the vaccine protocol and distribution schedule seriously and is committed to prioritizing New Mexicans according to the [phased timeline available here](#).

Is it safe for teachers and school staff to return to in-person learning if we've only received one of the two required doses of the vaccine?

New Mexico schools are not reopening because of the vaccine; we're reopening because it's safe to do so and it's the right thing to do for our children. Although vaccinating teachers is important, it's not a requirement for safely conducting in-person learning during the pandemic, according to guidance last month from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). In-person learning can take place safely if mitigation protocols are enforced, which New Mexico is doing. Meanwhile, New Mexico teachers are getting the vaccine as quickly as possible: We are distributing the vaccine more efficiently than any state in the country, and many of the highest-risk teachers have already received at least one dose of the vaccine. As New Mexico receives more vaccine doses, every educator who wants one will be fully vaccinated.

If I'm a teacher and I don't want to be vaccinated, may I continue working remotely?

You have a right to decline the vaccine, but that will not excuse you from coming back to work if your job requires it. We feel confident about the safety of these vaccines and encourage all New Mexicans, especially educators, to get their shots as quickly as they are available.

Will districts continue exemptions for staff with high-risk medical conditions?

Staff with high-risk medical conditions are exempt from in-person learning until reaching full protection from the vaccine. The two-shot vaccines reach full efficacy two weeks after the second shot; the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine reaches full efficacy two weeks after the single shot.

Will my district or school need to continue with the surveillance testing program if my teachers and staff are vaccinated?

Individuals who provide evidence of full COVID-19 vaccination are not required to participate in surveillance testing. Until all staff members have been vaccinated, surveillance testing will continue for staff who have declined the vaccine and anyone who has not been fully vaccinated. Options include PCR testing through VAULT, Curative, the Department of Health's Public Health Office testing sites, and antigen testing, if available, through a School-Based Health Center.

Will there be hazard pay for educators?

The PED neither requires nor forbids hazard pay for educators. That is a local decision.

Do vaccinated people still have to quarantine if they are a close contact?

Individuals who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and who have had close contact with a COVID-19 infectious individual are not required to quarantine if they meet the following criteria:

- Are fully vaccinated (i.e., ≥ 2 weeks following receipt of the second dose in a 2-dose series, or ≥ 2 weeks following receipt of one dose of a single-dose vaccine)
- Are within 3 months following the receipt of the last dose in the series
- Have remained asymptomatic since the current COVID-19 exposure

Do those recovered from COVID-19 infections have to quarantine if they are a close contact?

For the first 90 days after a positive PCR test, individuals who have had COVID-19 infections and who have completed their self-isolation periods, do not need to quarantine if they are a close contact of a COVID-19 infectious person.

Do those recovered from COVID-19 infections have to self-isolate and get tested if they develop symptoms?

If a person is positive for COVID-19, completes their self-isolation, recovers, and then develops new COVID-like symptoms within 90 days of their first infection, they should stay home until fever-free for at least 24 hours without fever-reducing medication and with improvement in symptoms. They may consider consulting their healthcare provider for additional guidance. If a person who was positive for COVID-19 more than 90 days ago develops new COVID-like symptoms, they should follow the same guidance as for someone who was never previously a case.

Will childcare be available for staff whose own children are remaining in remote?

Check with your district/school to see what accommodations may be available. You can also visit this [childcare search at newmexicokids.org](https://www.newmexicokids.org) or [this informational page](#) about childcare assistance through ECECD.

How will schools manage simultaneously teaching children in class and children in remote?

Each district or charter school will determine how best to deploy available staff and resources to accomplish this. Many are doing it already in the hybrid mode.

Additional expanded in-person learning information and guidance is available at bit.ly/BackToSchoolNM.