

Back to School FAQs SY 21-22



Mask Questions & Answers

Q: Will my child be required to wear a mask at school?

A: All individuals in elementary schools regardless of vaccination status are required to wear a mask while in a school building, on school transportation, or at an indoor school-sponsored event. Secondary school students, staff, volunteers and visitors who are fully vaccinated and provide documentation of full vaccination are not required to wear masks. Secondary school students, staff, volunteers and visitors who are unvaccinated (and those who do not provide documentation of full vaccination) are required to wear a mask while in a school building, on school transportation, or at an indoor school-sponsored event. Masks are not required outdoors for any individual. Vaccinated, non-participant spectators at secondary school events after school hours are not required to wear masks; and they are not required to provide evidence of vaccination status.

Q: Will my vaccinated high school student be required to wear a mask on the bus or in the cafeteria that is shared with elementary students?

A: Secondary school students who have provided evidence of full vaccination are not required by the PED to wear a mask while on the bus, in the cafeteria, or otherwise sharing space with elementary students. Schools may choose to have everyone wear masks at school all day, or during parts of the day, to ensure safety or reduce administrative burden..

Q: What accommodations will be allowed for children with asthma or other medical conditions that make mask-wearing more difficult?

A: There are very limited circumstances under which a face mask cannot be worn. According to CDC guidance, the following individuals should not wear a face covering: children under age two, or anyone who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance. When wearing a face mask would obstruct breathing or exacerbate another medical condition for an unvaccinated student, then the student should be seen by a healthcare provider to discuss whether it is safe for the student to be in school during the public health emergency.

General Questions & Answers

Q: Will social distancing be required at school?

A: Social distancing is required for unvaccinated students and staff in schools. Unvaccinated adults are to maintain 6 feet of social distance to the extent possible from other adults and from students. Unvaccinated students are to maintain 3 feet of social distance to the extent possible, except when eating, exercising, taking mask breaks, playing wind instruments, and singing or shouting, in which case 6 feet of social distance is required.

Q: Will students need to cohort?

A: Cohorting is not required, although the practice of keeping groups of students and staff together over the course of the school day with the goal of limiting exposures to only those within the same cohort may help reduce the spread of COVID-19. Cohorting also can allow for targeted quarantine, testing, and/or isolation of a single cohort (instead of school-wide measures in the event of a positive case or cluster).

Q: What safety measures will be in place besides masks?

A: The goal as everyone returns to classes this summer and fall is to keep students and staff as safe as possible so that schools can operate in the mode we know works best: in-person learning. Other safety measures include ensuring students and staff maintain physical distance and encouraging those who can be vaccinated do so. In addition, COVID-19 surveillance testing is required for all schools providing in-person student services, including small-group special education services and athletics. The purpose of surveillance testing is to detect COVID-19 outbreaks as early as possible by screening asymptomatic individuals.

Q: Will water fountains be open?

A: It's up to the schools, but water fountains can be opened.

Q: Can lockers in hallways be used?

A: Schools can decide whether or not to allow the use of lockers, but there are no restrictions.

Q: Will schools still be required to notify families of positive cases?

A: Yes – for anyone who was infectious with COVID-19 while on campus.

Q: Will parents or visitors be allowed in schools? Will they be required to wear masks?

A: Visitors to schools are required to wear masks if they are unvaccinated. All individuals visiting elementary schools are required to wear masks.

Q: Will the P-EBT benefit continue?

A: Pandemic-EBT will continue for the summer and it will still be available for SY 21-22, but right now we do not have guidance as to how it will be implemented since we are anticipating that most schools will be conducting face to face learning. We should have more details soon.

Q: Will a student who is out sick have to have a negative COVID test to return to school?

A: Anyone who is exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 should self-isolate for 10 days (and be symptom/fever free without medication for 24 hours) or should be tested for COVID-19 and should have improved symptoms and be fever free for 24 hours without fever reducing medication before returning to school.

Vaccine Questions & Answers

Q: Will my child age 12 or over be required to get a COVID-19 vaccine?

A: No. Vaccines are not mandated at this time. However, because vaccines are the best possible way to prevent COVID-19 infections and spread, we encourage everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated.

Q: If unvaccinated, will my child age 12 or over be treated differently from vaccinated peers?

A: Unvaccinated individuals of any age will be required to wear masks on school property, at school events, and while riding school transportation to prevent infection and spread of COVID-19. The goal is to ensure safety, not to punish or otherwise isolate children from their peers.

Q: How will vaccination status be determined in schools?

A: Schools will create their own implementation and monitoring methods for determining vaccination status of its students. Schools also will update their student discipline policies for the upcoming school year 2021-2022 to include consequences for violating mask-wearing requirements with a focus on supportive and instructional approaches. Schools must provide notice to families about updated discipline policies and collect signatures acknowledging receipt of the update.

Q: Will my vaccinated child be required to self-isolate if determined to be a close contact to an infectious individual at school?

A: No. Vaccinated individuals ages 12 and up will not have to self-isolate should this occur.

Remote Learning Questions & Answers

Q: Is remote learning still an option if I don't want to send my child back to school?

A: The PED has closely aligned its COVID-Safe Practices with CDC guidance and consulted with state health experts to ensure schools are as safe as possible and that we can offer the greatest amount of in-person learning as possible. For the coming school year, the PED is not requiring districts or charter schools to provide a remote learning option for the upcoming school year, but families should check with their local district for options.

Q: If the virus makes a surge this fall, will I have the option to put my child into remote learning after the school year starts?

A: Parents always have the option to move their children into remote learning at any point of the school year by using the handful of virtual charter schools available in the state. Please check your local district for options they will have available, either through established virtual programs or partnerships with other districts via the [New Mexico Virtual Course Consortium](#).

Educator Questions & Answers

Q: Will fully vaccinated teachers and school staff be required to wear masks at school?

A: New Mexico no longer requires mask-wearing for fully vaccinated individuals at New Mexico public schools with the exception of elementary schools, which will still require masks for all individuals. In addition, individual districts may choose to require masks for everyone.

Q: As an educator, am I required to get a vaccine?

A: There is no employment requirement at this time to get a vaccine. However, the state strongly recommends the vaccines, which are safe, effective and the best known way to prevent infection and spread of COVID-19.

Q: Will teachers have to use their sick leave if they must quarantine?

A: Districts and state-chartered schools must provide emergency paid sick leave to employees through June 30, 2022.

Q: May I request an alternative work assignment rather than returning to the classroom?

A: Reasonable accommodations such as alternate work assignments may be available to an employee, including high risk staff, under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Additionally, you could be eligible for leave under the Family Medical Leave Act due to your serious medical condition.

Q: What if I can't return to the classroom because someone in my family has a serious medical condition?

A: Leave under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) may be available to an employee who is unable to perform his or her duties due to the employee's or eligible family member's serious medical condition. ADA and FMLA requests may include consideration of the mitigating effects of the COVID-19 vaccine, which have been, and are being, made available to all school staff. Please consult with your Human Resources staff and legal counsel for advice about the process for making determinations about reasonable accommodations under the ADA and/or leave under the FMLA.

Emergency Paid Sick Leave

Districts and state-chartered schools must provide emergency paid sick leave to employees under House Bill 2 (signed April 9, 2021). The federal government renewed and expanded the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) as a voluntary program for the period April 1, 2021, through Sept. 30, 2021. However, House Bill 2 requires LEAs to implement the provisions of FFCRA through June 30, 2022. (See House Bill 2, <https://nmlegis.gov/Sessions/21%20Regular/final/HB0002.pdf>, lines 22-25 on p. 169 and lines 1-2 on p. 170.)

To pay for this mandate, you may use state-appropriated operational funds or available Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds. (See House Bill 2, <https://nmlegis.gov/Sessions/21%20Regular/final/HB0002.pdf>, lines 1-2 on p. 170.) ESSER funds are also subject to federal statutory use requirements and applicable federal regulations. If using ESSER funds, such use must be listed under "other activities necessary to maintain operation and continuity of services" in the American Rescue Plan application (see the highlighted provision below my signature block).

Elementary School Questions & Answers

Q: Will my child under age 12 be treated differently than my older child?

A: Because children under age 12 are currently ineligible for a COVID-19 vaccine, they will be required to wear masks at school to protect them from infections and community spread. The state no longer requires fully vaccinated children and adults to wear masks at secondary schools, although districts may choose to do so.

Q: Will elementary students still be quarantined if there is a positive case? And how long will the quarantine be?

A: Unvaccinated close contacts are required to quarantine for 10 days following their last exposure. Close contacts are defined as students who were within three feet of a confirmed case for 15 minutes over a 24-hour period.

Q: Will the Rapid Response protocols remain in place in elementary schools?

A: Rapid response protocols remain in effect in schools.

Q: Will schools still be required to notify families of positive cases?

A: Yes – for anyone who was infectious with COVID-19 while on campus.

Q: Will large school gatherings and/or performances be allowed?

A: Yes – following COVID-safe practices, including social distancing and mask wearing (as required).

Q: Will parents or visitors be allowed in schools? Will they be required to wear masks?

A: Schools will define their own policies regarding whether visitors will be allowed, but current guidance states that any individual visiting an elementary school is required to wear a mask. Vaccinated individuals at secondary schools are not required to wear a mask, unless the school requires it.

Q: Will students be sent home if they exhibit symptoms?

A: For mild symptoms like a cough or headache, students can be tested at school and return to class (if schools have implemented school-based BinaxNOW testing). If school-based testing is not available, then students would need to wait in the isolation room until they can be picked up. Students with chronic conditions can provide a note from their primary care provider indicating their base-line symptoms and may attend school with baseline symptoms.

Secondary School Questions & Answers

Q: Will classes still be required to quarantine if there is a positive case? If so, for how long?

A: Unvaccinated close contacts are required to quarantine for 10 days following their last exposure. Close contacts are defined as students who were within three feet of a confirmed case for 15 minutes over a 24-hour period.

Q: Will the Rapid Response protocols remain in place in secondary schools?

A: Rapid response protocols remain in effect in schools.

Q: Will all sports and extracurricular activities resume as normal? What about travel and overnight stays?

A: Yes, activities and travel may resume, and there is no requirement to quarantine for out of state travel (still recommended). However, unvaccinated individuals may not share rooms.

Q: Will athletes be required to wear masks?

A: Athletes who have not provided evidence of full vaccination will wear masks while indoors.

Q: Will athletes be required to have vaccines in order to compete?

A: Vaccination is not required by the PED to participate in in-person instruction or extra-curricular activities.

Q: What safety measures will be required for band and choir classes?

A: Elementary students and secondary students who have not provided evidence of full vaccination will maintain 6-foot social distancing and will wear masks while singing and playing wind instruments. Specialized masks and bell covers are required for playing wind instruments. Instruments are not to be shared and supplies for cleaning instruments must be available.

Q: Will large school gatherings and/or performances be allowed?

A: Yes – following COVID-safe practices, including social distancing and mask wearing (as required).

Q: Will students be sent home if they exhibit any symptoms?

A: Schools are required to offer isolation rooms for anyone exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19. Students should be picked up as soon as possible.