



FAQ: Reopening Public Schools

This is a collection of members' frequently asked questions about reopening schools in this COVID-19 environment. Information is constantly changing as the governor announces new executive orders and state and federal agencies develop policies and regulations regarding reopening. We will update this FAQ as more questions come up and the situation evolves.

1) The district is sending people back to the schools. What percentage of employees can be working at one time?

There is no definitive guidance for how many staff members can be in a school facility at once. What is defined, in the guidance published on July 13, 2020 by The New York State Department of Health ([link](#)), is that school administrations must maintain protocols and procedures for students, faculty and staff to ensure social distancing to help prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus when on school grounds and in school facilities. Social distancing means that a six-foot distance between individuals must be maintained in all directions.

2) Is my school required to provide me with a face covering?

Yes. The most recent guidance from the [New York State Education Department](#) ([link](#)) states that every district/school must have a plan for obtaining and maintaining adequate supplies of cloth face coverings for school staff, students who forget their masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) for use by school health professionals.

On pages 33 and 34 of the guidance, SED provides a table to help schools understand how many masks and PPE they should plan to have on hand to provide to staff and students.

In addition to this guidance from SED, NYSUT notes that it is also important that schools have an adequate supply of the PPE that is required to be used with each school's chosen cleaning and disinfection products. Each cleaning or disinfection product's safety data sheet will explain how the product is to be used and what PPE is necessary. This data sheet can be requested by staff for their review.

3) I am concerned about social distancing. What does that look like for staff when we return to school?

According to guidance from the [New York State Department of Health](#), schools must maintain protocols and procedures for students, faculty and staff to ensure appropriate social distancing. Social distancing requires six feet of space in all directions between individuals. Please note that the distance is between individuals, not an individual and a desk. This rule is applicable on the bus, during the school day, in every school facility, on school grounds and during and safety and emergency drills.

Creating a defined workspace is a best practice when possible. This space consists of the area six feet around a worker's post, including every item within this six-foot space. This helps reduce the likelihood of staff sharing things such as staplers, document holders, etc. If items must be shared, they should be disinfected between uses.

Limited space may prompt some schools to ease indoor social distancing concerns by changing the way they use space in their existing buildings or by acquiring additional space. All spaces to be occupied by school students and staff must meet the requirements of the 2020 New York State Uniform Fire Prevention and Building Code and the State Energy Conservation Code. More information on what exactly should be assessed before this is done can be found on [Page 49 of the SED Guidance](#).

Wherever you may be on school property, if you are unable to maintain a six-foot space between yourself and an unmasked student or staff member, additional PPE should be considered by the school administration to protect staff. This may include an N95 respirator and a face shield. [Page 34 of the SED Guidance](#) includes a table of PPE that should be on hand for "...staff members who may be in high-intensity contact with students or handling waste materials." The recommended quantities listed are calculated per staff and the examples of staff given include "nurses, custodians, and some special education teachers and other staff."

4) We have been told that the most effective way to stay safe is good hand washing hygiene. What do I do if my school does not have adequate supplies?

Hand hygiene is a key component of fostering a safe and healthy workplace, especially during the fight against COVID. Your employer should provide you and your colleagues with what is needed to wash your hands and cover your coughs and sneezes. Examples include:

- Providing tissues and no-touch trash cans
- Providing soap and water in the workplace
- Encouraging good hand hygiene by placing posters at the entrance to the school and in other workplace areas where they are likely to be seen

The NYS Department of Health Guidance for schools specifies that districts must provide soap, running warm water and disposable paper towels for hand washing. Receptacles must also be placed around the school for disposal of soiled items, including paper towels and PPE. This can be found on [page 15 of the NYS Department of Health Guidance](#).

On [Page 20 of the NYS Education Department guidance](#), the SED addresses this concern and notes that district/school plans must include a daily checklist for school personnel to inspect their area and ensure that they have sufficient supplies each day. (e.g. face coverings, tissues, hand hygiene supplies, cleaning supplies, etc).

The Centers for Disease control also reinforce the importance of hand hygiene and ensuring adequate supplies. Learn more here: [Handwashing: Clean hands save lives](#)

If your school does not provide you with potable water for washing or there is no soap or means to dry your hands, you can reference that this is a requirement under Federal OSHA which is enforced for public employees by the New York State Department of Labor. See the standards here: [29 CFR 1910.141](#) Reference specifically sections (d)(2)(ii) , (iii) and (iv).

5) I am concerned about handling paper, mail, money and other items that others have touched. Should I wear gloves? What can I do to protect myself?

The risk of contracting COVID-19 from paper products is low. However, if you can, reduce the amount of shared paper products and, as always, practice good hand hygiene. Washing your hands regularly and resisting the urge to touch your face are best. Wearing gloves might cause you to disregard good hand hygiene because people may keep wearing dirty gloves instead of washing hands. Gloves are useful only when you use them immediately and in a meaningful way. Then they must be disposed of and you must wash your hands. For example, a school nurse would put gloves on for an individual procedure and then discard the gloves immediately. Note: Wearing gloves is not recommended unless workers are required to wear them according to the school's Hazard Communication Plan or the Exposure Control Plan.

If you are able, it is useful to have certain paper items dropped off into a container that can be sealed. For example, books that are returned to a library can go directly into a box that can be sealed once full. Once sealed, the box should be labeled and remain untouched for three days. After three days, the virus, if present on any of the materials, will no longer be viable and the books can be handled safely.

A study published in The New England Journal of Medicine found that the virus, in a controlled lab setting, was detectable on copper for up to four hours, on cardboard for up to 24 hours and on plastic and steel for up to 72 hours.

6) What should I expect the district to clean and how often?

The latest guidance from the NYS Department of Health requires schools to conduct regular cleaning and disinfection of the facilities and more frequent cleaning and disinfection for high-risk areas used by many individuals and for frequently touched surfaces including desks and cafeteria tables which should be cleaned between each individual's use, if shared. Cleaning and disinfection must be rigorous and ongoing and should occur at least daily, or more frequently as needed.

The new guidance references past guidance documents that provide more detail. They include the [Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection of Public and Private Facilities for COVID-19](#) and the DOH's [Interim Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection of Primary and Secondary Schools for COVID-19](#). This guidance gives more specifics about what high touch surfaces must be cleaned and disinfected at a higher rate.

It is important to note that the latest guidance says that schools must maintain logs that include the date, time and scope of cleaning and disinfection. Districts must also determine the frequency of both cleaning and disinfection for each facility type and assign responsibility for it.

7) I want to bring in my own disinfectant, but my school won't allow me to. Why?

Disinfecting is the responsibility of school custodial staff. They are trained to use disinfectants in a safe and effective manner and to clean up potentially infectious materials and body fluid spills, such as blood, vomit, feces and urine. If teachers or other staff, besides trained custodial staff, need to assist with classroom cleaning, they should use a district-provided basic cleaner. A third-party certified green cleaner is required. Schools discourage the use of products like Lysol and Clorox wipes brought from home because the overuse of disinfectants can trigger asthma and are associated with adverse health effects. In addition to the dangers related to their overuse, disinfectants can give a false sense of security because they don't work properly if they are not used exactly to label instructions.

If teachers are asked to help disinfect, they must be provided with training on how to effectively use the disinfectant and be provided with the personal protective equipment that is required by the product's safety data sheet. A copy of the safety data sheet must be maintained on site so that it can be viewed by anyone who requests it.

8) Will there be a way to control people coming in and out of the building and how will people know what the rules are?

School officials must educate school communities about the rules for social distancing, hand hygiene and wearing a mask when on school property. It is their responsibility to ensure that everyone is aware of the rules and the consequences for not following them. Schools should be encouraged to post signs at entrances and in high traffic areas outlining the health and safety rules of the building. Your local union should work with district administration to establish what the rules are, who will be permitted on the premises and what protocols must be established for entry to buildings. If the rules are not followed, officials cannot say they are providing a safe and healthy workplace.

The DOH Guidance for in-person instruction promotes limiting contact and entry of parents/legal guardians into the building, to the greatest extent possible. The same goes for deliveries. A designated area must be chosen for pickups and deliveries.

Additionally, the DOH Guidance requires health screenings prior to entry of the school. Anyone who plans to enter the building must have their temperature checked. It is strongly encouraged that this is done remotely prior to departing for the school. A school can also choose to do temperature checks at the entrance of the building. People conducting in-person screenings must be given, at a minimum, an acceptable face covering or mask, and may also include gloves, a gown, and/or a face shield.

The State Education Guidance provides more detail on how in-person temperature checks should be conducted on [pages 24-26](#).

Health questionnaires are also required for all staff, contractors, vendors and visitors. Students may be required to complete a screening questionnaire periodically. Anyone who presents with a temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or greater or has a positive response on the screening questionnaire must be isolated from others and sent home immediately.

9) Who will enforce social distancing and wearing a mask rules at school?

Speak with your local union about what enforcement protocols are outlined in the district re-opening plan. This plan should outline how the rules will be communicated to staff and the school community, who will be responsible for enforcing them and what system is in place for staff to report any violations of the rules.

10) Does it help prevent the spread of the virus if there is good airflow and fresh air in my classroom?

Yes, increased fresh air intake is important, especially with the increased cleaning and disinfecting that will be happening. You want to ensure the air is as free of indoor air pollutants, which includes viruses, as possible. Work with your school's Health and Safety Committee regarding solutions to increase the amount of filtered fresh air in classrooms and the school building.

The DOH guidance for in-person instruction calls for increasing the amount of fresh air in occupied spaces. SED guidance notes on page 53 that districts and schools are encouraged to increase the fresh air ventilation rate to the extent possible to aid in maintaining a healthy indoor air quality. SED recognizes that there are many different types of ventilation systems, natural or mechanical, that may be limited for increasing ventilation outside air due to available heat or fan/relief airflow capacity. Schools may consider installing a higher efficiency filter. A higher efficiency filter may require a larger filter housing and will create greater resistance to airflow, and the fan and HVAC system may require rebalancing to maintain the code required ventilation rate.

The code required ventilation rate is 15 cubic feet per minute per person. This comes from the NYS Building Code, Section 808 of the Mechanical Code.

Learn more about how to improve your school's indoor air quality at the following websites:
[ASHRAE](#) (American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers)
[Environmental Protection Agency: Ventilation and Coronavirus](#)

11) I'm a custodian. What kind of PPE is required for the disinfectant and/or cleaner I am using and does the school need to provide it for me?

Yes, the school must provide PPE required to be used with any cleaning or disinfectant. You will know what PPE is necessary because it will be listed on the product's Safety Data Sheet (SDS). Your school must also provide you with its written Hazard Communication Program. This program must be available on site and it must include an inventory of all cleaning and disinfecting products used within the school. The program must outline how the information about the hazards related with these products will be shared with staff. Additionally, it should have information on product labels, where the Safety Data Sheets (SDS) are maintained and how staff will be trained. The SDSs include information on the necessary personal protective equipment to be provided to custodial staff and must also be readily available at the school for review by any employee at any time. To learn more about this standard, go here: [Hazard Communication](#)

If your district officials do not provide you with a product's SDS or their Hazard Communication Program, they are in violation of the Hazard Communication Standard which is enforced by the New York State Department of Labor's Public Employee Safety and Health Bureau.

12) Our school does not have enough maintenance staff to keep up with the new disinfection plan and safety plans. What do we do?

Discuss this concern with your local union. District re-opening plans may generate a new set of duties and responsibilities and, therefore, increase the district's staffing needs. Make sure your school is aware of how much work needs to be done by creating a cleaning and disinfection plan and checklist. High touch surface areas will need to be disinfected throughout the day. Outline the new requirements to maintain the school ventilation system, social distancing supports and hygiene supply stocks. Map out your concern as soon as possible so that you can show your district officials that the current staffing levels will not allow them to live up to their responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace.

13) Our district doesn't have enough school nurses. There isn't always a nurse in every school. How will sick students and staff be helped if there isn't a health care professional on site?

Staff and students who appear to have symptoms upon arrival to school or who become sick during the day should immediately be separated from others. Schools must identify an isolation room or area to separate anyone who has COVID-19 symptoms or tests positive but does not have symptoms. School nurses and other healthcare providers should use Standard and [Transmission-Based Precautions](#) when caring for sick people.

SED requires that ill students and staff be assessed by the school nurse (registered professional nurse, RN) or medical director and that if a school nurse or medical director is not available, schools will have to isolate and dismiss any student or staff member who has a fever or other symptoms of COVID-19 that are not explained by a chronic health condition for follow-up with a health care provider. Administrators should work collaboratively with school nurses to determine if additional staff is needed to assist with non-nursing tasks such as:

- Student supervision;
- Telephone calls, texts, or emails to parent/guardians; and
- Assistance with completing any required paperwork other than nursing documentation.

14) What is going to happen to team sports and physical education?

As of July 13, 2020, the date the NYS DOH interim guidance for in-person instruction was published, interscholastic sports are not permitted. Additional guidance on athletic activities is forthcoming.

Regarding physical education, guidance from the SED promotes holding P.E. classes outside as much as possible. SED's guidance calls for maintaining a distance of 12 between individuals during P.E. classes. You can learn more about the SED's guidance on this topic here: [SED and Physical Education Page 101](#)

SED also notes further guidance is available from [The Society of Health and Physical Educators \(SHAPE\)](#).

15) How do we open libraries? I am most concerned about the sharing of books.

All general plans for mitigating the risk associated with COVID-19 should extend to the libraries. This includes social distancing rules, enhanced cleaning practices and hand hygiene. COVID-19 does not survive long on porous surfaces, such as paper. On other surfaces like plastic and cardboard, the virus can survive longer. A recommended practice would be to have all returned books sit in a sealed plastic bin for three days before restacking them. Signage that promotes hand washing should also be posted in the library. For more guidance about opening libraries, go to American Industrial Hygiene Association's website: [AIHA Library Guidance](#)

16) I work with students who have IEPs and often require hands-on support. How do I protect myself?

Staff that work with students with disabilities are at a higher risk because of the nature of their jobs. They could be even more vulnerable if they are older than 65 or have an underlying health condition like chronic lung disease or diabetes. These factors could mean they are at [higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19](#). Your school must be very aware of each staff person's risk level and proceed from there. Maintaining social distancing can be difficult when working with students with disabilities. Enforcing a face mask rule and hand hygiene practices for these students may also prove difficult. As school officials begin their task of assessing risk and deciding how they will protect all staff and students, IEPs should be reviewed to understand the extent to which each student requires close contact. This is a complicated scenario and conversations must begin as soon as possible so that your school officials are aware of your concerns and the realities of your work, as plans move forward on how to reopen safely.

If you must work with a student who cannot maintain social distancing and/or cannot keep a face mask on, you will need additional PPE. This may include an N95 respirator and a face shield.