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RE: Updated COVID-19 Health Guidelines for Anne Arundel County Schools

Dear Private and Non-Public Schools,

In-person instruction is critical for the cognitive, social/emotional, and physical development of children. The Anne Arundel County Department of Health provided school reopening guidance in October 2020 and again in February 2021 to help safely reopen schools. Now, almost a year and a half into the pandemic, all schools are in a position to fully reopen for the 2021-22 academic year.

In the past month, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), [Maryland Department of Health \(MDH\)](#) and [Maryland State Department of Education \(MSDE\)](#) and [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#) have published updated guidelines on a range of strategies to ensure that schools can fully reopen to students while also minimizing the spread and impact of COVID-19. This guidance will only address the three mitigation strategies that we get the most questions about: masking, testing, and vaccination. There are many more mitigation strategies that schools are implementing that will not be covered here but that are covered in the guidances mentioned above.

We're excited to see all students back in the classroom this fall.

Masking

A comprehensive masking strategy is a critical piece of a multilayered COVID-19 mitigation strategy. Reducing the level of spread in schools will help keep students in school safer, decrease absences, and decrease the need for quarantining students. For many students who are not eligible to get the vaccine, either because of age or medical condition, the more others are vaccinated, the less likely they are to get infected.

All K-12 schools in Anne Arundel County should implement universal masking in indoor settings for students, teachers, staff, and visitors. In outdoor settings masks are not indicated for unvaccinated individuals except in crowded settings. This recommendation is consistent with guidance released in July by both the [CDC](#) and the [AAP](#).

Critical factors that went into this recommendation include.

- The Delta variant spreads more easily than previous variants.
- Vaccinated individuals can spread the Delta variant.
- Children 11 and younger are not yet eligible for vaccination.
- Significant numbers of children 12 and older are not yet vaccinated.
- The purpose of a mask is to both protect the wearer from being infected AND to prevent an infected person from transmitting to other people.
- With schools returning to full capacity, distancing indoors is recommended at 3 feet or the maximum distance possible if less than 3 feet.
- Updated contact tracing guidance from the CDC notes that for students who are 3-6 feet from each other, if both the case and contact students are masked, the contact will NOT need to quarantine.

Testing

K-12 schools in Anne Arundel County are recommended to implement testing, in combination with other prevention strategies, as an important layer of prevention to decrease COVID-19 transmission amongst students and staff in school.

The [CDC](#) recommends screening testing as part of a layered approach to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the school setting. The [MDH and MSDE](#) also recommend diagnostic testing programs in schools as part of a comprehensive testing program.

[Screening testing](#) is used to identify positive cases in symptomatic or asymptomatic students and staff. Screening testing is a surveillance tool, as well as a prevention strategy used to support the full return to in person learning. [Diagnostic testing](#) can be performed when an individual exhibits COVID-19 symptoms or has had a known exposure to a confirmed positive case.

The COVID-19 Testing Task Force, Maryland Department of Health (MDH), and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) have developed a K-12 COVID-19 Testing Program to provide free COVID-19 testing, laboratory support, and technical assistance for public school systems and non-public schools. For program registration or questions please email MDH.K12Testing@Maryland.gov

- The [MDH Reopening Schools COVID-19 screening testing RFA](#) allows K-12 schools to apply for funds, [resources](#), and technical assistance to offer a free, full service, vendor generated screening testing program. Using non-pooled or [pooled testing](#) schools/districts can choose from the following screening testing approaches:
 - Testing of staff and/or students for participation in extracurricular activities (sports, performing arts, club, academic)
 - Testing all staff and/or students (all grades or grade specific) periodically (all elementary students weekly)
 - Testing a sample of staff and/or students periodically (10% of all students weekly)
- The [MDH/MSDE diagnostic testing program](#) provides registered schools with the necessary information and resources to test symptomatic students and staff, as well as asymptomatic students and staff who are determined to be a close contact of a person with confirmed COVID-19. Participants can implement both rapid point of care tests and PCR specimen collection processes.

Vaccines

Vaccines against COVID-19 are safe and effective. Vaccines significantly decrease the risk of severe disease and death. Vaccines are currently available for all individuals 12 and older. **Everyone who is eligible is strongly encouraged to get vaccinated, preferably before the beginning of the school year.**

Sincerely,



Niles Kalyanaraman, MD, FACP
Health Officer