

Association of Bay Area Health Officials

Bay Area Health Officers Reaffirm Support for Full In-Person School FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 26, 2021

As Bay Area Health Officials, we are excited that more than a million Kindergarten-12th grade students are returning to school for in-person learning this fall across the wider San Francisco Bay Area. In the counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Monterey, Napa, San Benito, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano, Sonoma, and the City of Berkeley, many children are back in the classroom for the first time since early 2020.

This summer's surge in COVID-19 cases and hospitalization due to the spread of the Delta variant is causing people to feel cautious about the return to school. We know that when rates of COVID are high in our communities, cases will appear at schools, just as they do in other settings. However, with effective protocols in place – including universal indoor masking, vaccinations of eligible persons, testing, good hand hygiene, staying home when sick and proper ventilation – the data shows that these multiple layers of defense can stop the spread of COVID in school settings.

In considering the many benefits to children, Bay Area Health Officials reaffirm the [joint Bay Area Health Officials' statement from June](#), endorse the recent [statement from Bay Area County Superintendents of Schools](#), and continue to firmly support a safe return to the classroom.

The lack of in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted education, but it also weakened social supports and harmed the mental health of students. The risks and benefits of returning to in-person learning are clearer now than any other time during this pandemic – we must all continue to do everything possible to keep kids safely attending their schools.

While children can get COVID-19, severe disease among kids is uncommon and deaths are exceedingly rare. Transmission can happen in any setting, including in schools, but children are often exposed to COVID-19 at home or in social settings where safety practices vary. Cases identified by school testing programs may often be unrelated classroom exposure. In Alameda County, we are seeing COVID-19 cases among children but at rates generally lower than among adults and lower than last winter's surge. Hospitalizations in children are only 3% of those reported to date for the summer surge.

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The [State's K-12 Schools Guidance for the 2021-22 School Year](#) is practical guidance that emphasizes universal application of the most important safety measures while also offering flexibility for different approaches to meet the needs and capacities of a broad range of schools and districts seeking to safely keep children in classrooms.

School leaders have worked hard to implement this Guidance and are ready to welcome students back. Health Officials continue to monitor the data closely and we will work across the region and the state to adapt when needed.

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Alameda County and the City of Berkeley are aligned with the [State's K-12 Schools Guidance for the 2021-22 School Year](#).

Cases Will Occur: What to Expect

When COVID-19 is circulating at high levels in communities, like it is now in Alameda County and the City of Berkeley, we should expect cases in schools. Cases among students and staff must be reported by schools to the Alameda County Public Health Department or the City of Berkeley's Public Health Department depending on the location of the schools per the [State's K-12 guidance](#).

Alameda County's and City of Berkeley's Schools and Outbreak teams communicate with and support school leaders and staff as these situations arise, assisting with investigations and providing guidance on how to implement mitigation measures.

Parents and caregivers should reach out to their school or district leaders to learn how their student's school will respond to cases.

Stay Home if Sick

Students and staff who experience symptoms or test positive for COVID-19 must stay home to protect the health and well-being of others. If students are identified as close contacts of someone who tests positive, there are [different quarantine options for schools](#) per State Guidance.

Vaccination

Vaccine continues to be the most powerful tool we have to end this pandemic. To protect students and staff, the State issued a [new public health order](#) requiring all school staff to either show proof of full vaccination or be tested at least once per week.

Children and youth, 12 and older, are currently eligible for the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine, which has full FDA approval for youth aged 16 and older. Vaccine is safe, free, and highly effective at preventing severe illness, hospitalization, and death. Getting you and your eligible children vaccinated is the best way to protect against the spread of COVID-19.

While we hope to have a vaccine option for younger children soon, the timeline is uncertain. Learn more at <https://covid-19.acgov.org/youthvaxfacts>.

Masking

In alignment with the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics, universal masking indoors in schools is required by the State's school guidance and the [local face masking order](#). CDC guidance for communities that have [high levels of community transmission](#) also includes a [recommendation for unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated people to wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings](#) when physical distancing can't be maintained or during activities that involve sustained close contact with other people. In school settings, that could mean at recess or sporting events. Coupled with vaccination, consistent masking protects your student and those around them.

COVID-19 Testing

To stop the spread of COVID-19, appropriate testing and management of infected or exposed people is the priority. The State has a [framework](#) that outlines a menu of testing options for schools to consider implementing with their school communities. Each school district and the community it serves is unique and we encourage all school districts to review the strategies and partner with the State to implement the testing program that works best for their district: [K-12 school-based COVID-19 testing strategies for school year 2021-22 \(ca.gov\)](#)

What You Can Do

COVID-19 continues to impact all communities in Alameda County and the City of Berkeley, and we must work together to keep our students and school staff safe. Wear your mask, get yourself and your eligible children vaccinated, and keep them home if they are sick. We strongly encourage you to speak with your school leaders about their safety plans and talk to your child about the importance of keeping their mask on during the school day. We all have a role to play as we work to keep our students and schools safe.

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