



Updated Mississippi State Department of Health Public Health Guidance for the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 in K-12 Settings, 2021-2022 School Year

Introduction

Mississippi is experiencing substantial and high levels of transmission of COVID-19, with increased cases, hospitalizations, and numerous outbreaks in multiple settings, including among students engaged in school sponsored activities and in school settings. The proportion of cases and hospitalizations among children <18 years of age is rapidly increasing, while the rate of COVID-19 vaccinations remain low in these same age groups. Additionally, 4 deaths among children <18 years of age have been reported in Mississippi.

The primary driver of the increased cases, hospitalizations and deaths is the emergence of the Delta variant in Mississippi. As of July 30, 2021, the Delta variant is the predominant strain in the state accounting for an estimated 93% of cases in the state. The Delta variant is much more contagious, and spreads three times as easily compared to other strains.

The overwhelming majority of cases, hospitalizations and deaths are among unvaccinated persons, though there have been some infections, hospitalizations and deaths seen in fully vaccinated persons. **Some fully vaccinated persons who become infected may be contagious.**

As school begins across the state, we anticipate numerous cases and outbreaks in the school setting, which may lead to disruptions in both in-person classes and extracurricular activities. While students benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person instruction continues to be a priority, schools need to be prepared now for the continued surge in transmission we anticipate over the coming weeks. Each school/school district should continue to put in place measures to reduce transmission and maintain a safe school environment.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recently updated their public health guidance for school settings to recommend universal masking indoors in the school setting for all persons, regardless of vaccination status. **Therefore, the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) is providing UPDATED Public Health Guidance for the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 transmission in Mississippi K-12 school settings aligned with the CDC guidance.** The guidance is intended to supplement, not replace, the CDC guidance and provide MSDH specific recommendations for continued in-person classes for the 2021 school year.

Please review the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools available at [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools | CDC](#) MSDH anticipates the CDC K-12 guidance will reflect the updated recommendation soon.



Gist of Updates to MSDH Public Health Guidance and Recommendations

- Consistent with CDC Public Health Guidance, MSDH recommends universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 school settings when not eating or drinking, *regardless of vaccination status*.
- MSDH recommends that all unvaccinated individuals exposed to COVID-19 should immediately quarantine and be excluded from the school setting as outlined below (see Isolation, Contact Tracing, Quarantine, and Identifying Exposed Individuals section for allowable alternatives to the full 14-day quarantine period in individual exposures).
- MSDH recommends that all COVID-19 exposed individuals get tested 3-5 days following exposure (fully vaccinated persons do not have to quarantine after exposure but it is recommended that they get tested).
- **Modified Quarantine: Considering the highly infectious Delta variant circulating and the increased impact on transmission, MSDH is NO LONGER RECOMMENDING a modified quarantine for exposed individuals with every other day testing as an option to continue in-person for exposed persons. All unvaccinated individuals exposed to COVID-19 are recommended to be quarantined and excluded from the school setting during the quarantine period. See the Isolation, Contact Tracing, Quarantine, and Identifying Exposed Individuals section for allowable alternatives to the full 14-day quarantine period in individual exposures.**
- **Outbreaks:** An outbreak is defined as ≥ 3 cases of COVID-19 in a classroom or group (sports team, group activity, band, or other) within 14 days.
 - In an outbreak setting, quarantine and exclusion from the school setting is recommended for all unvaccinated exposed persons in the outbreak group.
- **School Dismissal Considerations:** The school may consider dismissal of the entire student/faculty under the following conditions:
 - If ≥ 3 individual classroom settings, defined groups, or defined buildings are experiencing simultaneous outbreaks, or
 - If multiple absentees or exclusions of students and staff are leading to disruptions in on-campus functioning and impacting the learning environment as determined by the school.
 - If decided upon, dismissal should be for at least 14 days to interrupt transmission



MSDH Public Health Guidance

I. Vaccination

MSDH recommends that all eligible students, teachers, and staff 12 years of age and older receive COVID-19 vaccination.

Vaccination remains the primary public health prevention strategy to end transmission and allow for safe participation of in-person classes and school sponsored extracurricular activities. Schools should continue to promote COVID-19 vaccination for all eligible students, teachers, and staff.

Advantages of having the eligible (12 years of age and older) students, teachers, and staff fully vaccinated (2 weeks after the second dose of vaccine in a 2-dose series, or 2 weeks after a single dose vaccine):

- *Keep the learning environment safe for in-person learning.*
- *Lower the risk of transmission and reduce the severity of illness if infected.*
- *Limit school disruptions to in-person learning and extracurricular activities.*
- *If exposed to COVID-19, no quarantine is necessary for fully vaccinated individuals unless symptoms develop, keeping students and staff fully engaged.*

MSDH is committed to facilitating on-site COVID-19 vaccinations for all interested schools through the development of an Adopt-a-school program. MSDH is working to put in place partnerships with local providers and healthcare systems through the COVID-19 Community Vaccination Partnership (CCVP) to directly provide COVID-19 vaccinations to all eligible students, teachers, and staff so all schools and school districts have the opportunity to have COVID-19 vaccinations available.

When a local provider partners with an adopted school, barriers are removed.

- All students, teachers, and staff 12 years old and above have access to vaccinations regardless of socioeconomic status.
- Parents do not have to search or disrupt normal routines to locate appropriate vaccine and provider.
- Schools can choose dates that best accommodate the school schedule.

School/School Districts Role

- Partnership to ensure appropriate school age children have access to the Covid-19 Vaccine.
- Help obtaining consent from parental guardians.
- Designation of space for a vaccination clinic at your location.
- Support from trusted members of the educational community and school board.

Please visit <https://msdh.ms.gov/AdoptASchool> for additional details about the Adopt-a-school program. If your school or school district has interest in participating in onsite COVID-19 vaccinations for all eligible students, teachers, and staff, email your interest with the name of your school/school district and point of contact to Covid19vaccine@msdh.ms.gov



II. Universal Indoor Mask Use

Consistent with CDC Public Health Guidance, MSDH recommends universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 school settings when not eating or drinking, *regardless of vaccination status.*

Consistent and correct mask use by all students, teachers, staff, and visitors regardless of vaccination status is vital to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Children 2 years of age and younger should not wear a mask.

In general, people do not need to wear masks when outdoors, but masks should be considered in crowded outdoor settings or during activities of close prolonged contact with other students/teachers.

III. Physical Distancing

MSDH recommends schools maintain at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classroom settings, combined with universal indoor mask wearing, to reduce transmission risk.

MSDH recommends at least 6 feet of physical distancing and universal indoor mask wearing in all other indoor circumstances.

This guidance is made with an understanding of the potential physical constraints and other barriers in classroom settings when providing in-person classes for all students.

IV. Screening Testing

MSDH recommends routine screening testing of all *asymptomatic unvaccinated* students, teachers, and staff as an additional measure to prevent further transmission.

Screening testing can identify potential cases and prompt rapid isolation and quarantine of individuals exposed to COVID-19 who are not fully vaccinated.

Recommended algorithm for schools and school districts engaged in screening testing:

- Weekly screening of all interested **asymptomatic unvaccinated** teachers, staff, or students.
- Weekly screening of **asymptomatic unvaccinated** students (and teachers/coaches) participating in school sponsored extracurricular activities of any type, including sports, as a condition of participation (school district decision).

Additional Considerations:

- ***Fully vaccinated students and teachers/staff (2 weeks after completion of one-dose or two-dose COVID-19 vaccine series) do not require weekly asymptomatic screening.***



- Screening testing is not designed for symptomatic individuals. Any symptomatic student or teacher/staff should continue to be excluded from school/school district and be evaluated by their primary medical provider.

Managing Positive and Negative Tests in School Based Screening Testing

Positive Screening Tests

- Asymptomatic individuals who test positive with screening test should be excluded from the school setting for 10 days from the date of the test as long as they remain asymptomatic. If they develop symptoms, they should be excluded for a full 10 days from the onset of symptoms and are fever free for 24 hours before returning.
- Asymptomatic individuals with a positive rapid antigen test who have a negative molecular based COVID-19 test within 48 hours of the rapid positive do not require further exclusion and may return to the school setting. This only applies to molecular based tests (i.e., PCR) and does not include an additional antigen test or antibody tests.

Negative Screening Tests

- Asymptomatic individuals with a negative rapid screening test may continue in-person classes and extracurricular activities.

V. MSDH School Based Screening Testing Initiative

MSDH has developed a School Based Screening Testing Initiative to facilitate onsite screening testing for all unvaccinated asymptomatic students and teachers/staff at interested schools and school districts.

The program has two phases.

- In Phase 1, MSDH directly provides interested school districts with COVID-19 rapid tests for schools to conduct individual screening tests. More information can be obtained at [School-Based COVID-19 Testing Initiative - Mississippi State Department of Health \(ms.gov\)](https://www.ms.gov/health/school-based-covid-19-testing-initiative).
- In Phase 2, vendor agreements managed by MSDH will support on-site school-based testing for all interested schools and school districts. Every school district and school in the state will be contacted by the vendor to determine their interest in participation and discuss enrollment in Phase 2 for screening testing as outlined above.

Both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the MSDH School Based Testing Initiative are completely voluntary for all schools and students/teachers and staff.



VI. Isolation, Contact Tracing, Quarantine, and Identifying Exposed Individuals

MSDH recommends all schools continue to isolate and exclude COVID-19 infected students, teachers, and staff and continue contact tracing to identify exposed individuals for quarantine and exclusion from the school setting.

COVID-19 Infected Individuals and Isolation Period

- MSDH recommends individuals who test positive for COVID-19 be excluded from the school setting and remain in **Isolation** for a full 10 days from the onset of symptoms and are fever free for 24 hours (or excluded for 10 days from the date of the test if asymptomatic).
- Asymptomatic individuals with a positive rapid COVID-19 test who have a negative molecular based COVID-19 test within 48 hours of the rapid positive do not require further exclusion and may return to the school setting. This only applies to molecular based tests as the confirmatory testing (i.e., PCR) and does not include antigen test or antibody tests.

Contact Identification (Exposed Individuals)

MSDH recommends schools continue **Contact Tracing** to identify all individuals who are in close contact to COVID-19 within the school setting or in extracurricular activities.

COVID-19 Exposure Definition: The current definition of exposure to COVID-19 remains 15 minutes of cumulative contact over a 24-hour period at <6 feet. An infected person can spread COVID-19 up to 2 days before they have symptoms or 2 days prior to positive test if they have no symptoms, therefore, contacts should be identified who were exposed up to 2 days prior to onset or test date accordingly.

Unvaccinated individuals who meet this definition of exposure to COVID-19 should quarantine and get tested 3-5 days after exposure, however, the following exceptions to recommended quarantine apply:

- In the **K–12 indoor classroom** setting, the close contact definition *excludes students* who were within **3 to 6 feet of an infected student** (laboratory-confirmed or a [clinically compatible illness](#)) where
 - both students were engaged in **consistent and correct use of well-fitting masks; and**
 - other **K–12 school prevention strategies** (such as universal and correct mask use, physical distancing, increased ventilation) were in place in the **K–12 school setting**.
 - This exception does not apply to teachers, staff, or other adults in the indoor classroom setting. See CDC guidance at [Appendices | CDC](#)



- *Fully vaccinated persons in close contact with an infected person do NOT have to quarantine unless they develop symptoms (fully vaccinated persons are recommended to receive COVID-19 testing 3-5 days after exposure to rule out infection).*
- People who have tested positive for COVID-19 within the past 3 months and recovered do not have to quarantine or get tested again as long as they do not develop new symptoms.
- In all other settings the standard definition of close contact applies for unvaccinated individuals.

Quarantine Period

Students, teachers, and staff who are not fully vaccinated and are identified as close contacts to COVID-19, as outlined above, should be in **Quarantine** for a full 14 days. There are additional options to the 14-day quarantine period from the school setting as follows:

- 10-day option: Quarantine can end after 10 days if the individual has no symptoms during the entire 10-day period, or
- 7- day plus test option: If the individual has no symptoms for 7 days and has a negative COVID-19 test (molecular or antigen) collected on day 5, 6, or 7 of the quarantine period, the quarantine period can be discontinued quarantine after 7 days.
- *Fully vaccinated students and teachers/staff do not require quarantine after contact to an infected person.*

VII. Outbreaks and School Dismal Considerations

MSDH recommends the following considerations for outbreaks and school dismissals:

- **Outbreaks:** An outbreak is defined as ≥ 3 cases of COVID-19 in a classroom or group (sports team, group activity, band, or other) within 14 days.
 - In an outbreak setting, quarantine and exclusion from the school setting is recommended for all unvaccinated exposed persons in the outbreak group.
- **School Dismissal Considerations:** The school may consider dismissal of the entire student/faculty under the following conditions:
 - If ≥ 3 individual classroom settings, defined groups, or defined buildings are experiencing simultaneous outbreaks, or
 - If multiple absentees or exclusions of students and staff are leading to disruptions in on-campus functioning and impacting the learning environment as determined by the school.
 - If decided upon, dismissal should be for at least 14 days to interrupt transmission



VIII. Exclusion When Sick

All students, teachers, and staff who have symptoms of any infectious illness, regardless of vaccination status, should stay home from school and be evaluated by their healthcare provider.

Students, teachers, and staff should not be allowed to return to school until symptom and fever free for at least 24 hours, or if COVID-19 is diagnosed, until the isolation criteria for return to school are met.

IX. Reporting

Mississippi K-12 schools are required to provide weekly reports of cases among students, teachers and staff, number of outbreaks, and teachers and students under quarantine as a result of COVID-19 exposure. An outbreak in a school setting is defined as 3 or more individuals diagnosed with COVID-19 in the same group within a 14-day period. Please utilize the attached survey to report <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MSDHData>

X. Example Letters for Isolation and Quarantine for school Use

See the next pages for example letters for utilization by schools when communicating with parents/students.



COVID-19 Case letter Guidance for Individuals with COVID-19 in the School Setting

Dear Parent/Teacher/Staff member,

You have reported to the school that you or your child have recently tested positive for COVID-19. Please see the following instructions:

- You or your child may not return to the school setting until 10 days from the day your symptoms started. If you or your child had no symptoms, you may not return until 10 days from the date of the positive test.
- The individual who tested positive should remain isolated at home for the 10-day period. Stay away from all persons at your home. Do not leave your house, or come in contact with anyone, including the people you live with.
- If you do have household contacts, you must limit exposure to them. Stay in a specific room away from others in your home. Additional CDC guidance may be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/steps-when-sick.html>.
- After 10 days you must also be fever-free for at least 24 hours (without fever-reducing medication) with improvement of symptoms prior to returning to school.
- During the 10-day isolation period your child may not participate in any extracurricular school activities or sports.
- A negative test will not be required prior to return to school as long as the above criteria are met.
- A note from your physician is not required for return to school.

For additional information please see:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>
- Mississippi State Department of Health https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/14,0,420.html

COVID-19 Close Contacts Letter



Notification/Guidance for Close Contacts to COVID-19 in the School Setting

Dear Parent/Teacher/Staff,

You or your child have been identified as a close contact to a case of COVID-19 in the school setting. A close contact is defined as any individual within 6 feet of the infected person for at least 15 minutes or greater (cumulative) while the COVID-19 infected person is contagious. The contagious period is 48 hours before to 10 days after symptoms started (or 48 hours before to 10 days after test if there were no symptoms). Based on this close contact the following instructions are provided.

For 14 days* following potential exposure, you, or your child:

- Will be excluded from the school setting for a minimum of 14 days after last exposure to the case of COVID-19.
- Should remain quarantined at home for 14 days after your (or your child's) last exposure to the case.
- Are instructed to get tested for COVID-19 following your exposure, even if you do not have symptoms. MSDH maintains a list of testing sites on the website at https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/14,21912,420,874.html. (Please let your provider know that you have been exposed before you go in for testing.)
- Should monitor for symptoms and take your (or your child's) temperature twice a day for a minimum of 14 days from your last exposure.
 - If at any point your (or your child's) temperature is 100°F or more, feel like you are developing fever, or start having any of the symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, shortness of breath or a new loss of taste or smell) contact your healthcare provider for evaluation and retesting if indicated.
- May return to school following the 14-day quarantine and school exclusion period if no symptoms develop.

Students, teachers, and staff who are not fully vaccinated and are identified as close contacts to COVID-19 should be in **Quarantine** for a full 14 days. There are additional options to the 14-day quarantine period from the school setting as follows:

- 10-day option: Quarantine can end after 10 days if the individual has no symptoms during the entire 10-day period, or
- 7- day plus test option: If the individual has no symptoms for 7 days and has a negative COVID-19 test (molecular or antigen) result collected on day 5, 6, or 7 of the quarantine period, the quarantine period can be discontinued quarantine after 7 days.
- ***Fully vaccinated persons in close contact with an infected person do NOT have to quarantine unless they develop symptoms (fully vaccinated persons are recommended to receive COVID-19 testing 3-5 days after exposure to rule out infection).***
- People who have tested positive for COVID-19 within the past 3 months and recovered do not have to quarantine or get tested again as long as they do not develop new symptoms.

For additional information please see:



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- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>
- Mississippi State Department of Health https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/14,0,420.html
- CDC considerations for reducing quarantine time. See [Options to Reduce Quarantine for Contacts of Persons with SARS-CoV-2 Infection Using Symptom Monitoring and Diagnostic Testing | CDC](#) for full guidance.