



March 15, 2021

Carissa Moffatt Miller, Ph.D.  
Chief Executive Officer, Council of Chief State School Officers

Michael Casserly, Ph.D.  
Executive Director, Council of the Great City Schools

Dear Dr. Moffat Miller and Dr. Casserly,

Thank you for your letter regarding the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) recently released the [Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Mitigation](#) (Strategy) for reopening schools. Given the importance of key services schools offer and the benefits of in-person learning for children, it is critical for K-12 schools to open, and stay open, as safely and as soon as possible. K-12 schools should be the last settings to close after all other mitigation measures in the community have been employed, and the first to reopen when they can do so safely.

COVID-19 transmission in schools is associated with [community transmission](#). When community rates of COVID-19 are high, there is an increased likelihood that SARS-CoV-2 will be introduced to, and potentially transmitted within, a school setting. Given this likely association, a **first step** in determining when and how to reopen safely involves assessing the level of community transmission. School administrators, working with local public health officials, should assess the level of risk in the community and the likelihood of a case in a school facility, the likelihood that a case would lead to an outbreak, and the consequences of in-school transmission. Levels of community transmission are available on [state, tribal, local, and territorial \(STLT\) health department](#) websites and on CDC's [COVID Data Tracker County View](#).

Schools that are open for in-person instruction (either fully open or hybrid) may decide to remain open even at high (red) levels of community transmission. These decisions should be guided by information on school-specific factors such as mitigation strategies implemented and the number of cases among students, teachers, and staff. A decision to remain open should involve considerations for further [strengthening mitigation strategies](#) and continuing to monitor cases to reassess decisions. This should also be driven by a "classroom-first" approach; in-person instruction should be prioritized over extracurricular activities including sports and school events, a common source of school transmission, to minimize risk of transmission in schools and protect in-person learning.

Evidence to date suggests that when schools implement mitigation strategies with fidelity, transmission within schools can be limited. In addition to the Strategy, CDC released [The Science Brief: Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in K-12 Schools](#), which reviewed the latest scientific

evidence on COVID-19 among children and adolescents in school settings and about virus transmission. Studies of COVID-19 transmission in schools that used consistent implementation of multiple mitigation strategies – sometimes called layered mitigation – have shown success in limiting transmission in schools. For example, a [study](#) of 11 school districts in North Carolina with in-person learning for at least 9 weeks during the fall 2020 semester reported minimal school-related transmission even while community transmission was high. These schools implemented and strictly adhered to multiple mitigation strategies, including universal mask use and physical distancing. Additionally, a [study](#), involving 17 K-12 schools in five rural Wisconsin districts, found that transmission risk within schools appeared significantly lower than community transmission. The schools implemented student cohorting to separate classes/pods and required universal and correct use of masks. Of note, desks were not spaced 6 feet apart.

Although CDC recommends establishing school policies and implementing structural interventions to promote physical distance of at least 6 feet between people, we know that it sometimes not possible. The interventions presented below provide examples of ways to promote physical distancing and alternatives when 6 feet is not always feasible:

- **Cohorting:** [Cohorts](#) (or “pods”) are groups of students, and sometimes teachers or staff, that stay together throughout the school day to minimize exposure to other individuals across the school environment.
- **Staggered scheduling:** [Stagger](#) school arrival and drop-off times or locations by cohort, or put in place other protocols to limit contact between cohorts, as well as direct contact with parents.
- [Alternate schedules](#) **with fixed cohorts** of students and staff to decrease class size and promote physical distancing.
- [Install physical barriers and guides](#) such as sneeze guards and partitions particularly in areas where it is difficult for individuals to remain at least 6 feet apart (e.g., reception desks).

Thank you again for your letter regarding CDC’s new guidance for schools. CDC remains committed to protecting the American public during this pandemic. We appreciate your support as we work together to fight COVID-19.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Greta Massetti". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Greta Massetti, Ph.D.  
Lead, Community Interventions and Critical Populations Task Force  
CDC COVID Response