Guidance for Opening and Operating Schools During COVID-19

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RISK SERVICES

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OCTOBER 2020

Guidance for Opening and Operating Schools During COVID-19

This guidance document is to assist school leaders as they wade through the numerous considerations surrounding opening and operating schools. It includes direct references to CDC guidance and provides hyperlinks to useful resources. The hope is that readers will choose the course of action that best matches their needs and capabilities of administrators, faculty, staff, students and their families.

Topics for consideration include:

- Communication
- Staff Training
- Cleaning and Disinfection
- Hygiene
- Social Distancing
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COMMUNICATION

Below is a list of topics for consideration when developing a comprehensive and cohesive communication plan:

Before school opens:

Ensure protocols for the following:

o Maintaining contact with the local public health experts to understand how community transmission rates are trending (up or down), local transmission prevention requirements, availability of testing and reporting possible/positive cases

o Screening children, teachers and staff

o What to do in the event of positive symptoms or case, including:

- Isolating the positive person and getting them home or to a healthcare facility
- Establishing potential for transmission based on precautions taken while the positive person was among others (contact tracing)
- Determining whether to close off areas of school and isolate people who interacted closely with the positive person
- Cleaning requirements for affected areas

Communicate clearly to staff, parents and the community, including:

o Who will return to the school and when

o Any changes to how students and employees access the school

o Any wellness monitoring people may be subject to before or upon entering the school

o The cleaning and disinfecting activities that occurred before opening and operating and the plan in place to continue cleaning and disinfecting the school

o The actions utilized to enhance social distancing and the safety of students within the school

o How to report any safety or health issues or concerns, including possible cases of COVID-19

Designate specific staff person(s) to be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns (e.g., administrative staff person to field general questions and school nurse for health-related concerns). All school staff, students and families should know who this person(s) is and how to contact them.

CDC Communication Resources:
The CDC has numerous COVID-19 **Communication Resources** in many formats and languages to support communication efforts including:

- Toolkits:
  - K-12 Schools
  - Social Media
  - People 15 to 21
  - Youth Sports
- COVID-19 Videos
- Print Resources
- COVID-19 Graphics and Buttons

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While on Campus:

Ensure all staff and families know which staff person is responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns and how to contact this person.

o Develop a plan to manage and communicate changes in policies and procedures as the COVID-19 situation evolves.

o Reinforce the healthy practices that staff, students, families and visitors should follow by communicating with them regularly. Examples include:

- Post visual cues and signage throughout the school to reinforce proper hygiene and social distancing practices (see CDC **Print Resources** like **How to Protect Yourself and Others** and **Stop the Spread of Germs**).
- Broadcast regular announcements on reducing the spread of COVID-19 on PA systems or during morning announcements.
- Use school websites, email and social media accounts to include messages (e.g., videos) about behaviors that prevent the spread of COVID-19 (see CDC **Social Media Toolkit** and **COVID-19 Videos**).
- Ensure communication is developmentally appropriate and accessible for all students, including those with disabilities.

Reducing Stress:

Encourage staff and students to take breaks from watching, reading or listening to news stories about COVID-19, including social media, if they are feeling overwhelmed or distressed.

o Promote healthy eating, exercising, getting sleep and finding time to unwind.

o Encourage staff members and students to talk with people they trust about their concerns and how they are feeling

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STAFF TRAINING

Adequate training will be required to help faculty and staff get reacquainted with their responsibilities and the "new normal" that exists within the school.

- o   Train personnel conducting cleaning and disinfecting appropriately for the task.
- o   Train employees and school visitors on the hazards of COVID-19 exposure, how to report a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19, and proper procedures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including:
  - Hand-washing
  - Coughing/sneezing etiquette
  - Social distancing
  - Masks and face coverings
  - Other personal protective equipment (PPE)
- o   Train faculty and staff or designated individuals to enforce policies on:
  - Hand-washing
  - Coughing/sneezing etiquette
  - Social distancing
  - Masks and face coverings
  - PPE
- o   Train employees to carry out different roles and responsibilities, as needed if the school is operating with a reduction of on-site employees.

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CLEANING AND DISINFECTING

Before opening and operating, schools will need to ensure facilities are clean and disinfected. Plans also need to be developed to continue the cleaning and disinfecting activities at regular and scheduled intervals when campuses are operational.

The CDC/EPA **Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools, and Homes** provides clear direction on developing and implementing a cleaning and disinfecting plan. Below is a list of topics to consider when developing a comprehensive cleaning and disinfecting plan.

- o   Identify who is responsible for scheduled cleanings.
- o   Address whether teachers and students will participate in cleaning frequently touched surfaces in their classroom throughout the day.
- o   Develop a schedule for increased routine cleaning and disinfecting in collaboration with maintenance staff.

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- o Describe the frequency and method of cleaning and disinfecting.
  - Refer to the CDC/EPA **Making Your Plan to Clean and Disinfect** infographic to help determine when to clean or disinfect based on location, last occupancy and material type.
  - Clean all visibly dirty surfaces with soap and water before disinfecting them. Determine what surfaces and objects need cleaning with soap and water and which need disinfecting.
  - Describe what surfaces and objects need disinfecting. Examples include tables, doorknobs, light switches, keyboards, touch screens, cafeteria tables, handles, desks, phones, sinks, faucets and toilets.
  - Describe how porous material such as carpet or material in seating areas will be cleaned or disinfected. For high traffic areas, consider removing these materials or covering them with impermeable, easy to clean material (like commercial floor mats, runners, etc.).
- o Remove unnecessary objects and furniture from the school to reduce frequent handling and touching.
- o Close communal spaces or develop a plan for staggered use and frequent cleaning and disinfecting.
- o Consider methods for signaling whether an infrequently used room, surface or object requires, or does not require, cleaning or disinfecting from day to day.
- o Ensure the use of EPA-approved disinfectants (see **List N: Disinfectants for Coronavirus COVID-19**) and the adherence of adequate contact times.
  - EPA's **6 Steps for Safe & Effective Disinfectant Use**
- o Develop a protocol to ensure the safe and correct use and storage of cleaners and disinfectants, including storing products securely away from students.
- o Review the plan frequently with staff and janitorial staff to improve overall effectiveness and efficiency. If necessary, include a process for monitoring to ensure proper cleaning is taking place as required.
- o Maintain appropriate supplies of PPE needed for cleaning and disinfecting.
- o Ensure the people cleaning and disinfecting:
- o Are equipped with appropriate PPE, including gloves and gowns
- o Have adequate ventilation
- o Have read and are following the manufacturer's instructions, product labels and safety data sheets (SDSs) for the cleaners used
- o Have been appropriately trained on the hazards of the products used and how to use any necessary PPE
- o Follow all applicable state and local orders, as well as CDC and OSHA guidance, related to respirators, masks, face coverings and other PPE.

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HYGIENE

Schools should consider implementing the following hygiene strategies to encourage behaviors that reduce the spread of COVID-19:

o Teach and reinforce handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and increase monitoring to ensure adherence among students and staff.

- If soap and water are not readily available, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol can be used (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer).

- Refer to the CDC's **When and How to Wash Your Hands** guide for detailed instructions on handwashing and using hand sanitizer.

o Consider requiring staff and students to wash or sanitize their hands before entering and exiting the school and before each class.

o Create a schedule for frequent hand hygiene, especially for young children.

o Post signs and information throughout the facility emphasizing good hygiene, specifically, proper handwashing and coughing/sneezing etiquette.

o Encourage staff and students to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue. Used tissues should go in the trash, and hands should be washed or sanitized immediately after.

o Encourage teachers and possibly students to clean and disinfect their desks and frequently touched materials regularly.

o Ensure an adequate number of handwashing/sanitizing stations exist throughout the school.

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SOCIAL DISTANCING

Practice social distancing (i.e., maintaining a distance of at least 6 feet between individuals) in combination with other **everyday preventive actions** to reduce the spread of COVID-19. These methods include **wearing cloth face coverings**, avoiding touching your face with unwashed hands, and frequently washing your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

The webpage **Operating Schools During COVID-19: CDC's Considerations** offers the following guidance for implementing social distancing on school campuses:

Distance Learning / Remote Work
o   Determine what administrative actions to take for those who wish not to or cannot for health reasons return to the school. Options include:
- Continue to allow distance learning for children who are ill or at higher risk for severe illness, if possible.
- Implement alternate work schedules for staff, and continue to allow remote working if possible.

Staggered Scheduling
o   Stagger arrival times of students and attendance of certain classes or grades.
o   Stagger times of breaks, recess, and lunch.
o   Limit contact among small groups and with other students' guardians (e.g., staggered arrival and drop-off times or locations).
o   For staff, use flexible worksites (e.g., telework) and flexible work hours (e.g., staggered shifts) to allow for increased social distancing, especially if state and local health authorities recommend social distancing.

Identifying Small Groups and Keeping Them Together (Cohorting)
o   Ensure that student and staff groupings are as static as possible by having the same group of children stay with the same staff (all day for young children, and as much as possible for older children).
o   Limit mixing between groups if possible.

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Modified Layouts / Physical Barriers
o Modify the layout of the classroom. Space seating/desks at least 6 feet apart when feasible.
o Turn desks to face in the same direction (rather than facing each other), or have students sit on only one side of tables, spaced apart.
o Install physical barriers, such as sneeze guards and partitions, particularly in areas where it is difficult for individuals to remain at least six feet apart (e.g., reception desks).

Sharing Materials
o Discourage the sharing of items that are difficult to clean or disinfect.
o Keep each student's belongings separated from others' and in individually labeled containers, cubbies or areas.
o Ensure adequate supplies to minimize the sharing of high touch materials to the extent possible (e.g., assigning each student their own art supplies, equipment) or limit the use of supplies and equipment by one group of children at a time and clean and disinfect between use.
o Avoid sharing electronic devices, toys, books and other games or learning aids.

Control Movement Between Buildings, etc.
o Provide guides/signs (e.g., tape on the floor) directing staff and children to remain at least six feet apart while waiting in lines, moving between buildings and at other times.
o Limit hallways and stairways to one-way traffic flow, and indicate the correct direction by signs and tape.
o When a class period is over, have teachers move to their next class of students rather than having students move to a new classroom.
o Stagger arrival and departure times of students.
o Discourage crowding and gathering when students have free time and when entering or leaving school.

Communal Spaces
o Close communal use shared spaces such as dining halls and playgrounds with shared playground equipment if possible; otherwise, stagger use and **clean and disinfect** between use.
o Add physical barriers, such as flexible plastic screens, between bathroom sinks, especially when they cannot be at least six feet apart.
o Require organizations that share the school facilities to follow COVID-related practices.

Meeting/Conference Rooms
o Conduct employee/staff meetings virtually via audio or videoconference.
o Post signs designating the maximum capacity of the room.
o Remove/rearrange furniture to reinforce the maximum capacity and social distancing.

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Break Rooms and Cafeterias

- o Close break rooms and cafeterias, and have students/staff eat at their desk or workspace.
- o Eat outside if conditions allow.
- o Redesign cafeteria seating, such as sitting at every other seat.
- o Equip cafeteria tables with plastic dividers.
- o Stagger lunchtimes so social distancing can be maintained.

Meals and Food Service

- o Develop a plan for serving students individually plated, boxed or wrapped meals in classrooms instead of in a cafeteria, or implement staggered mealtimes to reduce the number of students or small groups within a cafeteria.
- o Use disposable food service items (e.g., utensils, dishes). If disposable items are not feasible or desirable, ensure that all non-disposable food service items are handled with gloves and washed with dish soap and hot water or in a dishwasher.
- o Individuals should **wash their hands** after removing their gloves or after directly handling used food service items.
- o Continue to ensure the **safety of children with food allergies.**

Gatherings, Visitors, and Field Trips

- o Pursue virtual group events, gatherings, or meetings, if possible, and promote social distancing of at least six feet between people if events are taking place. Limit group size to the extent possible.
- o Limit any nonessential visitors, volunteers and activities involving external groups or organizations as possible – especially with individuals who are not from the local geographic area (e.g., community, town, city, county).
- o Pursue virtual activities and events instead of field trips, student assemblies, special performances, schoolwide parent meetings and spirit nights, as possible.
- o Pursue options to convene sporting events and participation in sports activities in ways that minimize the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to players, families, coaches and communities.
- o If offering food at any event, have pre-packaged boxes or bags for each attendee instead of a buffet or family-style meal. Avoid sharing food and utensils.

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CLOTH FACE COVERINGS

The CDC recommends the use of cloth face coverings when in public places (like schools), especially when other **social distancing** measures are difficult to maintain. Specific considerations include:

o   Assess the feasibility of staff and students to wear cloth face coverings for everyday use. Decide how to provide and procure cloth face coverings to keep up with ongoing demand.

- Face coverings may be challenging for students (especially younger students) to wear in all-day settings such as school.
- Face coverings should be worn by staff and students (particularly older students) as feasible, and are the most essential in times when physical distancing is difficult.

o   Note: Cloth face coverings should not be worn by:

- Children younger than two years old
- Anyone who has trouble breathing or is unconscious
- Anyone who is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the cloth face covering without assistance

o   Teach and reinforce the use of **cloth face coverings** for those wearing them.

o   CDC's **Use of Masks to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19**

o   Individuals should be frequently reminded not to touch the face covering and to **wash their hands** often.

o   Remind wearers that cloth face coverings are to protect other people in case the wearer is unknowingly infected but does not have symptoms.

o   Provide information to staff, students, and students' families on **proper use, removal and washing of cloth face coverings**.

o   Follow all applicable state and local orders, as well as CDC and OSHA guidance, related to respirators, masks, face coverings and other PPE.

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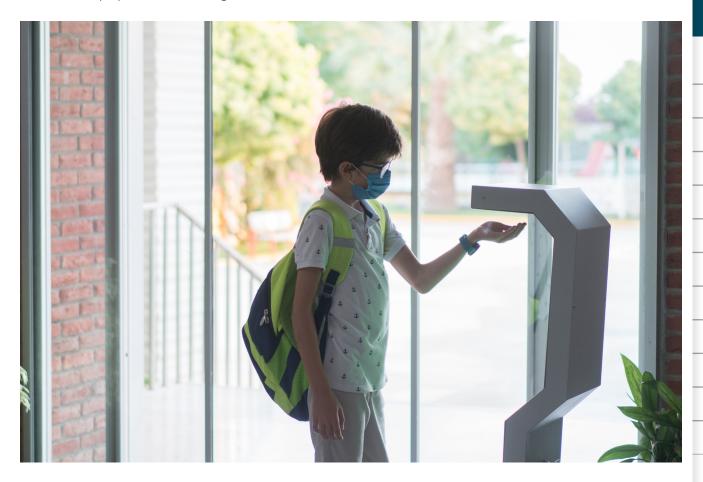
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SCHOOL ACCESS

o   Establish procedures to inform and instruct visitors of actions and policies in place within the school to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Visitors could include parents, community members, delivery personnel, and installation and repair crews.

o   Develop and implement a policy to screen and control access to the school by visitors.

o   Instruct visitors who are allowed to enter the building to adhere to established rules (i.e., use of face masks), posted signs and visual cues throughout the school.

o   Make necessary changes to employee entrances and exits to minimize the touching of door handles and maintain proper social distancing.

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Before Someone Gets Sick

o Establish a policy that requires or encourages sick students and employees to stay home.

o Make sure staff and families know they should not come to school and must self-report to administrators if, within the last 14 days, they:

- Have COVID-19 symptoms
- Are diagnosed with COVID-19
- Are waiting for test results
- Have been exposed to someone with symptoms or a confirmed or suspected case

o Consider providing or referring potential exposed or sick individuals to the following CDC resources:

- **What to Do If You Are Sick** (webpage)
- **COVID-19 Quarantine-vs-Isolation** (printable guide)

o Identify an isolation room or area to separate anyone who has COVID-19 symptoms or who has tested positive but does not have symptoms.

o Establish procedures for safely transporting anyone who is sick to their home or a healthcare facility, if necessary.

o Develop policies for returning to school after COVID-19 illness.

- Refer to the CDC's criteria for **When You Can be Around Others After You Had or Likely Had COVID-19** as guidance, including links to videos.

o Have a system in place to notify individuals of closures and restrictions put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19.

o Develop a plan to support staff, students and families experiencing trauma or challenges related to COVID-19.

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When Someone Gets Sick

o Immediately isolate individuals who are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, or those that have tested positive.

o If necessary, transport sick individual(s) home or to a healthcare facility, depending on how severe their symptoms are. If calling an ambulance or bringing someone to a healthcare facility, alert them ahead of time that the person may have COVID-19.

o The CDC offers assistance for determining **When to Seek Emergency Medical Attention.**

o Close off areas used by a sick person and do not use these areas until after cleaning and disinfecting them (for outdoor spaces, this includes surfaces or shared objects in the area, if applicable).

  • See the **Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility** section of the CDC's **Community, Work & School Cleaning and Disinfecting** guidelines.

o Advise sick individuals that they should not return to school until they have met CDC criteria to discontinue home isolation.

o Consider the need for short-term closure procedures.

o Refer to the CDC's What to Do if a Student Becomes Sick at School or Reports a New COVID-19 Diagnosis Flowchart.

After Someone Gets Sick

o Per state and local laws and regulations, notify local health officials, staff and families of cases of COVID-19 while maintaining confidentiality following the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

o Notify individuals of closures and restrictions put in place due to COVID-19 exposure.

o Advise those who have had close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19 to stay home, self-monitor for symptoms and follow CDC guidance if symptoms develop.

  • **Symptoms of Coronavirus** includes a Self-Checker (webpage)

  • **Symptoms of Coronavirus (COVID-19)** (Print resource)

o Wait at least 24 hours before cleaning and disinfecting. If 24 hours is not feasible, wait as long as possible. Ensure safe and correct use and storage of cleaning and disinfection products, including storing them securely away from children.

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Monitoring

The CDC's expectations are for schools to require sick students and staff to stay home and that the school establishes procedures for students and staff who are sick at school. These procedures include:

o Ensuring students and staff who become sick at school or arrive at school sick are sent home as soon as possible

o Keeping sick students and staff, particularly those with symptoms of respiratory illness, separate from well students and staff until they can leave

o Planning to have areas where these individuals can be isolated from well students and staff until they can leave the school

o Sharing resources to help staff and families understand when to keep children home. Consider providing or referring potential exposed or sick individuals to the following CDC Resources:

- **What to Do If You Are Sick** (webpage)
- **COVID-19 Quarantine-vs-Isolation** (printable guide)

If a school does perform monitoring of students and employees, consider implementing the following:

o Develop and implement a policy to monitor/screen students and employees for signs and symptoms of COVID-19. For example, consider checking the body temperature of all students and employees daily before they enter the building. Consider enacting the same monitoring procedures for visitors to your school.

o Monitor student and employee absences, and have flexible leave policies and practices.

o Consult with the local health authorities if there are cases at the school or an increase in cases in the local area.

o Ensure students or staff members who have been in contact with a COVID-19 case to stay home for 14 days.

o Inform parents about the measures the school has in place, and ask for cooperation to report any cases of COVID-19 that occur in the household.

o Waive the requirement for a doctor's note to excuse absences when there is a community transmission of COVID-19.

o Create a checklist for parents, students and staff to decide whether a student or staff member can go to school, taking into account the local health department standards for COVID-19. The checklist could include:

- Underlying medical conditions and vulnerabilities to protect the student or staff member
- Recent illness or symptoms suggestive of COVID-19
- Particular circumstances in the home environment, to tailor support as needed
- Special considerations regarding school transport as needed

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Testing

The CDC provides guidance for testing within [Interim Considerations for K-12 School Administrators for SARS-CoV-2 Testing](#). Below is an excerpt from the guide.

"While schools play a role in identifying students, faculty, and staff who have COVID-19 symptoms or who have had recent known or potential exposure to SARS-CoV-2, school staff are not expected to administer SARS-CoV-2 tests directly. In some circumstances, school-based healthcare providers (e.g., school nurses, physicians) may conduct SARS-CoV-2 testing in their capacity as healthcare providers, such as in school-based health centers. Not every school-based healthcare provider will have the resources or training to conduct testing, and accordingly, should not feel compelled to do so; these providers can help link students and their families and staff to other opportunities for testing in the community."

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BUILDING SYSTEMS

Opening and operating school buildings after prolonged shutdown or reduced operation requires coordinated planning, thoughtful evaluation and focused activity. Without proper preparation, building occupants can experience symptoms attributable to COVID-19 when the culprits are microbes or mold spores dispersed through the building's water and HVAC systems.

CDC, EPA, NFPA, NIOSH, ASHRAE and ICC offer resources to guide facilities managers through the building opening and operating process. Safety National developed a **Reopening Building Systems Guide** that highlights important building system considerations and provides direct links to pertinent resources, checklists, standards and white pages.

Ongoing Ventilation

CDC guidelines and experts recommend that ventilation be increased in buildings as much as possible, as adequate ventilation can lower the risk of infection. Consider taking these steps to improve ventilation in your building:

o Ensure ventilation systems operate correctly according to manufacturer's specifications and building requirements.

o Utilize natural ventilation by opening windows if possible and safe to do so and when environmental conditions and building requirements allow.

- Opening windows and doors when it is safe to do so
- If windows are open, students and staff should dress appropriately
- If using fans, make sure they do not blow from one person onto another

o Conduct classes outside when possible.

o Increase the percentage of outdoor air in your HVAC system.

o Increase total airflow supply to occupied spaces.

o Inspect filter housing and racks to ensure appropriate filter fit, and check for ways to minimize filter bypass.

o Run the building ventilation system even during unoccupied times to maximize dilution ventilation.

o Use portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fan/filtration systems to help enhance air cleaning, especially in higher-risk areas.

o Ensure exhaust fans in restroom facilities are functional and operating at full capacity when the building is occupied.

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SCHOOL BUS TRANSPORTATION

o Implement COVID-19 safety and sanitizing procedures to prevent spreading the virus to students on their way to and from school. Considerations include:

- Sanitize buses after each trip with EPA-approved disinfectants. Elements to sanitize should include:
  » Entry handrails
  » Seats (fronts and backs)
  » Window handles
  » Driver controls
- Supply each bus with a hand sanitizer station and train drivers as to how to instruct students to use it.
- Supply each bus with tissues and no-touch trash cans.
- Post signage emphasizing social distancing and good hygiene—specifically, proper hand sanitizing, coughing/sneezing etiquette and disposal of used tissues.
- Reference the CDC's **Cleaning and Disinfection for Non-emergency Transport Vehicles**

o Maintain social distancing on the bus through pre-planning, including the need for additional buses, revised routes and staggered schedules to meet the transportation needs of all students.

o Require/encourage students to practice social distancing by:
- Standing six feet away from other students when lining up to board or disembark from the bus
- Create distance between children on school buses (e.g., seat children one child per row, skip rows) when possible
- Keeping their distance from their bus neighbors when on the bus

o Review contracts with private bus services and drivers and, if necessary, revise to ensure that services and drivers follow all applicable state and local orders and directives, as well as CDC and OSHA guidance, related to cleaning and disinfecting buses.

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Resources referenced while creating this guide:

CDC:
- Operating Schools During COVID-19: CDC's Considerations
- Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools, and Homes
- Considerations for K-12 Schools: Readiness and Planning Tool
- Use of Masks to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19
- What to Do if a Student Becomes Sick at School or Reports a New COVID-19 Diagnosis Flowchart
- Guidance for Child Care Programs that Remain Open
- Interim Considerations for K-12 School Administrators for SARS-CoV-2 Testing
- Cleaning and Disinfection for Non-emergency Transport Vehicles

EPA:
- List N: Disinfectants for Use Against COVID-19
- EPA 6 Steps for Safe & Effective Disinfectant Use
- Making Your Plan to Clean and Disinfect Infographic

Important Notice: This guide is advisory in nature. It should only be considered as a resource in creating and maintaining loss control and risk management programs. This guide is necessarily general, identifying certain controls understood at the time of its creation to minimize the transmissibility of coronavirus and the resultant disease, COVID-19. It does not identify all possible hazards or controls. It is not tailored to your particular locations or operations. It is neither legal advice nor a statement of the law in any jurisdiction. Readers should consult with their legal counsel, insurance advisors, risk managers, and other professionals to achieve legal compliance and to establish loss prevention and claims management programs appropriately suited to their unique risk factors. We assume no liability arising from the contents of or your use of this document. We make no guarantee of results.

Sources:
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"Operating Schools during COVID-19: CDC's Considerations." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 Sept. 2020,
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