

NYS AAP–Chapter 2

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American Academy of Pediatrics

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The New York State American Academy of Pediatrics - Chapter 2, representing 1,500 pediatricians from Suffolk, Nassau, Brooklyn and Queens, strongly support the return of students to school and in-person education. However, this must be done with the utmost attention to the safety of students, teachers, and staff. In accordance with the guidelines set forth by New York State, the Centers for Disease Control, and the national American Academy of Pediatrics, it is imperative that local epidemiology and rates of local cases of SARS-CoV-2 inform decisions about school re-entry and continued school attendance throughout the early part of the school year. Specifically, a universal masking policy, adherence to distancing guidance with the use of needed barriers, limiting school populations to reduce the chance of spread, strict attention to hand hygiene, symptom isolation, and access to widespread testing policies are needed to reduce the burden of COVID-19 in schools and communities and prevent outbreaks.

Local school districts have been given the task of creating specific plans for the safe return of students, faculty, and staff in the safest manner possible, and we believe these policies will assist that effort:

Universal Mask Policy

All children and adults in the school should be required to wear masks at all times except when masking would endanger breathing or mental health. Consistent with American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines, only children with rare, severe respiratory illness should be excluded from masking. This would not include most children with common respiratory conditions such as asthma. Threats to mental health would apply to children with sensory issues or developmental delays for whom wearing a mask could cause extreme anxiety. Types of masks may vary. We understand some parents, teachers and staff have expressed concerns with respect to wearing a mask throughout the day. Mask wearing takes some effort to get used to, but with time and patience it can be accomplished.

Further guidelines specific to proper use of masks, periodic 'mask breaks' during the course of the school day and desensitizing mask-related anxiety will be coming from local pediatricians in your area. To build tolerance for wearing a mask, we recommend children practice wearing masks during the weeks leading up to the start of school. Further guidance to help increase mask endurance and reduce mask anxiety should be discussed with your local health care provider. School Districts may also wish to provide messaging and assistance toward this effort.

Maintaining Distancing

Consistent with New York State guidance, students, staff, and teachers should maintain 6 feet of social distancing, whenever possible, to ensure the reduction of viral spread via respiratory droplets. Using physical barriers wherever possible also mitigates viral spread. Allowing smaller groups of children in the schools at one time, and using the model of smaller grouped cohorts would still further reduce the risk of spread. Alternating school attendance by specific grouped cohorts of students on certain days of the week may be helpful in schools that cannot allow full return on all days because of inability to physically distance. Deep cleaning between each cohort group attending school would also reduce exposure. Social distancing and masking should also be implemented during bus transportation.

Hand Hygiene

Multiple areas of hand washing and/or hand sanitizing must be available. Guidelines for hand washing should include washing for at least 20 seconds. Hand washing prior to eating, removal of masks, or any other activity, is important to stress. Schools should employ messaging, education and guidance regarding the importance of proper hand washing in the prevention of the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and other illnesses like influenza and gastroenteritis, that are commonly spread in a school setting.

Symptom Isolation and Access to SARS-CoV-2 Testing

Importance should be given to advising all students, staff and teachers to stay home if exhibiting any symptoms of illness, especially fever. Parents should be aware of keeping children home in the presence of any of the symptoms listed in the NYS guidelines. Symptomatic students must be isolated and must consult with their healthcare provider. Isolation of possible contacts must take place once a diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 has been made. Accessibility to testing will be imperative to ensure the reduction of spread, and will provide information regarding local infection rates to guide further policy. When possible, schools should work in cooperation with local health departments to encourage and facilitate widespread testing of students however possible to provide the most accurate assessment of the incidence of SARS-CoV-2 in the community.

As per NYS guidelines, local health departments should assist in testing and isolation procedures after possible exposures. A contact of a person testing positive is defined as an individual who was within 6 feet for more than 10 minutes with the positive case. Duration of contact should be in accordance with local health department guidance. All guidance should be directed by the local health department and local health care personnel. Please follow state and local guidelines in preparation of schools for the return of students. As pediatricians, we would like to see the return of in person learning inside schools wherever possible, while also giving the utmost attention to the safety and health of all students, teachers, and staff.

Sincerely,



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