



FAQ: Reopening Public Schools

This is a collection of members' frequently asked questions about reopening schools in this COVID-19 environment. Information is constantly changing as the governor announces new executive orders and state and federal agencies develop policies and regulations regarding reopening. We will update this FAQ as more questions come up and the situation evolves.

1) The district is sending people back to the schools. What percentage of employees can be working at one time?

There are currently no staffing restrictions applicable to schools, hospitals or nursing homes. When staff is in the building, social distancing and the wearing of masks are recommended by the governor, the Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control.

2) Is my school required to provide me with a face mask?

Yes, currently, if you are an essential worker doing a job where you are in direct contact with members of the public, your employer must provide a mask. There is an Executive Order ([No. 202.16](#)) that requires all essential businesses or entities to provide any employees with face coverings when in direct contact with members of the public. While the executive order does not define "public," we interpret this to include students. This requirement may change, as state policy around reopening evolves.

Additionally, on June 8, 2020, the New York State Department of Health issued an ["Interim Advisory for In-Person Special Education Services and Instruction During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency."](#) This guidance states that schools must "ensure acceptable face coverings are worn by all staff whenever they are within six feet of students or other staff." It also adds that "School districts/schools must provide employees with an acceptable face covering at no-cost to the employee and have an adequate supply of coverings in case of replacement."

Lastly, The Centers for Disease Control, as the highest public health authority in the U.S., states that employers should encourage staff to wear a cloth face covering at work to contain the wearer's respiratory droplets and help protect co-workers and members of the general public.

3) I am concerned about social distancing. What does that look like for staff when we return to school?

Social distancing remains one of the most important mitigation efforts available to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The state Department of Health states that people should wear a mask and remain six feet apart. Just because you have a mask on does not mean social distancing rules do not apply. Creating a defined workspace is a best practice when possible. This space consists of the area six feet around a worker's post, including every item within this six-foot space. This helps reduce the likelihood of staff sharing things such as staplers, document holders, etc.

4) We have been told that the most effective way to stay safe is good hand washing hygiene. What do I do if my school does not have adequate supplies?

Yes, hand hygiene is a key component of fostering a safe and healthy workplace, especially during the fight against COVID. Your employer should provide you and your colleagues with what is needed to wash your hands and cover your coughs and sneezes. Examples include:

- Providing tissues and no-touch trash cans
- Providing soap and water in the workplace
- Encouraging good hand hygiene by placing posters at the entrance to the school and in other workplace areas where they are likely to be seen

If your school does not provide you with potable water for washing or there is no soap or means to dry your hands, you can reference that this is a requirement under Federal OSHA which is enforced by the New York State Department of Labor. See the standards here: [29 CFR 1910.141](#) Reference specifically sections (d)(2)(ii) , (iii) and (iv).

5) I am concerned about handling paper, mail, money and other items that others have touched. Should I wear gloves? What can I do to protect myself?

The risk of contracting COVID-19 from paper products is low. However, if you can, reduce the amount of shared paper products and, as always, practice good hand hygiene. Washing your hands regularly and resisting the urge to touch your face are best.

Wearing gloves might cause you to disregard good hand hygiene because people may keep wearing dirty gloves instead of washing hands. Gloves are useful only when you use them immediately and in a meaningful way. For example, a school nurse would put gloves on for an individual procedure and then discard the gloves immediately. Note: Wearing gloves is not recommended unless workers are required to wear them according to the Hazard Communication Plan or the Exposure Control Plan.

6) What should I expect the district to clean and how often?

You should expect your district to clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that are touched frequently. These items can include doorknobs, light switches, classroom sink handles and countertops, as well as toys, games and cubbies. Your school should consider using a checklist to track what has been cleaned and disinfected. Common high touch areas in a classroom should be cleaned and disinfected before and after students leave the space. Surfaces such as bathroom doorknobs and light switches throughout the school should be cleaned and disinfected 3-4 times a day. Visit this document for more guidance: [Reopening Guidance for Childcare Settings](#)

7) I want to bring in my own disinfectant, but my school won't allow me to. Why?

Disinfecting is the responsibility of school custodial staff. They are trained to use disinfectants in a safe and effective manner and to clean up potentially infectious materials and body fluid spills, such as blood, vomit, feces and urine. If teachers or other staff, besides trained custodial staff, need to assist with classroom cleaning, they should use a district-provided basic cleaner. A third-party certified green cleaner is required.

Schools discourage the use of products like Lysol and Clorox wipes brought from home because the

overuse of disinfectants can trigger asthma and are associated with adverse health effects. In addition to the dangers related to their overuse, disinfectants can give a false sense of security because they don't work properly if they are not used exactly to label instructions.

8) Will there be a way to control people coming in and out of the building and how will people know what the rules are?

School officials must educate school communities about the rules for social distancing, hand hygiene and wearing a mask when on school property. It is their responsibility to ensure that everyone is aware of the rules and the consequences for not following them. Schools should be encouraged to post signs at entrances and in high traffic areas outlining the health and safety rules of the building. Your local union should work with district administration to establish what the rules are, who will be permitted on the premises and what protocols must be established for entry to buildings. If the rules are not followed, officials cannot say they are providing a safe and healthy workplace.

The CDC says, if feasible, schools should conduct daily health checks (e.g., temperature screening and/or [symptom checking](#)) of staff and students. Health checks should be conducted safely and respectfully, and in accordance with any applicable privacy laws and regulations. School administrators may use examples of screening methods in the CDC's supplemental Guidance for [Child Care Programs that Remain Open](#) as a guide for screening children and CDC's [General Business FAQs](#) for screening staff.

9) Who will enforce social distancing and wearing a mask rules at school?

Speak with your local union about what enforcement protocols are outlined in the district re-opening plan. This plan should outline how the rules will be communicated to staff and the school community, who will be responsible for enforcing them and what system is in place for staff to report any violations of the rules.

10) Does it help prevent the spread of the virus if there is good airflow in my classroom?

Yes, increased fresh air intake is important, especially with the increased cleaning and disinfecting that will be happening. You want to ensure the air is as free of irritants as possible. Work with your school's Health and Safety Committee regarding solutions to increase the amount of filtered fresh air in classrooms and the school building as a whole.

Learn more about how to improve your school's indoor air quality here: [ASHRAE](#) (American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers)

11) I'm a custodian. What kind of PPE is required for the disinfectant and/or cleaner I am using and does the school need to provide it for me?

Yes, the school must provide PPE required to be used with any cleaning or disinfectant. You will know what PPE is necessary because it will be listed on the product's Safety Data Sheet (SDS). Your school must also provide you with its written Hazard Communication Program. This program must be available on site and it must include an inventory of all cleaning and disinfecting products used within the school. The program must outline how the information about the hazards related with these products will be shared with staff. Additionally, it should have information on product labels, where the Safety Data Sheets (SDS) are maintained and how staff will be trained. The SDSs include information on the

necessary personal protective equipment to be provided to custodial staff and must also be readily available at the school for review by any employee at any time. To learn more about this standard, go here: [Hazard Communication](#)

If your district officials do not provide you with a product's SDS or their Hazard Communication Program, they are in violation of the Hazard Communication Standard which is enforced by the New York State Department of Labor's Public Employee Safety and Health Bureau.

12) Our school does not have enough maintenance staff to keep up with the new disinfection plan and safety plans. What do we do?

Discuss this concern with your local union. District re-opening plans may generate a new set of duties and responsibilities and, therefore, increase the district's staffing needs. Make sure your school is aware of how much work needs to be done by creating a cleaning and disinfection plan and checklist. High touch surface areas will need to be disinfected throughout the day. Outline the new requirements to maintain the school ventilation system, social distancing supports and hygiene supply stocks. Map out your concern as soon as possible so that you can show your district officials that the current staffing levels will not allow them to live up to their responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace.

13) Our district doesn't have enough school nurses. There isn't always a nurse in every school. How will sick students and staff be helped if there isn't a health care professional on site?

Staff and students who appear to have symptoms upon arrival to school or who become sick during the day should immediately be separated from others. Schools must identify an isolation room or area to separate anyone who has COVID-19 symptoms or tests positive but does not have symptoms. School nurses and other healthcare providers should use [Standard and Transmission-Based Precautions](#) when caring for sick people. NYSUT believes there should be a nurse in every school. If there is not, staff that are identified as responsible for caring for sick individuals must be provided with appropriate PPE and trained on the standard and transmission-based precautions.

14) What is going to happen to team sports this year? Are they possible?

Social distancing remains key to slowing the spread of this virus. Currently there is no guidance from the governor, state Department of Health or State Education Department regarding the upcoming school sports seasons. In the meantime, speak with your local union about your concerns but also understand that it is your employer's responsibility to keep you and the school community safe. For more guidance about youth sports from the CDC, go to: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/youth-sports.html>

15) How do we open libraries? I am most concerned about the sharing of books.

All general plans for mitigating the risk associated with COVID-19 should extend to the libraries. This includes social distancing rules, enhanced cleaning practices and hand hygiene. COVID-19 does not survive long on porous surfaces, such as paper. On other surfaces like plastic and cardboard, the virus can survive longer. A recommended practice would be to have all returned books sit in a sealed plastic bin for three days before restacking them. Signage that promotes hand washing should also be posted in the library. For more guidance about opening libraries, go to American Industrial Hygiene Association's website: AIHA Library Guidance

16) I work with students who have IEPs and often require hands-on support. How do I protect myself?

Staff that work with students with disabilities are at a higher risk because of the nature of their jobs. They could be even more vulnerable if they are older than 65 or have an underlying health condition like chronic lung disease or diabetes. These factors could mean they are at [higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19](#). Your school must be very aware of each staff person's risk level and proceed from there. Maintaining social distancing can be difficult when working with students with disabilities. Enforcing a face mask rule and hand hygiene practices for these students may also prove difficult. As school officials begin their task of assessing risk and deciding how they will protect all staff and students, IEPs should be reviewed to understand the extent to which each student requires close contact. This is a complicated scenario and conversations must begin as soon as possible so that your school officials are aware of your concerns and the realities of your work, as plans move forward on how to reopen safely.