

**Diocese of Baton Rouge**  
**Catholic School Policy for Returning to School 2021-22**  
**July 12, 2021**

Committed to doing our part for the common good, the Diocese of Baton Rouge (“Diocese” or “Diocesan”) under the leadership of Bishop Duca has since March 2020 accepted the Governor’s invitation to help minimize the surge and spread of the coronavirus in Louisiana (the “State) by adopting practices such as wearing masks and observing physical distancing. Further, the Bishop’s focus on protecting each other included his suggestion that being vaccinated should be considered as an act of charity toward others in our communities. As ministries of the Church and institutions approved by the State Department of Education, Catholic schools in the Diocese have implemented safety protocols with fidelity for the protection of students and staff.

Schools completed the 2019-20 school year through online learning support provided by teachers during the State-mandated quarantine. After those few months of being away from campus, school leaders worked diligently during the summer of 2020 to establish operational practices that would allow for returning to school buildings for the 2020-21 school year. Under the protection of Act 9 of the 2020 First Extraordinary Session of the Louisiana Legislature signed by Governor John Bel Edwards on July 8, 2020, which enacted LA Revised Statutes 17:439.1 and 3392, schools were allowed to reopen campuses if the State’s COVID-19 guidance was followed. Thankfully, Catholic school consistency in following safety protocols resulted in a very successful reopening in-person and on-time in August 2020, and students had a good school year as the State moved in phases to a less restrictive guidance by the end of the school year.

Now, as we approach the 2021-22 school year, new guidance has been issued by the State Department of Education for schools to return to school. The recently issued *Ready to Achieve! 2021-2022 School Operational Guidelines* ("[Ready to Achieve](#)") supports the Governor’s Roadmap to Restarting Louisiana by utilizing current medical knowledge of how COVID-19 is transmitted to provide guidance for schools on physical distancing, masking, handwashing, respiratory etiquette, cleaning of facilities, contact tracing, quarantining, and other considerations for starting the 2021-22 school year. Realizing that the pandemic is not over, the vaccination rate in our State is not substantial and some students and staff are unable to receive the vaccine, schools have an obligation to provide a safe environment for all members of the school community.

After careful review of *Ready to Achieve*, Diocesan and school leaders have collaborated to address the requirements from the State to be able to return to campuses and provide families with as “normal” a school year as possible. Further, it is expected that procedures for schools to resume will be updated over time to address new information for maintaining in-person learning in schools across the Diocese as state guidelines are similarly adjusted.

According to the State Department of Education’s guidance for beginning the new school year, students and staff will generally follow the protocols in place as the last school year ended. The following policies for school operation are not intended to replace the State’s current guidance, but to provide clarity in several areas. Schools must reference *Ready to Achieve* as they formulate and implement safety protocols for the upcoming school year.

- **General Policy:** While on campus or at school events, all students and staff who have fully completed the vaccination protocol (shots and subsequent time requirement) do not need to

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mask or maintain physical distancing if a copy of the CDC vaccination card or verification from a similar State or medical authority is submitted. Schools must establish an isolation area for individuals who display any symptoms of illness and follow guidelines pertaining thereto.

- **Physical Distancing:** Unvaccinated students must remain at least 3-feet apart in classrooms where mask use is universal and static/cohort seating is employed. Unvaccinated adults must remain 6-feet apart from other adults and students. In common areas, all individuals must remain 6-feet apart. When eating, unvaccinated individuals must remain 6-feet apart, and vaccinated individuals are urged to maintain distance when possible. During activities with increased exhalation (i.e., singing, shouting, band practice, sports, or exercise), individuals must be 6-feet apart. Further, these activities should continue to be held outdoors or in large, well-ventilated spaces whenever possible. School buses may operate at 100% capacity if all passengers are masked, the windows are open, and assigned seating charts are utilized and enforced.
- **Temperature Check & Illness:** Students and adults do not need to be checked for temperature when coming on campus. Instead, self-monitoring of adults and parental screening of children prior to arrival at campus is required. If a student or adult has a temperature or is ill, they must immediately be moved to an isolation area and sent home. Water fountains must be closed, but bottle fillers are allowed.
- **Face Masks:** Anyone who provides the school with acceptable medical verification that they have fully completed the vaccination protocol does not have to wear a face mask while on campus or at a school event. All unvaccinated adults and students in Grade 3 – 12 must wear face masks while indoors, including classrooms. While outdoors, students and adults do not need to mask if they adhere to physical distancing of 6-feet or more.
- **Quarantine:** Vaccinated individuals do not have to quarantine, even if they are in close contact with COVID-19 infection, if asymptomatic. Students and staff members who are not vaccinated but who wear face masks may return to academic classes following a 10-day quarantine after being in close contact with a person infected with COVID-19, if asymptomatic. Because there is an increased risk of post-quarantine transmission associated with options to shorten quarantine, these individuals may not participate in any activities with a higher risk of spreading the virus (i.e., extra-curricular or co-curricular activities, including sports teams, PE class, music instruction, field trips, etc.) or take part in any activity that cannot maintain a 6-foot physical distancing. After 14 days, students and staff members in quarantine may resume all activities provided by the school. Students and staff members in early learning programs (Grades PK – 2) are required to quarantine for 14 days after close contact with infection. Students in quarantine for any amount of time (10- or 14-day) may have the support of virtual or online learning, depending on the school’s policy.
- **Activities:** Field trips can be part of the school’s activities if strict adherence to masking, cohort grouping and transportation requirements is followed. Band and Vocal Music activities may be held indoors or outdoors within physical-distancing, masking and instrument-covering

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provisions in accordance with guidance approved by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Catholic School Athletic Association and Louisiana High School Athletic Association sports programs may resume within the guidance of *Ready to Achieve*. Concerts, athletic events and other gatherings can be held with guidance found at <https://opensafely.la.gov/>. All schools must post signs throughout campus indicating that “All unvaccinated individuals are required to practice physical distancing and wear face masks.”

- **Travel and Overnight Activities:** Vaccinated students may share rooms on overnight trips. Single/Private accommodations must be provided for unvaccinated individuals. Transportation protocols must be followed, as per state guidelines.
- **Visitors to Campus:** Non-essential visitors (i.e., volunteers, external groups, organizations, etc.) are not allowed to visit campus unless required by law or by contract for services. All visitors are required to wear masks and maintain 6-foot physical distancing from others.
- **Child Nutrition Program:** Breakfast, lunch, and after-school meals will be provided at no cost to all students during the 2021–2022 school year. Grab-n-go packaged meals such as cereal bars, pop tarts, muffins, fruit, juice, and milk will be available for breakfast. Students will be afforded a main dish and/or menu choices for lunch, which will be provided through the cafeteria serving line. Extra items may also be purchased through the student’s cafeteria account, which can be funded through [www.myschoolbucks.com](http://www.myschoolbucks.com). After-school meals will be distributed to the program director at each site. For lunch service, hard trays will be used for cafeteria dining and disposable containers will be used for dining outside of the cafeteria area. Principals should assign seating in the dining area so that unvaccinated students are seated at least 6-feet apart. Cafeteria staff will sanitize tables and chairs, as per state guidelines.

The policies listed above come from concern for the safety of all stakeholders. The Diocese is grateful to pastors, school leaders, faculty, staff, advisory board members, parents and students for their vigilance in embracing health and safety practices to protect others in the community. Only through care for our brothers and sisters in Christ during this pandemic are we able to continue to enjoy learning communities that *Evangelize Hearts, Educate Minds, Encourage Talent, and Embrace the Future*.

**Fr. Thomas Ranzino, Vicar General**  
**Fr. Paul Yi, Secretary for Catholic Schools**  
**Dr. Melanie B. Palmisano, Superintendent of Schools**