



DIOCESE OF SIOUX CITY

Office of Evangelization, Discipleship and Family Life

Guidelines for Planning Faith Formation Programs in 2020-2021 in Light of COVID-19

Pope Francis' Prayer to the Virgin Mary for Protection from the Coronavirus

O Mary, you shine continuously on our journey as a sign of salvation and hope. We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick. At the foot of the Cross you participated in Jesus' pain, with steadfast faith. You, Salvation of the Roman People, know what we need. We are certain that you will provide, so that, as you did at Cana of Galilee, joy and feasting might return after this moment of trial. Help us, Mother of Divine Love, to conform ourselves to the Father's will and to do what Jesus tells us: He who took our sufferings upon Himself, and bore our sorrows to bring us, through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection. Amen.

We seek refuge under your protection, O Holy Mother of God. Do not despise our pleas – we who are put to the test – and deliver us from every danger, O glorious and Blessed Virgin. Amen.

Fundamental Considerations

As the events since March of 2020 have demonstrated, COVID-19 has reshaped many of our plans and priorities. We have had to adapt, adjust, be creative and to some degree, experiment. For the most part, we had to do this with little to no notice in the early days of spring. Current trends and the testimony of public health experts demonstrates that these new and different challenges are not going away anytime soon. Quite simply, this next faith formation year will be altogether different for all of us. That said, we are recommending that parish faith formation programs have plans for the following circumstances to provide religious instruction for students:¹

1. Customary onsite/classroom/in-person approach (keeping in balance the social distancing requirements).
2. Virtual/Online/Remote/At-home approach.
3. Hybrid approach, combining elements of both remote learning and in person.

Guiding Principles to Keep in Mind

In developing plans for the fall, CDC recommendations and protocols should be considered normative. The CDC provides the following "Guiding Principles:"

The more people a student or staff member interacts with, and the longer that interaction, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread. The risk of COVID-19 spread increases in school settings as follows:

- **Lowest Risk:** Students and teachers engage in virtual-only classes, activities, and events.
- **More Risk:** Small, in-person classes, activities, and events. Groups of students stay together and with the same teacher throughout/across school days and groups do not mix. Students remain at least 6 feet apart and do not share objects (e.g., hybrid virtual and in-person class structures, or staggered/rotated scheduling to accommodate smaller class sizes).
- **Highest Risk:** Full sized, in-person classes, activities, and events. Students are not spaced apart, share classroom materials or supplies, and mix between classes and activities.²

¹ Bear in mind, it is likely that parishes will need to have more than one formation option available to families for the entirety of the year (e.g. some parents will not be comfortable sending their children to onsite classes).

² CDC, COVID-19 Considerations for Schools, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>



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Additional Guiding Principles

- Policies and practices for 2020-2021 faith formation year should be flexible in responding to new information and developments. A willingness to adapt and refine approaches when specific practices are not working will be needed. However, this must also be kept in balance with ensuring the health and well-being of the parish community.
- Local parish faith formation policies for the 2020-2021 year should possess the ability to be adapted based on the level of viral transmission that may be present in the local community. Good communication with local public health authorities, clergy, and diocesan offices will be critical.
- Policies should strive to be practical and feasible.
- Special considerations should be made (insofar as it is possible) to best account for diversity of youth in faith formation programs, the needs of individual children, and that of each family. This is especially true of more vulnerable populations.
- Accommodations will need to be made if parents and caregivers decide to homeschool their children's faith formation program this year rather than participate in onsite classes. As primary educators and catechists of their children, they indeed have this right; even more with all that COVID-19 presents.
- Parish faith formation policies should strive to assist families by partnering with parents and caregivers, providing them support in delivering religious instruction to their children.
- Parish faith formation policies should also strive to support the overall health and well-being of the children in their programs, their families, and the parish community.
- "Finally, policy makers should acknowledge that COVID-19 policies are intended to mitigate, not eliminate, risk. No single action or set of actions will completely eliminate the risk [of transmission]... but implementation of several coordinated interventions can greatly reduce that risk."³

Changes to Routine and Behaviors that Help to Reduce the Spread

The task of planning our faith formation year in such a way to help to limit the potential spread of COVID-19 is multi-faceted. Not only do we have to plan the content to be taught, the method for its delivery, and accommodations that are needed, but there are many routines, behaviors and practices imbedded into and surrounding these faith formation programs that may need to be adjusted to better meet the challenges presented to us this fall by COVID-19. That said, we will start with some of these practices, routines, and behaviors before moving to the delivery of religious education.

When to Stay and When to Go

- Educate parents and children about when to stay home, and when to return to class.
- The CDC provides guidance on this topic here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/index.html>
- Even if only temporary, develop/adjust policies that help to encourage students to stay home without fear of "getting behind," or needing to "make up" requirements. "*Consider not having perfect attendance awards, not assessing [faith formation programs or participation] based on absenteeism...*"⁴

Avoid the Rush (Even if that may mean adjusting the religious education schedule)

- Insofar as it is possible, consider assigning students to use different entrances.
- If possible, stagger drop-off processes. This helps to limit contact between cohorts and parents.
- Put tape marks on the floor to help direct traffic.

³ APA, *COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry*, https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/?fbclid=IwAR3UCquyNuV8Z55m-FCrktO2iqc6XXDxFTWJUEG1_rsMI-4ZGsW9XawZbxw

⁴ *Considerations for Schools*



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With COVID-19, Not Sharing Is Caring

- It is best if students are not allowed to share spaces like cubbies and lockers. This may require making an adjustment to things as simple as where to hang up coats in the winter. If these spaces can be limited to one child per cubby or locker, that is ideal.
- The CDC recommends minimizing the sharing of high touch materials. This will be important in your younger grades. A new approach will be needed for communal pencils, crayons, and other craft or even skit/play items.
- Try to ensure adequate supplies to minimize the sharing of high touch materials. If budget constraints or other factors make this difficult, small groups of children could be assigned to a designated bundle of supplies, with disinfection in between. This limits potential exposure to a smaller group. However, this is not ideal as it is difficult to manage.

Minimize Movement

- Less travel across the campus will reduce the amount of interaction with others and potential spread of the virus.
- Large gatherings at the beginning and/or end of each religious education session should generally not take place. In the rare event that they do, social distancing is always to be maintained. These gatherings should be as short as possible. Face coverings are expected to be worn in transition times, and at any time when social distancing cannot be maintained.
- Limiting movement and mixing of multiple groups are an important factor in limiting exposure by creating a potentially smaller group. This is a critical aide in contact tracing if that becomes necessary.
- As much as it is possible, ensure that students and staff groupings are as static as possible by having the same group of children stay with this same group and catechist(s) for the entirety of the catechetical session.

Social Distancing: Rearrange Classrooms and/or Repurpose Available Spaces

- A six-foot perimeter for each student, in so far as it is possible, this is where planning for the 2020-2021 year in the classroom begins. All desks/students should be facing the same direction. No desks/students should be grouped together and/or facing each other.
- CDC recommends that people wear cloth face coverings in public settings and when around people who don't live in your household, especially when other [social distancing](#) measures are difficult to maintain.
- Cloth face coverings may help prevent people who have COVID-19 from spreading the virus to others.
- Cloth face coverings are most likely to reduce the spread of COVID-19 when they are widely used by people in public settings.
- Cloth face coverings should NOT be worn by children under the age of 2 or anyone who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.
- If six-foot perimeter is not feasible, a minimum of a three-foot perimeter is expected.⁵ However, students are asked to wear a face covering if a six-foot perimeter cannot be maintained in the classroom.
- Consider every possible space on your campus and the possibility of repurposing temporarily.

Social Distancing and Face Coverings

- Considering what is known about the dynamics of COVID-19 transmission, parish staff, volunteers and catechists should attempt to maintain a distance of six feet from other persons as much as possible. This includes in the classroom.
- Catechists should be diligent in maintaining a distance between themselves and students while they teach. This is especially important because in teaching they are facing students. "COVID-19 is mostly spread by respiratory droplets released *when people talk*, cough or sneeze."⁶ It is highly recommended that catechists wear face coverings while teaching. If a physical distance of less than six feet while teaching cannot be maintained, these face coverings are expected.

⁵ COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry

⁶ Considerations for Schools



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- Special accommodations should be made to assist students and adults who rely on the ability to see facial expressions and visual cues for communication (e.g. deaf or hearing impaired).
- It is unfortunate that face coverings have become a divisive issue. To help provide educations and support on this topic we strongly recommend reading and making available to parents the following CDC documents:
 - [Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19](#)
 - [About Cloth Face Coverings](#)
 - [Considerations for Wearing Cloth Face Coverings](#)

Social Distancing: Gatherings and Activities

- Limit activities to only those that can be done while maintaining social distancing.
- Pursue virtual group events, meetings, and gatherings if possible. This includes finding creative ways to hold virtual events and activities rather than student activities, plays, etc.
- Every effort should be made to limit group size to the extent that maintaining social distancing allows.
- Limit the number of nonessential visitors, volunteers and activities involving external groups or organization.
- In cases where there may be events, gatherings, or activities that may include signing, great care should be taken for social distancing to be maintained and all people should face the same direction (even then, masks are recommended). Adults leading children in singing should be at least 10 feet away from their students. Keep in mind that it is best to minimize the time spent in proximity to one another. In addition, droplets that spread viral contamination are propelled from the mouth while singing. If music is to be used, it should only be to a very limited degree.
- *Regarding liturgical and/or sacramental events and activities (e.g. Mass, penance services, etc.) it is required that the Diocese of Sioux City's "[Instructions for Resuming the Public Celebration of Mass](#)" be followed. Likewise, guidance provided by the Office of Worship in conjunction with the Diocesan Post-COVID-19 Task Force should be adhered to. This will require diligence in staying up to date on the latest information.*

Cleaning and Disinfecting

- Sufficient cleaning and sanitizing materials must be on hand and each parish needs to be responsible for acquiring these supplies. Individual parishes should assess their needs and act accordingly, networking with other parishes, schools, and local businesses to obtain cleaning products if needed. These sanitizers and disinfectants must be certified and approved for use against COVID-19.
- Proper procedures for cleaning and sanitizing the church/parish center/classroom are to be put in place. Proper sanitation procedures can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/clean-disinfect/index.html>
- Hand sanitizer, preferably in touchless dispensers, are to be provided at every entrance and used by each student as they enter. Hand sanitizer should also be available in every room where students will gather.