



# **Interim Fall Guidance for Catholic Schools to Assist in Developing Reopening Plans**

Updated September 2, 2020



“Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet, our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again: Do not be afraid” (Mt 28:5).  
And we, together with Peter, “cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us”  
(1 Pet 5:7).

**-Pope Francis**

**Strong in the Face of Tribulation: A Sure Support in Time of Trial**





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## PURPOSE

*This guidance document is being issued to Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Austin to assist in developing a reopen plan. It is intended to assist Catholic Schools during the 2020-2021 academic school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The document was prepared using the Texas Education Agency (TEA) materials, including the agency document on [“SY 20-21 Public Health Planning Guidance,”](#) Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines and Texas Catholic of Bishops (TCCB) Education Department.*

*Additionally, this guidance document is being provided based on the public health situation as we understand it today and is intended to support Catholic schools in planning for school year 2020-2021 activities and instruction beginning in Fall 2020. Changes to the public health situation over the course of the year may necessitate changes to this guidance, including additional restrictions to school operations.*

*Finally, please note this guidance cannot anticipate every unique situation. Catholic schools should stay informed and take actions based on common sense and wise judgment that will protect health and further their educational mission. In this respect, Catholic schools should be mindful of applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations, workplace safety standards, and health standards, including the latest [CDC Guidance for Schools,](#) to address the needs of both students and employees during the pandemic period.*





## PUBLIC HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

The virus that causes COVID-19 can infect people of all ages, and Catholic school administrators, teachers, and staff should do everything feasible to keep students safe. That said, research from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), among others, has found that while children do get infected by COVID-19 and some severe outcomes have been reported in children, relatively few children with COVID-19 are hospitalized or have severe symptoms.

Nevertheless, a child with a mild or even asymptomatic case of COVID-19 can spread the infection to others. The same is true for adults. Even if an infected person is only mildly ill, the people they spread it to may become seriously ill or even die, especially if that person is 65 or older with preexisting health conditions that place them at higher risk.

While it is not possible to eliminate all risk of furthering the spread of COVID-19, the current science suggests there are many steps schools can take to reduce the risks to students, teachers, staff, and their families significantly. This guidance document contains information on four sets of practices that minimize the likelihood of viral spread, some of which are requirements for all schools and others that are recommendations. The practices are:



The prevention and mitigation practices recommended in this document are designed to significantly reduce the likelihood that a coronavirus outbreak occurs on campus. Catholic schools should take their local public health context into account throughout the year as they determine which of the prevention and mitigation recommendations they implement.

Catholic schools operating in regions with higher rates of COVID-19 spread should apply recommendations more stringently than those with very few or no cases in their regions. Additionally, Catholic schools should consider stringently applying prevention and mitigation recommendations to adults on campuses, even when it might not be feasible to do so for students. Consistently implementing recommendations to the extent feasible is the best way to reduce the potential negative impact of infection on students' educational experiences.

There will almost certainly be situations that necessitate temporary school closure due to positive COVID-19 cases in schools. Parents, educators, and school administrators should be prepared for this in the event that it occurs, while actively working to prevent it through prevention and mitigation practices.

## **PROVIDE NOTICE: PARENTAL AND PUBLIC NOTICES**

### **Developing a Plan for On-Campus Activities and Instruction**

Catholic schools must post for parents and families of students, one week prior to the start of on campus activities and instruction, a summary of the plan they will follow to mitigate COVID-19 spread in their schools based on the requirements and recommendations outlined in this guidance document. Each school accredited by the TCCB ED must submit their plan to the superintendent by July 31, 2020. It is recommended that, within this summary, schools designate a staff person or group that is responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns and clearly communicate for all school staff and families who this person or group is and how to contact them.

# PREVENT: PRACTICES TO PREVENT THE VIRUS FROM ENTERING THE SCHOOL

## Screening Questions for COVID-19 Before Campus Access



1. Catholic schools should require all school personnel to self-screen for COVID-19 symptoms before coming onto campus each day including taking their own temperature. Symptoms are listed at the end of this document. School personnel would report to the Catholic school if: (a) they have come into close contact with an individual who is test-confirmed with COVID-19; or (b) they themselves have COVID-19 symptoms.



2. Catholic schools should develop a plan for screening students to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to determine if: (a) they or a household member have the COVID-19 symptoms listed in this document; or (b) they have had close contact with an individual who is test-confirmed with COVID-19 or (c) if they have a household member that has been testing and is waiting for results. Regularly performing a forehead temperature check of otherwise asymptomatic students in school is not recommended, but the practice is also not prohibited by this guidance.



3. Excluding parental drop-off and pick-up as discussed above, before visitors are allowed onto campuses, Catholic schools should screen all visitors to determine if: (a) they have COVID-19 symptoms listed in this document; or (b) they have had close contact with an individual who is test-confirmed with COVID-19. When practical, screening questions could be supplemented with temperature checks of adults.



4. Catholic schools are permitted to prevent any individual who fails the screening criteria from being admitted to the campus or a bus until they meet any of the criteria for re-entry to the campus, as described below.

### Individuals Confirmed, Suspected, or Exposed to COVID-19

- I. Any individuals—including teachers, staff, students, volunteers or other campus visitors—who themselves either: (a) are test-confirmed to have COVID-19; or (b) experience the symptoms of COVID-19 (listed below) must stay at home throughout the infection period, and cannot return to campus until the Catholic school screens the individual to determine any of the below conditions for campus re-entry have been met:

- In the case of an individual who was diagnosed with COVID-19, the individual may return to school when all three of the following criteria are met:

- i. at least **one day (24 hours)** have passed since recovery (resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications)
- ii. the individual has **improvement in symptoms** (e.g., cough, shortness of breath); and
- iii. at least **ten days have passed** since symptoms first appeared.

- In the case of an individual who has symptoms that could be COVID-19 and who is not evaluated by a medical professional or tested for COVID-19, such individual is assumed to have COVID-19, and the individual may not return to the campus until the individual has completed the same three-step set of criteria listed above.
- If the individual has symptoms that could be COVID-19 and wants to return to school before completing the above stay at home period, the individual must either (a) obtain a medical professional's note clearing the individual for return based on an alternative diagnosis or (b) obtain an acute infection test (at a



physician's office, approved testing location, or other site) that comes back negative for COVID-19.

2. Individuals—including students, teachers, staff, volunteers or other campus visitors—who have had close contact with someone who is test-confirmed to have COVID-19, as narrowly defined in this document and as determined by the appropriate public health agency, should stay at home through the 14-day incubation period, and should not be allowed on campus.
  - Catholic schools should screen individuals after the incubation period has concluded, and if the individual did not experience COVID-19 symptoms during that period, the individual can be allowed back on campus. If the individual experienced symptoms, they must stay at home until the conditions outlined above have been met.

Any individual (student, staff or visitor) with a household member that has tested positive or is waiting for results should not be permitted to enter a school building or attend any in-person school event or activity.

EXCEPTION: If the symptomatic household member is determined to not have COVID-19 and is released by a medical provider based on an alternate diagnosis or receives a negative COVID-19 acute respiratory viral test result, all remaining household members may be permitted for readmittance upon this release.

### **Identifying Possible COVID-19 Cases on Campus**

- I. Schools must immediately separate any student who shows COVID-19 symptoms while at school until the student can be picked up by a parent or guardian and immediately notify the diocesan superintendent. Schools must clean the areas used by the individual who shows COVID-19 symptoms while at school (student, teacher, or staff) as soon as is feasible.

2. Employees or students who report feeling feverish should be given an immediate temperature check to determine if they are symptomatic for COVID-19.

Any employee or student should be sent home if becomes ill at school based on the following criteria:

- A temperature of 100°F or higher.
- If the temperature is 99.0 – 99.9°F, recheck temperature in 30 minutes and continue to check throughout the day. If temperature increases, send employee or student home.



## RESPOND: PRACTICES TO RESPOND TO A TEST-CONFIRMED CASE IN THE SCHOOL

### Required Actions if Individuals with Test-Confirmed Cases Have Been in a School



1. If an individual who has been in a school is test-confirmed to have COVID-19, **the school must notify their diocesan superintendent and its local health department**, in accordance with applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations.



2. Schools must **close off areas that are heavily used** by the individual with the test-confirmed case (student, teacher, or staff) until the non-porous surfaces in those areas can be disinfected, unless more than 7 days have already passed since that person was on campus.



3. Consistent with diocesan and school notification requirements for other communicable diseases, and consistent with legal confidentiality requirements, **schools must notify all teachers, staff, and families of all students** in a school if a test-confirmed COVID-19 case is identified among students, teachers or staff who participate on any on campus activities.

## MITIGATE: PRACTICES TO MITIGATE THE LIKELIHOOD OF COVID-19 SPREAD INSIDE THE SCHOOL

### General Health and Hygiene Practices

I. Schools should have hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water at each entrance. They should provide hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water in every classroom.

- I. Students, teachers, staff, and campus visitors should be encouraged to sanitize and/or wash hands frequently.
  - Catholic schools are encouraged to have students engage in supervised handwashing for at least 20 seconds at least two times each day, in addition to being encouraged to wash hands after using the restroom and before eating.
  - Catholic schools are encouraged to teach students good handwashing techniques.
  - Students, teachers, staff, and campus visitors should be encouraged to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, and if not available, covered in their elbows. Used tissues should be thrown in the trash, hands should be washed immediately with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or hand sanitizer should be used.
2. Campuses should institute more frequent cleaning practices, including additional cleaning by janitorial staff, as well as provide the opportunity for children to clean their own spaces before and after they are used, in ways that are safe and developmentally appropriate.
  - Schools should arrange for additional cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces that are touched in common throughout the day. This would include objects such as door handles, common tables/desks, shared supplies such as art supplies, and high touch devices such as shared laptops or tablets.
  - Schools should arrange for cleaning of commonly touched surfaces in classrooms between different class groups, if the same room will be used by multiple class groups.

- The [CDC has provided guidance on cleaning](#) community buildings to prevent COVID-19 spread.
  - Schools should ensure all cleaning products are stored safely, including storing harmful products where children cannot access them, and ensuring that harmful cleaning products are not used near children.
3. Whenever possible, schools should open windows or otherwise work to improve air flow by allowing outside air to circulate in the building.
  4. If a building has remained dormant for an extended period, we recommend you review CDC guidance on maintaining water system safety when buildings are unused for extended periods of time and apply this guidance as appropriate.
  5. The CDC provides a range of printed resources such as posters that promote protective measures and can serve as helpful reminders of best practices. Schools may use these or may create their own reminders.
  6. On the first day of school, Catholic schools must provide instruction to students on appropriate hygiene practices consistent with the mitigation practices adopted by the Catholic school. This instruction should be reinforced and repeated throughout the pandemic.

## Masks and Face Shields

1. For the purposes of this document, masks include non-medical grade disposable face masks, cloth face coverings (over the nose and mouth), or full-face shields to protect eyes, nose, and mouth. Full face shields may be used in place of a mask to protect eyes, nose, and mouth whenever a mask is not feasible or whenever the education context may benefit from the ability to see an individual's full face.
2. Schools must follow diocesan, state and/or local face covering requirements. Consistent with the actions taken by many organizations across the state, consider having all employees and visitors wear masks or face shields. This could be especially important

where staff congregate in relatively close settings, for example, during staff meetings or in employee break rooms, or where visitors may congregate.

3. Similarly, consider having students for whom it is developmentally appropriate wear masks or face shields at times when they will be in close proximity to other students for an extended period (i.e., when they would otherwise meet the definition of a close contact).
4. Young children and persons who are unable to adjust or remove masks should not be regarded as suitable candidates for wearing masks or face shields.
  - It is not developmentally appropriate for students in kindergarten and below to wear masks.
  - It may not be developmentally appropriate for some other students, including some students with disabilities, to wear masks.

## Student-Teacher Groupings

1. Where feasible without disrupting the educational experience, encourage students to practice social distancing.
2. In classroom spaces that allow it, consider placing student desks a minimum of six feet apart when possible.
3. In classrooms where students are regularly within six feet of one another, schools should plan for more frequent hand washing and/or hand sanitizing and should consider whether increased airflow from the outdoors is possible.



## Use of Non-Classroom Space

1. When feasible and appropriate (for example, in physical education classes as weather permits), it is preferable for students to gather outside, rather than inside, because of likely reduced risk of virus spread outdoors.
2. Catholic schools with policies that allow it may open facilities to the public. Operation of the facilities should be done consistent with governor's executive orders for similar activities.
3. Campuses should plan for entry, exit, and transition procedures that reduce large group gatherings (of students and/or adults) in close proximity. Consider staggering school start and end times, assigning students to entries to ensure even distribution of students entering/exiting at each door, providing guidance to students to enter one at a time and wait six feet apart outside the entrance, and, where appropriate, encouraging parents to remain outside during drop-off and pick-up.
4. Catholic schools should consider practices that reduce the likelihood that students meet the close contact definition (defined below) at lunch. This could include having students eat lunch at their desks. It could include the use of seats that are spaced at least 6 feet apart. It could include the use of dividers on cafeteria tables if they can serve the purpose of shielding the students from respiratory droplets with which they might otherwise come into contact. For meal service itself, consider individually plated meals with disposable food service items for students who do not bring their own lunch.

## Transportation Recommendations

1. For those Catholic schools offering transportation, they should consider requiring students and staff to use hand sanitizer upon boarding the bus.
2. For bus routes where students need to sit in close proximity within the bus, consider having all students for whom it is developmentally appropriate wear masks or face shields while on a bus.

3. When possible, schools should open windows to allow outside air to circulate in the bus.
4. Catholic schools should encourage families to drop students off, carpool, or walk with their student to school to reduce possible virus exposure on buses.
5. Buses should be thoroughly cleaned after each bus trip, focusing on high-touch surfaces such as bus seats, steering wheels, knobs, and door handles. During cleaning, open windows to allow for additional ventilation and air flow.

## Visits to Schools

1. Parents and other adults may visit schools, as permitted by Catholic school policies. During these visits, parents and other visitors must follow virus prevention and mitigation requirements of the school.
2. Catholic schools should restrict visits in schools to only those essential to school operations.

## Staffing

1. Employees of Catholic schools, like employees of any organization, must continue to meet the work expectations set by their employers.
2. School teachers and staff will be trained specifically on the protocols outlined in this document and the practices adopted by the Catholic school. Additionally, while not developed with this exact guidance in mind, Johns Hopkins University offers a free online course on [Understanding the COVID 19 Pandemic](#), that all employees will complete.
3. Catholic schools should attempt to reduce in-person staff meetings or other opportunities for adults to congregate in close settings. When those meetings are necessary, consider the use of masks or dividers, and schools should also consider whether increased airflow from the outdoors is possible in those settings.

## COVID-19 SYMPTOMS

In evaluating whether an individual has symptoms consistent with COVID-19, consider the following questions:

Have they recently begun experiencing any of the following in a way that is not normal for them?

- Feeling feverish or a measured temperature greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit
- Loss of taste or smell
- Cough
- Difficulty breathing
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Shortness of breath
- Headache
- Chills
- Sore throat
- Shaking or exaggerated shivering
- Significant muscle pain or ache
- Diarrhea
- Fatigue

### Close Contact

This document refers to “close contact” with an individual who is test-confirmed to have COVID-19. The definition of close contact is evolving with our understanding of COVID-19, and individual case scenarios should be determined by an appropriate public health agency. In general, close contact is defined as:

- a. being directly exposed to infectious secretions (e.g., being coughed on); or
- b. being within 6 feet for 15 minutes or greater during the infectious period; however, additional factors like case/contact masking (i.e. both the infectious individual and the potential close contact have been consistently and properly masked), ventilation, presence of dividers, and case symptomology may affect this determination.

Either (a) or (b) defines close contact if it occurred during the infectious period of the case, defined as two days prior to symptom onset to 10 days after symptom onset until the time the patient is isolated.

## Screening Questionnaire Information

1. When asking individuals if they have symptoms for COVID-19, Catholic schools must only require the individual to provide a “Yes” or “No” to the overall statement that they are symptomatic for COVID-19, as opposed to asking the individual for specific symptom confirmation. Catholic schools are not entitled to collect information during screening on the specific health information of an individual beyond that they are symptomatic.
2. The following screening questions will be asked of all employees, visitors and students:
  - Have they recently begun experiencing any of the following symptoms in a way that is not normal for you?
  - Have you had close contact with an individual who is test-confirmed in the past 14 days?
  - Do you have a household member that has been tested and is waiting for results?
  - Have you traveled to a restricted area that required quarantine for return within the last 14 days?

Once it is determined that individuals who responded meet the criteria for re-entry, Catholic schools must destroy those individuals’ responses.