

Catholic Schools COVID FAQ

Please note: Schools within Allegheny County work directly with Allegheny County Health Department. Schools within Beaver, Butler, Lawrence or Washington Counties work with the Pennsylvania Department of Health. Only six counties in the Commonwealth have their own health departments.

Updated on January 12, 2021 – see changes in blue.

How is someone considered to be a “close contact” and what are the requirements if my child is forced to quarantine for being a “close contact” of a positive case?

A “close contact” is someone who meets at least one of the following:

- Has been within 6 feet or less of a positive COVID-19 case for 15 minutes or more
- Has provided care at home to someone who is sick with COVID-19
- Had direct physical contact with someone who is sick with COVID-19 (hugged or kissed them)
- Has shared eating or drinking utensils with someone who has COVID-19
- Has been exposed to respiratory droplets from someone who has COVID-19

A close contact is required, as per the Pennsylvania Department of Health (PA DoH), to quarantine at home for 14 days after his/her last contact with the affected individual. Even if this person has no symptoms and/or tests negative for COVID-19, he/she must still quarantine as, according to PA DoH, the virus could take up to 14 days to develop. Any student or adult who is within their 14 day quarantine window should **stay home** and limit interaction with others. A close contact could feel fine and be experiencing no symptoms (asymptomatic) but could still have the virus and pass to others.

Please Note: CDC, PA DoH, and ACHD introduced a shortened quarantine option for close contacts of 10 days dependent upon specific circumstances. **Our policy will remain unchanged as indicated in my letter with the 14-day close contact quarantine.** This remains the overarching recommendation from the three medical agencies. The decision to continue with fourteen days was made in consultation with medical professionals and supports our commitment to do all we can to keep our schools open for in-person instruction.

What guidance will the schools use to determine travel quarantines?

Schools will implement the Pennsylvania Department of Health order effective Tuesday, January 12:

<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/Documents/Diseases%20and%20Conditions/Travel%20Order%20Amendment.pdf>

CDC updated the social distancing guidelines. Do these changes affect the schools?

These are the updated social distancing guidelines-- prior to last week, the social distancing guidelines agreed upon by CDC, PADoH, and Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) listed the suggested social distance of 6 feet as the guideline for safety. Additionally, if an individual is 6 feet or less for 15 minutes or more, regardless of masking, they are considered to be a close contact and will be required to quarantine for 14 days from last contact. CDC recently revised the guidelines to specify 15 minutes cumulative in a 24 hour period. PADoH/ACHD has indicated that the 15 consecutive minute guidelines will still be followed by the Department when determining "close contact", but other circumstances may be considered (ex. very close contacts) that may warrant someone being identified as a close contact when the 15 minutes is not achieved.

What is the difference in the length of quarantine of someone who tests positive as compared to someone who is identified as a close contact?

COVID-19 Positive

- In accordance with CDC guidance, a person who test positive for COVID-19 must remain home in isolation until all of the following are true: (1) At least 10 days have passed since the onset of symptoms AND (2) Until fever-free without anti-fever medications for 24 hours AND (3) Symptoms are improving.

Close Contact

- If a person is identified as a close contact of someone who is positive and has no symptoms, he/she is required to quarantine for 14 days. This is because the incubation period for the onset of symptoms is 2 to 14 days, and the best way to make sure he/she does not spread the virus is for him/her to stay home for the full 14 days.

Living in the same household as a positive COVID-19 case

- A person living in the same household as a positive case must quarantine as follows
 - If the positive person is asymptomatic, quarantine would be ten days from the positive test result.
 - If the positive person is symptomatic, quarantine would be 14 days after resolution of symptoms including fever.

Why should my child have to wear a mask when he/she is not in school?

Importance of Masking and Social Distancing

- Everyone in our schools has done an amazing job minimizing the risk of COVID-19 spread in our buildings by wearing masks and social distancing as much as possible. Unfortunately, a number of our employees and/or students have had family members or close acquaintances affected directly or indirectly by positive COVID results. Many of our positive cases have come from external exposure outside the school itself. One thing we have learned from working with the Department of Health over the past three months, it is critical that we all continue to mask and social distance as frequently as possible both at work and any time you are gathering with others, even family members who do not live in your household (ex. college students, grandparents, siblings). In a number of cases involving students and staff, individuals have had to quarantine for 14 days simply because they were near a person who had no symptoms at the time but later tested positive.

We had a delay of winter sports and now they have resumed. Why was there a delay and why are we resuming them now?

The decision to delay was made because of the uncertainty related to the holidays. Holiday gatherings presented opportunities for family gatherings and increased the possibility of exposure and spread.

We are resuming now with the added safety precaution of the mandatory mask protocols put in place by Governor Wolf in November. With the implementation of this safety measure, participation in winter sports will proceed under careful monitoring to ensure that it does not disrupt our primary goal of in-person instruction.

Are there exceptions to the masking rule for sports?

Governor Wolf's order does provide for medical exceptions:
<https://www.governor.pa.gov/covid-19/sports-guidance/>

It is important to note that while the mask order is mandatory except for specific exceptions, participation in sports **is not** mandatory. Parents should make the best decision for their children regarding participation in any athletic program and their concerns about wearing masks.

What happens when another team does not adhere to the face covering policy?

Our elementary schools participate in the Diocesan league so all are under the umbrella of this policy.

Our high school, like many public school districts, will not compete with teams who are not in compliance. As per WPIAL/PIAA guidance, the game will be declared no contest.

What is the process the schools goes through when alerted of a positive COVID-19 case?

Listed below is an outline of the protocol that the Diocese of Pittsburgh has implemented with our elementary schools and high schools. It is an approved protocol as per PAdoH and ACHD guidelines.

- Notification is received from the PA Department of Health, ACHD, parent or other family member that an employee or student has tested positive.
- The school principal immediately calls the Regional Administrator (if applicable) and the Director of Catholic Schools and then calls the PaDoH or ACHD schools hotline (depending on the county in which the school is located).
- The intake workers reports that the information will be passed on to a case manager at PAdoH who will call and work with the principal to develop the appropriate strategy. The process is similar for ACHD.
- Contact tracing begins as a collaborative effort between the principal and the health department. Any individual who has been within 6 ft. or less of the positive case for 15 minutes or more over the 48 hours prior to the positive case experiencing symptoms is required to be included on the contact list.
- The principal reconvenes with the Regional administrator and the Diocesan COVID-19 Task Force to define the strategy needed to move forward and the communication plan.
- The building principal and/or his/her designee contacts the families of all individuals on the close contact list and advises to quarantine for 14 days.

Why does the Diocese provide press releases for some COVID-19 situations but not others?

The policy that governs this decision is the level of exposure and nature of the quarantine. If the exposure and subsequent quarantine impacts a full sports program, grade level, or school program, then a press release is issued.

It would be helpful to know who is infected. Why is information so vague?

It is not only our moral responsibility, but also our legal responsibility to protect the privacy of our student, families, and employees (HIPAA). In the case of our smaller schools, any descriptive label would make identification likely. If you are impacted by the case, you will be contacted directly by the school and/or health department.

What is the process for determining if a school should go fully remote for a period of time?

The Catholic schools in the Diocese of Pittsburgh reside in five counties spanning multiple demographics – rural, suburban, and city. Depending on the governance structure (high school, parish or regional) the school administrators will work in consultation with pastors, regional administrators, the Catholic Schools Office, and PADOH / ACHD to determine the best path for each school. The Diocese is looped in with public schools in receiving up to date COVID information.

What happens if my county is classified as substantial by the PADOH? Are we required to go fully remote?

If a county moves to the substantial category regarding COVID infection rates, there may be a recommendation to go fully virtual. All health departments explain that it is a recommendation not a mandate. Each school (or district) should look at their own circumstances and make the decision accordingly. If the infection rate is high within a school community (5 cases or more), the local decision would be to go fully virtual for a period of time.

Is there a possibility that the Governor could mandate that all schools within the Commonwealth go fully remote? Since we are religious schools, can we defy that order?

The Governor with the PADOH could mandate fully remote instruction in the interest of public health. To date, all evidence supports that these decisions will continue to be made at the local level. If the Governor ordered schools to go fully virtual, our Catholic schools would not defy such a mandate. In the interest of community health and our commitment to caring for all our brothers and sisters, we would honor the mandate.

What can I do to help our administrators and teachers?

Please continue to keep our schools apprised if anyone in your family is exposed or tests positive, so we can follow appropriate protocols to ensure the safety of our school communities

Please continue to be vigilant during off school hours. Please commit to limiting gatherings, wearing masks, social distancing, and rigorous hygiene practices. We know these practices help limit the spread of the virus.

The best thing you can do to support our efforts is to continue to pray for all those working to serve your children. Please include those directly suffering the impact of this virus and the souls of those who lost their lives to it.

We know that our children are missing many of the activities that we all took for granted just one year ago, but this is a time when they can learn firsthand about overcoming adversity. They can also live fully and understand completely the importance of placing others first – as we are all called to love our neighbor.

Please note the following response from the Pennsylvania Department of education updated on January 7, 2021:

Is there evidence to support the safety of elementary school students returning to in-person instruction?

The research on offering in-person instruction during COVID-19 continues to emerge. While it is impossible to eliminate risk of disease transmission entirely within a school setting when community spread is present, recent studies have shown that when mitigation strategies, including universal masking, physical distancing, and hand hygiene are strictly adhered to, it may be safer for younger children, particularly elementary grade students, to return to in-person instruction.

While people of any age can contract COVID-19, research suggests people ages 18 and under have a lower risk of severe outcomes, including lower rates of hospitalization and death resulting from COVID-19 infection. Additionally, [emerging research suggests that children younger than 10 to 14 years old have lower susceptibility to SARS-CoV2 infection than adults.](#)