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Archdiocese of Newark – Catechetical Office Guidelines for Parish Catechetical Programs during the Covid-19 Pandemic

These guidelines have been adapted from the [“The Road Back: Restart and Recovery Plan for Education”](#), from the New Jersey Department of Education.

For further information be sure to review the CDC’s [Guidance for Schools and Childcare Programs](#).

INTRODUCTION

“The COVID-19 pandemic impacted every aspect of our lives. As we look to the future and plan for students to return to schools in-person this fall, we must recognize and prepare for the ways the virus and necessary public health response has changed and will change the way students learn.”, NJDOE’s *The Road Back*

As we look forward to the start of this upcoming catechetical year, we understand that parishes face many challenges in their ability to continue to provide quality Faith Formation opportunities for their parish families. After reviewing the various steps that are necessary in order to resume in-person catechetical sessions in a safe manner, we have determined that catechetical classes in the fall shall remain virtual, that is digital or remote. The situation will be reviewed to see if it will be possible to resume any type of classroom instruction beginning in January 2021. The following guidelines will serve to provide direction to parishes as they plan for faith formation during this time of pandemic.

A number of different strategies may be utilized, among them: Remote, Digital, and Blended learning experiences.

Remote: Remote learning is defined here as any catechetical program that is not conducted in-person or on-site at the parish. This can include, but is not limited to, children working at home using catechetical materials provided by the parish, family catechesis in the home, catechetical sessions facilitated online, etc.

Digital: Digital catechetical programming refers to faith formation sessions that are delivered via a digital platform (e.g. Zoom, Google Classroom, etc.). These digital learning experiences may be live or may be asynchronous where recorded digital content and tools are provided for independent work at home.

Blended: Blended learning refers to using a combination of the above strategies. For example, a parish may provide regular catechesis using a digital platform and also have opportunities for limited in-person gatherings according to established restrictions.

In-Person (Once it has been determined that in-person sessions can resume, sometime after January 2021): *In-person catechetical programming is programming that takes place when the catechists and children/parents are together and on site at the parish facilities.*

Directives for the upcoming year, 2020-2021, during this time of pandemic:

It has been determined by the Catechetical Office that parishes will need to move classroom instruction to remote or digital models. If blended and/or in-person gatherings are determined to be possible in larger meeting spaces, (for example, prayer services, family liturgy, rehearsal for sacramental celebrations, etc.) these gatherings may be monthly, quarterly or seasonal and should be primarily focused on liturgy and worship. The frequency of such gatherings will depend on the resources available to the parish to ensure that they are able to meet all of the necessary requirements for in-person gatherings.

Re-opening will look different for every parish. Every parish must submit their plan to the catechetical office for review. Plans must be submitted by September 15, 2020. Use THIS FORM to submit your plan. Having this information from every parish will help us to more effectively support you during this upcoming year.

Diocesan policy requires a minimum of 35 hours of yearly instruction. This requirement can be fulfilled using the methods listed above. Hours of instructional time are not defined as a child's time spent in front of a catechist or in front of a screen, but time engaged in learning under the guidance and direction of catechists and parents.

Regardless of the method used to deliver catechetical sessions during the coming year, pastors and parish catechetical leaders should work to establish a strong presence and voice among their parish families. This can be achieved by providing regular communication and family faith formation resources, particularly during this time of prolonged absence. Parents or guardians have the right to withhold the child's participation in in-person catechetical programming. In such cases, the parish must provide an appropriate alternative.

It would be helpful for you to be familiar with your local school district's plan to reopen schools in order to serve your families more effectively.

What follows are a set of minimum standards every Parish should incorporate into their reopening plans for catechetical programming. The following guidelines will provide Parish Catechetical Leaders with the information necessary to ensure that parish programs reopen safely and are prepared to accommodate students' unique needs during this unprecedented time. Included are also definite components related to health, safety, and operations.

In addition to these guidelines, the following documents [can be found here](#) and are linked throughout these guidelines:

- [Sample parent survey questions \(Survey 1\) \(Survey 2\)](#)
- [Catechetical Programming Planning Guide](#)
- [Safe Environment Guidelines \(link to the Office for the Protection of the Faithful\)](#)
- [Crisis Planning Guide/Templates \(and additional resources\)](#)
- *Parent consent form / release for the use of digital platforms
- [Archdiocesan Catechetical Office contact information](#)

**We are currently working to construct a consent form. As soon as it has been finalized we will provide that for you and it will be added to our resources link.*

GENERAL CATECHETICAL PROGRAMMING GUIDELINES

As we look ahead to the fall and beyond January 2021, parishes must not only address the basic physical safety needs of the Parish Catechetical Leader, children and catechists, but also the social, emotional and environmental factors that can impact catechists' capacity to teach and children's capacity to learn.

- Adjusting the parish environment to ensure the health and safety of children, families and staff will require a great deal of planning. Pastors and PCLs should consult their catechetical advisory group or create a Restart Committee to coordinate the overall reopening plan.
- Parishes should seek to actively include families in the decision-making process. There should be ongoing consideration for the families' capacity to provide in-home support and the provisions necessary to facilitate family participation.
 - Parishes should seek ways to assess how likely it is that families will be willing to return to in person instruction once it is deemed safe by the Archdiocese.
 - They should also attempt to assess whether families have the resources needed for remote/digital learning. [CLICK HERE for sample 1 of a parent survey.](#) [CLICK HERE for version 2 of a parent survey.](#)

[The Catechetical Programming Planning Guide](#) is a tool that could possibly assist you in examining the various aspects of your faith formation and sacrament preparation programs in order to determine to what degree you will be able to provide in-person opportunities for catechesis and how you will adapt your program in order to move to remote, digital or blended learning models.

- Communication with parents should be clear and frequent in order to ensure that families are well informed of the programming schedule, resources and expectations. *This is especially important in remote learning situations.*
- Parish programming must in some form continue to include ongoing faith formation for children of all ages as well as whatever is necessary by way of immediate preparation for the sacraments for children who will be preparing to celebrate sacraments during the 2020-2021 religious education year.
- Some flexibility in faith formation and sacramental preparation program requirements may become necessary. Pastors and Parish Catechetical Leaders should collaborate in making necessary adjustments in consultation with [the Catechetical Office](#).
- Regardless of the environment, parishes should clearly communicate with catechists regarding expectations and support for effective faith formation.
- Strong connections between the parish and the Faith Formation families will be critical in re-engaging children, supporting adults, rebuilding relationships, and creating a foundation for catechetical instruction. To this end, PCLs are encouraged to thoughtfully plan around the well-being of their catechists and families providing frequent check-ins to assess their current mindsets.
- Parishes must continue to meet their obligations to children with disabilities to the greatest extent possible. Specific strategies and considerations for children with disabilities must be critical points of discussion for every instruction scenario. For additional support contact Anne Masters, Director of Ministry with Persons with Disabilities, at anne.masters@rcan.org.
- Pastors and Parish Catechetical Leaders must continue to ensure that all [Safe Environment guidelines](#) are adhered to during any form of catechetical programming, including the various digital formats that might be

employed during this time. Pastors and PCLs must work closely with the Parish Safe Environment Coordinator. ([CLICK HERE for the Office for the Protection of the Faithful.](#))

- Parish Catechetical Leaders should update their crisis plan, parent handbooks and catechist handbooks yearly, especially in light of the current pandemic. ([CLICK HERE for Crisis Planning Resources.](#))

ALTERNATIVE MODELS

Primary consideration must be given to using alternative models of catechesis (e.g. digital platforms, remote/in-home formation, blended learning/hybrid programs).

- In planning curriculum and faith formation programming, parishes must focus on building staff capacity to deliver highly effective formation in remote/digital environments.
- The Catechetical Office encourages Pastors and PCLs to develop plans that are innovative, cultivate a clear sense of shared purpose and goals, encourage collaboration among catechists, and foster an effective partnership approach with children, family members and caregivers.
- It is important to remember that each child may not have access to a digital device nor internet connectivity. Parishes cannot rely upon equipment provided to children by public schools as these devices may be restricted to school use only.
- Parishes using digital platforms for faith formation, must be prepared with alternatives for children who are otherwise without access and must include in their reopening plan the steps to keep these families connected to the parish community.
- Care should be taken in the case of utilizing digital platforms which display video images of children. Parishes should develop protocols that are communicated to catechists, parents and children with regards to the safe and appropriate use of digital technology.
- Parishes must obtain the necessary permissions from parents to use this technology and to record sessions. This permission can either be included in the parent handbook or obtained by using a separate form. (*We are currently working to construct a consent form. As soon as it has been finalized we will provide that for you and it will be added to our resources link.*)

PERSONNEL

Parishes must rely heavily on remote, digital or blended learning programs.

- Pastors and Parish Catechetical Leaders should discern what resources will be needed in order to support this type of programming.
- Transitioning to these new methods will require professional development for Pastors, Parish Catechetical Leaders and catechists. The Catechetical Office is available to direct those in need of training to resources and opportunities offered by the catechetical office, partnering institutions, Catholic publishers, etc.
- Parishes must provide reasonable accommodations for parish staff, catechists and children at higher risk for severe illness.
- Appropriate professional help should be obtained to carry out necessary sanitizing procedures. Under no circumstances should the Parish Catechetical Leader or staff be expected to carry out sanitizing procedures.

IN-PERSON LARGE FORMAT GATHERING / BLENDED MODELS

If blended and/or in-person gatherings are determined to be possible in larger meeting spaces, (for example, prayer services, family liturgy, rehearsal for sacramental celebrations, etc.) these gatherings may be monthly, quarterly or seasonal and must follow governmental and Archdiocesan established liturgical guidelines.

Location and Schedule

In general, parishes must minimize use of shared objects, ensure indoor facilities have adequate ventilation, prepare and maintain hand sanitizing stations, and ensure staff/children/parents wash hands frequently.

- Promote behaviors that reduce spread:
 - Stay home when appropriate
 - Hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette
 - Face coverings
 - Signs and messages
 - Ensure social distancing

Use of Outdoor and Larger Spaces

- The use of outdoor spaces is possible when seasonally appropriate.
- These limited gatherings must take place in larger spaces (e.g. church or gym) that can be sanitized with greater ease, while ensuring social distancing.

IN-PERSON CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION:

At this time in-person classroom instruction is not permitted. Once it has been determined that it is possible to provide opportunities for in-person classroom instruction, careful consideration must be given to the following as you plan for the future. *These guidelines are subject to revision based on the developing situation and may be updated or changed as warranted.*

Use of Classrooms

If a parish has the means to provide in-person faith formation in a classroom setting, the following must be adhered to:

- Parishes must allow for social distancing within the classroom to the maximum extent practicable. This can be achieved by ensuring children are seated at least 6 feet apart and considering the flow of traffic around the room. When weather allows, windows should be opened to allow for greater air circulation. Indoor environments with recirculated air are the riskiest of environments for COVID-19 spread. If parishes are not able to maintain this physical distance, additional modifications should be in place, including physical barriers between desks and turning desks to face the same direction.
 - For furniture that is intended to accommodate more than one child, parishes should explore bringing in furniture to replace the multi-person furniture or consider some type of partitioning system. These have recently become commercially available and should also be considered anywhere it is necessary to separate children/parents from staff.

Hallways and Common Areas

- Parishes need to provide physical guides, such as tape on floors or sidewalks and signs on walls, to help ensure that staff and children remain at least 6 feet apart in lines and at other times (e.g. guides for creating “one-way routes” in hallways).
 - Doors should be propped open during arrival and dismissal until drop-off and pick-up is over in order to minimize touching doors.
 - All Safe Environment Protocols regarding security must still be in place. (e.g. A staff person should be in place where doors are propped open. All staff must be screened and trained according to the Archdiocese of Newark safe environment protocols.)
 - Consider keeping assigned groups/classes consistent throughout the catechetical year in order to limit exposure to the virus.
 - This includes planning for staggered arrival and dismissal times by cohort so as to minimize interaction among children/parents during drop-off and pick-up times.
- Regarding bathrooms:
 - Limit the number of people who can enter at a time.
 - Designate staff members to enforce limited capacity and avoid overcrowding.
 - Consider purchasing no-touch foot pedal trash cans, if possible.
 - Prop doors open to avoid touching handles.

Cleaning and Sanitizing

- Parishes must adhere to existing required facilities [cleaning practices and procedures](#), and any new specific requirements of the local health department as they arise.
- If space is shared with other entities (i.e. Catholic school, building leasee), parishes must coordinate cleaning and sanitizing procedures with them in order to ensure consistency.
- Parishes must ensure that spaces are cleaned and sanitized between each use.
- Parishes will need to develop a schedule for increased routine cleaning and disinfecting, especially of frequently touched surfaces and objects, and sanitize bathrooms between use as much as possible. This may include cleaning objects/surfaces not ordinarily cleaned daily:
 - Classroom desks and chairs
 - Other tables and chairs (e.g. if a cafeteria is used for faith formation, etc.)
 - Door handles and push plates
 - Handrails
 - Bathrooms
 - Light switches
 - Buttons on vending machines and elevators
 - Shared telephones
 - Shared desktops
 - Shared computer keyboards and mice
- For disinfection most common EPA-registered household disinfectants should be effective. A list of products that are [EPA-approved for use against the virus that causes COVID-19](#) is available on the EPA’s website.

Food and Beverages

- No food or drink will be provided during any in-person catechetical session.
- Children will not be permitted to bring or consume food during catechetical sessions.
- Children should be advised to bring their own water to sessions. Drinking fountains should not be used.

Evaluating Health

Health Checks

- Children and staff who are exhibiting any signs of illness must not attend catechetical sessions.
- Children and staff will be asked to leave or not come to class if they test positive for COVID-19 or exhibit one or more of the symptoms of COVID-19, based on CDC guidance, that is not otherwise explained:
 - A fever of 100° F or greater
 - Cough
 - Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
 - Chills
 - Repeated shaking with chills
 - Muscle pain
 - Headache
 - Sore throat
 - New loss of taste or smell
 - Fatigue
 - Congestion or runny nose
 - Nausea or vomiting
 - Diarrhea
 - Or other symptoms as determined by health officials
- Parishes must adopt a process and location to safely and respectfully screen staff, catechists and children/parents for symptoms of COVID-19 and history of exposure.
 - Staff must visually check children for symptoms upon arrival (which may include temperature checks or a self-reporting tool) and/or confirm with families that children are free of visible COVID-19 symptoms.
 - Health checks must be conducted safely and respectfully, and in accordance with any applicable privacy laws and regulations.
 - Results must be documented when signs/symptoms of COVID-19 are observed.
 - Any screening policy must take into account students with disabilities and accommodations that may be needed in the screening process for those students.
 - PCLs may use examples of screening methods in [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.
- Should a child become symptomatic during a catechetical session, the child must be isolated from others and parents should be notified to pick up the child.
- Children and staff with symptoms related to COVID-19 must be safely and respectfully isolated from others. If a parish becomes aware that an individual who has spent time in a parish facility tests positive for COVID-19, the PCL must immediately notify local health officials, staff, and families of a confirmed case while maintaining confidentiality.
- Contact Tracing – Contact tracing is the process used to identify those who have come into contact with people who have tested positive for many contagious diseases, including COVID-19. Parishes should collaborate with their local schools to develop contact tracing policies and procedures.
 - Careful attention must always be given to attendance records for children/parents and staff at every catechetical session because of the parishes responsibility to account for children's wellbeing and presence. This becomes even more important in light of the current Covid-19 crisis.

Face Coverings

- Parish staff and visitors are required to wear face coverings unless doing so would inhibit the individual's health or unless the individual is under two years of age.
- Children are strongly encouraged to wear face coverings and are required to do so when social distancing cannot be maintained, unless doing so would inhibit the child's health.
- It is also necessary to acknowledge that enforcing the use of face coverings may be impractical for young children or individuals with disabilities.

Sanitizing Stations

Prepare and maintain hand sanitizing stations with alcohol-based hand sanitizers (at least 60% alcohol): In each classroom (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer).

- At entrances and exits of buildings.
- Near bathrooms.
- Children ages 5 and younger should be supervised when using hand sanitizer.
- For classrooms that have existing handwashing stations, prepare stations with soap, water, and alcohol-based hand sanitizers (at least 60% alcohol).
- [Everyone should wash hands](#) for at least 20 seconds at regular intervals, including after using the bathroom, and after blowing their nose/coughing/sneezing.