



# COVID-19

## PREPARING FOR WIDESPREAD ILLNESS IN YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY

A Legal Guide for School Leaders

*A companion guide to Fostering Safer Schools*

*With special thanks to the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) for its input and collaboration*



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Your communities are likely paying attention to media reports of the rising numbers of cases of respiratory illness and deaths caused by a new coronavirus that is now present in the U.S. This guide is intended to inform school district leaders about the federally identified risks associated with this particular virus and to provide a checklist of issues school leaders should consider as you plan for any such crisis in your community.

The new virus, which causes mild to severe respiratory illness, is called "SARS-CoV-2," and the disease it causes is known as "COVID-19." It is unknown at this time how many people may become ill. The U.S. government is working closely with state, local, tribal, and territorial partners, as well as public health partners, to respond to this public health threat. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is monitoring the situation and considers the immediate health risk from COVID-19 in the U.S. to be low. That risk assessment could change.

## TERMINOLOGY

**Epidemic:** a widespread occurrence of an infectious disease in a community at a particular time.

**Pandemic:** a disease prevalent over a whole country or the world.

While COVID-19 currently is not spreading in U.S. communities, school systems can be proactive and plan to respond in a flexible way to a public health threat. Schools and school districts can refine their business operation response plans. School administration, including health services leadership, must be involved in the planning process, which includes partnering with local public health authorities, updating infectious disease pandemic plans, and sharing essential communication strategies. School nurses are critical members of the planning team and should participate in the planning process.

Given the likelihood that more cases of COVID-19 will be identified in the coming weeks, and more person-to-person transmission will occur, the CDC anticipates challenges arising in communities where large numbers of people need medical care at the same time. Communities could face increased absenteeism at schools, childcare centers, workplaces, and other gathering places; overloaded healthcare systems; and capacity challenges in law enforcement and transportation systems.

## Planning for COVID-19 Challenges in Your School District

**FIRST**, school leaders should follow guidance from your state educational agency and public health department, along with their counterparts at the county and local levels. Many state agencies are posting frequent updates on COVID-19 risk levels, numbers of cases, and recommended precautions. They are in close contact with the CDC, which is coordinating health system responses at the national level. Communicate clearly and regularly with school staff about recommended precautions like handwashing. Ensure that school nurses are connected to the most recent information and are following required protocols. The National Association of School Nurses (NASN) offers [guidance to school nurses and to principals and superintendents](#) for implementing CDC recommendations.

**SECOND**, after ensuring your school district is in compliance with federal, state, and local health protocols, you should prepare for a possible disease outbreak in your community consistent with your existing school safety plans. School safety plans should use an all-hazards approach that addresses many types of risks, including pandemic disease. See [Fostering Safer Schools: A Legal Guide for School Board Members on School Safety](#).

Consider the following when making decisions:

- Disease severity (i.e., number of people who are sick, hospitalization, and death rates) in the community where schools are located.
- Impact of disease on vulnerable employees and students who may be at higher risk for COVID-19 adverse health complications, including early childhood students, older adults, and those with chronic medical conditions.

School systems with multiple locations spread out over a large geographical region are encouraged to take appropriate actions outlined in their infectious disease outbreak response plan based on the conditions in each locality, with guidance from local and state public health authorities.

Should COVID-19 become epidemic, the CDC offers the following guidance for employers:

- Encourage sick employees to stay home.
- Enact sick leave policies that are flexible and consistent with public health guidance:
  - Allow care for family members, and
  - Forego healthcare provider notes for employees who are sick with respiratory illness.
- Ensure routine cleaning of high-touch surfaces before students arrive and leave for the day. Disinfect commonly used surfaces with approved products and consider deep cleaning for disease outbreaks.

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## RESOURCES

Your state and county departments also provide frequent updates. **Please check with your local health agencies regularly.**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-for-schools.html>

### General Information

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/index.html>

## **Prevention and Treatment**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/prevention-treatment.html>

## **Travel**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>

## **Planning for a Possible COVID-19 Outbreak in the U.S.**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-business-response.html>

Pandemic Flu Checklist for K-12 Administrators (applicable to COVID-19). <https://www.cdc.gov/nonpharmaceutical-interventions/pdf/pan-flu-checklist-k-12-school-administrators-item2.pdf>

## **Getting Your Workplace Ready for Pandemic Flu**

<https://www.cdc.gov/nonpharmaceutical-interventions/pdf/gr-pan-flu-work-set.pdf>

## **Resources from the National Association of School Nurses:**

[Guidance for School Nurses](#)

## COVID-19 Planning Checklist

The checklist that follows provides steps you can take as school leaders to plan for a possible disease outbreak.

- Share and implement precautionary measures called for by your state and local health departments and communicate them to staff, students, and families. The CDC recommends the following:
  - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
  - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
  - Stay home when you are sick.
  - Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
  - Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
  - Follow the CDC's recommendations for using a facemask (people with symptoms and health workers).
  - Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom; before eating; and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- Prepare for possible increased number of employee absences due to illness in employees and their family members, and for dismissals of early childhood program and K-12 schools due to high levels of absenteeism or illness.
- Review your school district's current policies and procedures that may come into play, such as:
  - student and employee absences due to illness (should "perfect attendance" procedures be amended?),
  - school closures based on public health concerns,
  - emergency management plans, and
  - non-discrimination policies.
- Assess levels of supplies that will be needed in case of an outbreak.
- Check your insurance coverage for contingencies such as school closures and high employee absenteeism.
- Emphasize the need to remain vigilant against stigma due to perceived race, national origin, or recent travel. Foster a supportive environment free from rumors or associations of a virus with a specific population.
- Consider cancelling nonessential travel per travel guidance on the CDC website, including local and national field trips.

- ❑ Prepare materials including symptoms lists, student absence protocols, emergency response team communications plans, communications procedures with parents in the event of school closures, and the like.
- ❑ Coordinate with your state educational agency about the possibility of mass student or staff absences. Will there be flexibility on requirements for student attendance days, graduation requirements, and staffing requirements?
- ❑ Determine when school closures are indicated based on a set percentage of staff and student absenteeism as recommended by local and state public health authorities.
  - Establish virtual education options for students if available for extended school closures.
  - Address how staff will be informed about expectations for student home-based academic work.
  - Coordinate with the state educational agency about the possibility of school closings. How will attendance days and/or virtual class time be counted?
  - Explore deploying visiting teachers to monitor or ensure education remains on track in case of school closings; recruit parents to assist in the delivery of educational services to their children.
  - Coordinate with local health and welfare agencies to ensure children receiving free and reduced-price meals continue to receive nutrition usually supplied at schools.
  - Address how the school district can provide information and support to families in need of childcare when schools are closed.
  - Determine under what conditions schools will re-open.
- ❑ In collective bargaining states, explore the contract implications for mass and extended individual employee absences, and instruction during school closings.
  - Coordinate with the unions in advance.
  - Draft any needed agreements.
  - Plan for substitutes for all positions—bus drivers, teachers, cafeteria staff, etc.
  - Address any needed sick leave exceptions or waivers.
  - Consider emergency sick leave pools.
  - Coordinate with health insurance carriers regarding any anticipated challenges with the widespread use of health insurance benefits.
- ❑ If the congregation of students prevents group childcare, explore with local agencies and community groups the kinds of services for childcare available for in-home care and serve as a resource for parents, particularly in high-poverty areas.

- Collaborate with local chambers of commerce to help businesses understand the potential impact of reduced or limited group childcare on families during the crisis and encourage planning accordingly.
- Identify state and federal emergency relief, grants, and funding flexibility available to address unexpected needs.
- Coordinate with local health authorities about expectations to utilize school facilities for emergency services.
- Obtain any needed equipment and supplies.
- Clear communication for staff and families is critical for potential quarantine expectations related to school closures. Work with public health officials for effective communication strategies.
- Seek federal and state grants and other assistance to help recovery efforts.
- After implementing your plan to re-open schools:
  - Address any requirement to make up missed school days;
  - Provide counseling to students as appropriate and involve community partners; and
  - Update the emergency plan as needed.

This guide is not legal advice. Please consult with your state school boards association and your school attorney member of the NSBA Council of School Attorneys for legal guidance particular to your state and district. This guide will be updated as necessary to reflect current conditions and changes in federal guidance.





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