



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Education & Early Development

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents

FROM: Dr. Anne Zink, Chief Medical Officer, DHSS
Dr. Michael Johnson, Commissioner

DATE: February 1, 2022

SUBJECT: COVID-19 Mitigation

Handwritten signatures of Dr. Anne Zink and Dr. Michael Johnson.

We wanted to take this opportunity to thank each of you for your steadfast commitment to educating Alaska's children during these challenging times. Your leadership in assuring the health and safety of students and staff while offering an effective learning environment for students over the past two years has been tremendous.

Our mission is the health and well-being of our children combined with an excellent education for every student every day. This has required us to continuously balance the challenges of a highly infectious disease with the importance of in-person learning and school activities, which we also know are essential for healthy youth development. As COVID-19 has evolved, we have continued to develop new tools and to use those that are most helpful for each new situation.

We are now entering a time when the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) can work with districts and schools during surges to best protect students and staff, while ongoing mitigation efforts, such as good ventilation and frequent handwashing, can become part of our daily routines.

Throughout the pandemic, malleability has been a key factor for effective response. COVID-19 is ever-changing, and schools will continue to benefit from being willing and able to adjust their response efforts appropriately as the pandemic continues to evolve. As layered mitigation has

shown to be the best defense against COVID-19, easing mitigations slowly will be safer than eliminating all strategies at once. Mitigation strategies should be considered holistically, and decisions about a given strategy should be made in the context of other mitigation strategies in place.

There is not one best approach to easing mitigation that will fit all schools equally, as districts throughout Alaska differ in many ways. Each district will need to consider which indicators and de-escalation strategies are best within the context of their schools and communities. Similarly, if subsequent waves occur due to new variants or other factors, districts will need to consider which layers to add back (and when) based on the local epidemiology and severity of the wave. Fortunately, we have more tools than ever before to manage COVID-19, including effective vaccines and promising treatments that help decrease the incidence of severe illness caused by this virus.

Examples of mitigation layers that districts will need to consider when to remove include the following:

- Moving from universal masking to optional masking
- Reducing/eliminating school-based contact tracing
- Reducing/eliminating asymptomatic screening testing and shifting to in-home tests for symptomatic students
- Diminished cohorting with a return to group work and play
- Modifying school-based quarantine policies

Districts will also need to consider which indicators are most useful in their community for determining when it is appropriate to increase or decrease mitigation efforts, such as:

- Vaccination rates of the community/school
- Case rate trends in schools and in the community, including student and staff absentee rates
- Hospitalization rates and capacity at the hospital(s) which serve your community. For smaller communities, consider rates and capacity at your nearest regional hospital.

Additional CDC school guidance is provided and routinely updated at the following links:

- [Schools, Child Care, and Colleges](#) (Updated Jan. 28, 2022)
- [K-12 Schools Guidance](#) (Updated Jan. 13, 2022)
- [Early Childhood Education and Child Care Guidance](#) (Updated Jan. 28, 2022)

We appreciate the amazing collaboration that has occurred over the past two years with school districts, and we look forward to continuing to work together to address new challenges as they arise during this ongoing pandemic response effort. As with all transitions, communicating changes about your mitigation strategies and protocols will be important within the schools and

communities you serve. Like you, we are committed to ensuring that Alaska children are given the best education possible during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. We are here to support you in these efforts.

If you have any questions or would like assistance, please email schoolhealthandsafety@alaska.gov or call the school health and safety number: 907-269-3433.

For more information, please visit the [DHSS School Health Information webpage](#).