# Frequently Asked Questions
## Regarding Reopening K–12 Public Schools

Connecticut State Department of Education • **August 11, 2020**

## Volume 2

The purpose of this Frequently Asked Questions document, Volume 2, is to provide clarification on a variety of topics outlined in the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) Adapt, Advance, Achieve Reopening Plan (referred to here as the "CSDE Reopening Document"). Keep in mind that plan guidance is offered in an effort to give general direction to all of Connecticut's different and diverse school districts and school operators to afford local educational agencies (LEAs) maximum flexibility in developing their own unique plan, rather than on overly prescriptive "one size fits all" model. Thus, additional questions specific and unique to any one district will require additional cooperation and collaboration at the local level among members of a Reopening Committee, Superintendent and district leaders, local public health officials, and Boards of Education.

***This is a working document, which may be updated due to the rapidly changing response to this pandemic emergency and ongoing federal guidance updates related to COVID-19.***

### Masks/Face Coverings

Q: **What obligation do districts have to require students to wear masks? Is the adoption of a Board of Education policy on masks required?**

A: The CSDE Reopening Document requires all students wear masks inside the school building, with limited exceptions and mask breaks. School districts should make every effort to ensure students and parents are aware of the importance of mask wearing and the reasoning for this requirement to improve compliance. Recognizing the stress and trauma caused by the pandemic, the CSDE strongly recommends schools prioritize measures to provide information and education about the importance of mitigation protocols such as mask wearing for students' protection before considering disciplinary measures.

The CSDE is also having ongoing conversations about appropriate ways to address mask wearing and the securing of medical documentation for those students who request an exception for a medical reason. We will provide parameters before the first day of school.

Q: **Does the CSDE have any suggestions on how to handle students who cannot wear masks due to medical reasons?**

A: The CSDE ReOpening Document was drafted with input from the State Department of Public Health outlining a layering of multiple mitigation strategies. Minimizing risk requires schools engage this combination of mitigation strategies, including but not limited to use of facial coverings, regular handwashing and hygiene practices, cohorting, deep cleaning of rooms and high touch points, and distancing to the extent possible.

Schools will need to prepare to engage even more diligent oversight on some of the other mitigating efforts where students have verifiable medical exceptions to the mask requirement.

Q: **Is there a requirement on the quality of face coverings?**

A: The CSDE and DPH are discussing the development of mask/face covering guidance that will include information on the quality of face coverings.

## Shifting Models/Health Metrics

Q: **How does a school district determine what reopening model is appropriate for their schools?**

A: The CSDE and DPH recently issued Addendum 4: Interim Guidance for Decision-Making Regarding the Use of In-Person, Hybrid (Blended), or Remote Learning Models, which should be used to guide decision-making. The relevant information for the county indicators will be posted weekly.

School medical advisors, local health directors, and school nurses are encouraged to join district leaders on our Tuesday health and safety office hours/phone calls to have these conversations directly with DPH.

Q: **What does the school district need to provide to CSDE to support use of a hybrid model? As school districts shift in and out of different models, is there an expectation the CSDE be notified every time they pivot models? If we begin with hybrid, but have decided to change the hybrid model (i.e., days in building, days remote) do we need to send an updated plan to the SDE?**

A: Superintendents have been given the flexibility to choose whether they will offer a full in-person model in the fall or a hybrid model and have been asked via survey what model they intend to start with.

The CSDE will be issuing additional guidance outlining best practices and expectations related to hybrid models. The goal should be to safely provide as much instructional engagement as possible and maximize in-person opportunities so long as it is consistent with the public health data indicators and other considerations. So long as the district is able to effectively follow health and safety requirements, the CSDE has instructed districts to prioritize the return in-person of vulnerable learner groups, including but not limited to students with disabilities and English learners, particularly those with more intensive needs, students with other barriers to remote learning such as device/internet issues, students who are significantly behind academically or identified as disengaged.

The CSDE understands that school districts will be reviewing and revising plans as new information becomes available. School districts need only notify the CSDE of the plan they will actually implement if is different from the plan it originally filed with the CSDE.

Q: **Who is responsible for the development and submission of the plans, and the decision for a district to decide to provide full in-person or hybrid learning? Is it the superintendents or local BOE? Will this be publicly communicated?**

A: Superintendents, in consultation with their communities and their local Boards, should make operational decisions after taking into consideration their unique community and facilities. The Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) is aware of this position and has communicated it to their members in previous forums. There may be implementation decisions that do require local board approval. The local Board may also need to revise existing policies consistent with the needs of the school district during the pandemic.

Q: **Any considerations being given for regional hybrid models?**

A: School districts are encouraged to work regionally for consistency. The reporting of data regarding the rate of transmission will be determined by county, and this supports a multi-district approach.

Q: **Our elementary schools are very small — two are 100 students or fewer. Hybrid would be extremely challenging. We want to be able to consider full attendance or remote.**

A: Currently, the health data indicators support in-person learning.

Q: **Will there be additional guidance/clarity on hybrid shift to full in-person learning or the issue of whether districts may allow for the opportunity to communicate ramp up or phase in?**

A: CSDE in consultation with the DPH released Addendum 4: Interim Guidance for Decision-Making Regarding the Use of In-Person, Hybrid (Blended), or Remote Learning Models that will assist greatly in determining which model is most appropriate at any given time. There are challenges with each model. Be aware of those challenges; superintendents should actively engage in

communicating all of the efforts being made around safety to build confidence. Be very clear with your community. The Commissioner has communicated that using a "ramp up or phase in" plan will be considered hybrid, so long as it is not lengthy and moves toward in-person access, provided the health data indicators continue to support an in-person learning model.

Q: **Is the 10<100,000 metric based on the DEMAS region, county, health region, state?**

A: Addendum 4: Interim Guidance for Decision-Making Regarding the Use of In-Person, Hybrid (Blended), or Remote Learning Models, data metrics will be based on county. The 10<100,000 metric refers to fewer than 10 new cases of COVID-19 per 100,000 population per day (using a 7-day rolling average), which favors in-person learning based upon current data. Spread and prevalence were considered by region, county, DEMHS region, and RESC, and it was determined county indicators were most appropriate.

Q: **Are schools still require to provide 180/177 days of school? How does using a remote or hybrid model, or a student's voluntary choice to remain remote affect this?**

A: To provide sufficient training and preparation time for educators and staff, the Connecticut State Board of Education (CSBE) already reduced the 180 days of actual school sessions for the 2020–2021 school year to 177 days. The CSDE recommended, and the CSBE authorized on August 11, 2020, additional flexibility consistent with the directive for local decision-making due to "unavoidable emergency". Future written communication on that topic is forthcoming.

Regardless of the instructional approach used (in-person, hybrid, or remote), districts should implement an instructional framework with equity at its core. This Board's authorization for hybrid or remote programming due to unavoidable emergency is contingent upon school districts providing rigorous learning and engagement opportunities that are aligned with State standards and Board expectations, whether the education is in person or remote. These should include, but are not limited to, opportunities for students to be engaged on a daily basis, for students to access grade level standards, and for students to be provided the necessary academic and social-emotional supports. This anticipates that classrooms will provide on-grade instruction that accelerates learning and incorporates the requisite scaffolds and supports.

In all cases, decisions related to shortening of the school year should be done to the minimum extent feasible, and lost in-person school sessions must be replaced with hybrid or remote learning programming. Generally, school districts will be expected to meet other statutory educational requirements, whether they are providing instruction in person, remotely, or in a hybrid model.

Q: **Will the analysis of metrics provided by DPH and CSDE be updated on a regular basis that takes the potentially changing situation regarding COVID-19 transmission into account for the benefit of local leadership?**

A: Yes, the plan is for this to be done on a weekly cadence with a team available to discuss potential nuances with districts that have questions/concerns.

Q: **With regards to school choice programs, will there be guidance on handling students from various counties with differing levels of risk?**

A: We anticipate publishing additional guidance in cooperation with the DPH and the Office of the Governor on this topic. The CSDE and DPH recently issued Addendum 4: Interim Guidance for Decision-Making Regarding the Use of In-Person, Hybrid (Blended), or Remote Learning Models, which should be used to guide decision-making. Choice programs will not have to make decisions alone, and should expect continued technical support from both the CSDE and the DPH. Contact tracing will follow in the community in which students reside.

## Transportation

Q: **Does the CSDE have any additional guidance around transportation and density levels? Do full buses contradict cohorting?**

A: Transportation is a challenge, and certainly risk is reduced as the density on buses decreases. Needless to say, decisions will depend on budget constraints, whether school schedules can adapt to flexibility needed for transportation, and bus/driver availability. School districts should look for ways to address capacity challenges by adding routes to existing bus runs, staggering start and end times for students, and encouraging families to seek alternative transportation to school when possible.

Hybrid models, and parents who choose to continue remote learning programming will also help reduce density on buses, as will parents who choose to bring their children to schools.

There is no perfect science to cohorting, but it is strongly encouraged as one of many ways to minimize transmission. In many instances, students necessarily participate in multiple cohorts – transportation, before/after school, extracurriculars or other contacts outside of the schoolhouse. Cohorting works toward reducing the spread, but it cannot completely eliminate it. Cohorting is not solely intended to prevent students from being around other students, but also allows for better contact tracing within schools so that the DPH can identify known contacts.

Additional funding from the Governor can also be used to alleviate bus crowding in dense areas and provide temporary bus monitors to establish routines.

## Operations

Q: **Can the SDE provide a self-guided curriculum for students who are home during hybrid or for those who choose to continue remote learning, because teachers will be busy teaching the kids in front of them?**

A: The CT Learning Hub is a resource to support onsite, hybrid and extended remote learning. The resources in the CT Learning Hub are supplemental to those in the district, and would still require school district engagement with the students who remain enrolled in the school. Columbia University's collaboration (CPRL) Distance Learning Framework was previously circulated on July 27, 2020 and provides guidance on how to create a Remote/Distance Learning environment.

Specifically, The CT Learning Hub is intended to provide access to supplement planning at the local level. Districts can access a statewide K-12 Readiness to Learn curriculum for social and emotional learning and Cultural Competencies to support students as they prepare to return to learning. The CSDE will be releasing resources to guide districts in their curricular planning as they prioritize learning targets by grade and content. This will assist districts in their ability to focus on learning outcomes and accelerating learning. There is a CT Learning Hub webinar series provided in partnership with CAPSS: August 3 and 10 to deepen the understanding on how to marry district and state resources with daily learning plans. CT Public Television will provide standards based programming for districts that is viewable on TV or other devices as well as downloadable and online access for students not fully connected. Other partners include Wide Open School, XQ, EdAdvance PIP21 Skills, Khan Academy and more. It is important to approach planning with an Asset Based Mindset - determine the assets that exist in the district and align with exiting learner framework like the portrait of the graduate, performance targets, learning targets and outcomes.

School districts must continue to provide educational opportunities in line the with guidance issued for students who have Temporarily Opting Into Voluntary Remote Learning Due to COVID-19. The CSDE will also plan to provide further guidance related to hybrid models.

Q: **Will State assessments be put on hold?**

A: No. As the Commissioner stated on the webinar, it is important especially this year for us to assess our students on the state assessment to help us monitor the long-term trends in student achievement and growth so that we can bring supports/resources where it is most needed. At the same time, we are advocating that for 2020–21, though we should try our best to administer the state assessment, we should not use it for formal district/school accountability purposes. This will require federal approval.

In the meantime, please see our Sensible Assessment Practices guidance for the types of assessments that are recommended for use during the 2020–21 school year, prior to the state assessment in Spring 2021; in general, prior to the spring state assessment, the CSDE recommends that districts use small scale, fine-grain assessments that focus on a narrow content domain and provide useful information for classroom teachers, instead of large scale, general survey assessments that may yield a standardized overall score but have limited value to inform instruction.

Q: **Will the executive orders that allow for the flexibility be extended or reissued and what are the parameters of the flexibility?**

A: No, not at this time. However, CSDE is working on other ways to provide flexibility within the authority of the Department and/or CSBE.

Q: **How should school districts manage athletics this fall, and responding to questions about the CIAC Resocialization of Interscholastic Athletics and Activities Guidance?**

A: The CIAC, in conjunction with the Connecticut State Medical Society Sports Medicine Committee, has released guidance for the resocialization of interscholastic athletics and activities programs. There is discussion with the Office of the Governor and other State leadership aimed at clearing up any uncertainty around this topic, and there will be further communication on this topic.

Q: **With the federal government blacklisting suppliers of companies like Lenovo, and other technology shortages, does the State of Connecticut have an expedited method of acquiring technology for schools — or could it be as late as October or even January before the units that the State is providing will arrive?**

A: Delivery of laptops and Chromebooks is currently expected sometime in October. We are trying to expedite, but there is a worldwide demand for these devices and supply chains are stretched thin worldwide. The specs we've chosen for the devices have been done with an eye to ensuring a decent device but also one with the fastest delivery timelines.

## Special Education

Q: **Will there be Special Education Guidance related to remote learning, and for those families that voluntarily keep their children at home?**

A: The CSDE is providing additional guidance related to the implementation of IEPs within the context of Full In-Person, Hybrid, and Remote instruction. This Guidance will be published the week of August 9.

Q: **When moving to a hybrid model with reduced class sizes, does the 50% ratio of students with non-disabled peers still need to be scheduled?**

A: Yes. Pre-K Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements still remain. This is a federal requirement and the CSDE is unable to provide flexibility. The CSDE will be releasing guidance to assist school districts with suggestions and strategies to address this issue.

## Office of Early Childhood/Childcare/Pre-K Masks

Q: **What is the guidance related to Pre-K and masks?**

A: Students in pre-school are not required to wear masks. On July 27, 2020, additional information was provided in Addendum 2: COVID Guidance and Considerations for Preschool Located in Public Schools.

Q: **Kindergarten students are so close to the pre-K students in age, is there any possibility that Kindergarten students will not be required to wear masks?**

A: At this time, kindergarten students will be required to wear masks. OEC guidance refers only to 3- and 4-year-olds. Discussions will continue about facial covering use in other levels although its use was universally supported by our health experts when developing the reopening plan.

Q: **Our number one issue impacting teachers' ability to return is the availability of daycare (non-toddler). Is the state considering options to support daycare options and opportunities?**

A: A 2-1-1 hotline was set up specifically to support educators seeking childcare options. The Office of Early Childhood and United Way of Connecticut have established an enhanced child care referral protocol that will ensure teachers and board of education staff have priority access to finding available child care in their area. They may call the dedicated phone number: 860-756-0864.

Q: **What conversations are being had with OEC to address daycare challenges facing teachers?**

A: Childcare is a huge factor that is being discussed nationally for both teachers and all working parents returning to fulltime work. School districts are encouraged to work with municipal leaders to look at community spaces differently, e.g., use of summer camp facilities during school year. OEC looking into opportunities for flexibility to allow other entities, including but not limited to, the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs, to provide supervision and space during the day for school age children who may not be in school due to a hybrid model. Also, OEC set up 2-1-1 line for teachers to identify their child care needs and place kids in area child care facilities.

## Parents Choosing Remote Learning

Q: **For planning purposes, we are asking parents who opt not to send their children back to school in September to keep them home for the entire first trimester. Please advise on the legality of that decision.**

A: Districts should consult with their legal counsel on this topic. Communication with families will be key, so they understand the importance of transition time for health and safety reasons and a more thoughtful transition to support the student. As indicated in our earlier guidance, we have recommended that schools request reasonable notice from families so that proper safety measures can be engaged before a student transitions back into in-person schooling. Normally, this would be enough notice to allow the school to notify the teacher and arrange for the return in line with health and safety protocols. If schools wish to request families voluntarily provide longer periods of time that would not be prohibited. However, excluding students for a longer period without specific health and safety reasons, is not appropriate.

## Charter Schools

Q: **Are charter schools included in new connectivity update on Wi-Fi and devices?**

A: If charter schools responded to the CSDE survey on connectivity, their numbers are included in the 50,000 devices we announced.

Q: **How will charter schools access available funding for PPE?**

A: All charters are eligible for ESSERF funding, and PPE is an eligible expense under ESSERF. In regard to FEMA funds, charters should work with the municipality in which they are located.

Q: **Will local public health officials be directed to work with charters? What do charters do when they have low community spread but neighboring or host districts have spread?**

A: DPH convenes local health directors to ensure conversations are being had about how all this needs to work together, and charters should be included in these planning discussions. Additionally, future guidance will be forthcoming for schools with students from different districts that may have different public health data metrics.

## Funding

Q: **Is the anticipated additional funding going to be able to be used for extended leave time, FMLA, additional cleaning/disinfecting, etc.?**

A: Guidance will be sent to districts about the eligible uses of the Coronavirus Relief Funds and any associated funding related to the pandemic.

Q: **Will connectivity and need for devices be supported by state funding?**

A: The Office of the Governor has estimated the connectivity needs for all districts based on district responses to surveys conducted by the CSDE and the CT Commission for Education Technology. The Office of the Governor has budgeted to fulfill up to the numbers stated in the email sent to each superintendent on the 28th and 29th of July.