



Santa Barbara County Education Office

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The state of in-person instruction for students in Santa Barbara County; vaccines for education and child care staff

By Dr. Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendents of Schools

Thousands of students in Santa Barbara County have not been on a campus since March 2020, and too many families are weary with concern for their children's well-being. All youth deserve equitable opportunities to thrive; they need routines that involve peers, interaction, play, and belonging. They need their talented teachers to foster those in-class relationships that bring joy, inspiration, and motivation for students and teachers alike. Online learning, which has proven to be successful for many, does not fulfill our collective mission to guarantee equity and access for all.

The path to reopening schools for in-person instruction has been steeped in the most dynamic challenges imaginable. Despite the hurdles, many smaller schools and districts in Santa Barbara County reopened in-person instruction as early as last fall. Smaller should not be confused with simple, as these school teams worked tirelessly to address innumerable details and implement all safety practices and protocols in order to reopen and remain open. However, reopening a school for 100 students is considerably different than reopening a district with 20 schools of more than 16,000 students. The larger the schools and districts, the more time, staff, and financial resources are needed to meet the requirements necessary to reopen.

Several school districts in Santa Barbara County are ready to open now, or as soon as they get permission to do so. Others are pursuing additional state or federal funding to secure required resources for reopening and/or are awaiting improved local health and safety data to reflect their community's readiness for reopening.

Many community members have asked about the state of reopening schools in Santa Barbara County. The information below is intended to provide up-to-date information about state and county-level processes and decisions that impact local schools and their reopening efforts. Opening timelines and school schedules are determined locally, with each district, charter school, and private school communicating directly with their staff and families.

What role does the Santa Barbara County Education Office/Office of the County Superintendent of Schools (SBCEO) play in approving districts and schools to reopen for in-person instruction?

SBCEO is in constant, daily contact with the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department (SBCPHD), works closely with the public districts and charter schools, and frequently communicates with private schools, childcare and early learning networks, and school nurses and health staff. SBCEO has continuously advocated on behalf of all Santa Barbara County schools, actively urging state and local legislators to provide equitable, realistic paths forward and provide vaccines for education and childcare employees to support safe school environments.

SBCEO has the authority to reopen only the schools and programs we directly operate, including court and community schools, special education programs, and preschools. We do not have the authority to reopen districts, charter schools, or private schools within Santa Barbara County.

What will it mean for elementary schools when case rates in Santa Barbara County decrease to a rate of 25 per 100,000?

As of February 16, 2021, Santa Barbara County was in the purple tier with an adjusted case rate of 27 per 100,000, down from 36 per 100,000 from the week prior, and a test positivity rate of 8.2%, down from 10.2%. SBCPHD officials are optimistic that we will drop below 25 soon.

According to the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), once Santa Barbara County reaches an adjusted case rate of 25 or less per 100,000 for five consecutive days, elementary schools may reopen with the approval of their local district, charter school, or private school board, and after SBCPHD approves their required school safety plan.

At this time, SBCPHD is proactively collaborating with districts and schools that have submitted school safety plans to ensure they are ready and approved as soon as possible.

Districts not yet open, with approved safety plans on file with SBCPHD, are Buellton Union School District, Goleta Union School District, Lompoc Unified School District, Santa Barbara Unified School District, Orcutt Union School District, and Vista Del Mar Union School District. Adelante Charter School and Cuyama Joint Unified School District are working closely with SBCPHD on their plans and are awaiting final approval.

When can middle schools, junior highs, and high schools reopen for in-person instruction in Santa Barbara County?

According to CDPH, schools serving 7-12 grades are required to wait until the county is in the red tier for five days.

Any school that reopened to in-person instruction in the fall may remain open. And all schools, TK-12, may serve small group of students (e.g., special education supports, athletic cohorts).

Can a district, charter school, or private school apply to open right now?

Last week, CDPH created a "Safety Review Process" to create very specific circumstances under which districts could request approval to open now, even with an adjusted case rate higher than 25. The Safety Review Process information continues to emerge, and it is not yet clear if any districts in Santa Barbara County qualify in these limited categories. CDPH will approve or deny requests sent in through this process.

Additionally, the SBCPHD and Santa Barbara Unified School District (SBUSD) sent a joint letter to the state, urging CDPH to permit SBUSD to open its elementary schools immediately. This is an independent process, separate from the Safety Review Process noted above. SBCPHD and additional local districts, including Goleta Union School District, are working together to request CDPH allow their districts to reopen through this joint process. SBCPHS and districts await responses from CDPH.

When will vaccines be available for education and childcare staff in Santa Barbara County?

SBCPHD announced that individuals 65 and older are now able to receive vaccines in Santa Barbara County. Education and childcare employees, along with other sectors in the same tier, will follow once more vaccines become available.

Prioritizing and protecting individuals 65 and older, who are most vulnerable to severe illness from COVID-19, is critical. However, there must be a way to begin providing vaccines for education and childcare employees now, as these are the very people we are asking to serve in the schools we seek to reopen and remain open.

At the very least, let's begin the process of providing vaccines to education and childcare staff who serve groups of youth in person now. This includes special education teachers and staff who serve medically fragile students, custodial staff who clean and disinfect populated areas throughout our open schools, food service staff who make and serve thousands of breakfasts and lunches, and bus drivers who drive groups of students multiple times each day. As the Centers for Disease Control emphasized in their report published days ago: we all must do what we can to support schools so they can open and remain open.

While working to support Santa Barbara County schools, I envision individuals from all corners of our county including parents, grandparents, students, and teachers who have written, called, emailed, and texted to share individual concerns and circumstances since March 2020. As County Superintendent of Schools, I am also the mom of two children attending public schools still in distance learning and am married to an educator who is teaching online until school reopens to in-person instruction. Every action and decision impacts real people and lives of those we know and love. As we all move forward together, our team at SBCEO and I are fully invested and committed to supporting and advocating for all our county's children, students, families, educators, and school staff as schools reopen and stay open to the fullest and safest extent possible.

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