Finish **Strong**

Schools, individuals, and families all have a role to play in protecting in-person learning for the remainder of the school year.

March 29, 2021

Describing this school year as challenging would be an understatement. The Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) and State Department of Education (CSDE) wish to express our sincere gratitude to school administrators, teachers, paraeducators, school staff, students, and their families for their patience and continued hard work as we adapt to changing circumstances during the pandemic. The fact that Connecticut schools have offered substantial in-person learning opportunities this school year with only minor interruptions is a testament to the willingness and success of the school community to work together and protect each other.

As vaccines continue to be distributed throughout our state, as the weather warms, and as outdoor activities increase, there is hope that we may begin to get back closer to our pre-COVID lives. However, with the spread of more contagious virus variants and many other unknown variables, DPH and CSDE continue to urge individuals and organizations to take a cautious approach to planning and resumption of activities at this time as expanding too much, too quickly could result in a significant rebound of community spread and a further loss of in-person learning opportunities. Now is the time for us to maintain our efforts for the remainder of the school year and **Finish Strong**!

What *schools* can do to help us Finish Strong

On March 19, 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated their guidance documents *Operating schools during COVID-19: CDC's Considerations* and *Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Prevention* to reflect recent scientific findings indicating that there appears to be no significant increase in the risk of transmission of COVID-19 among students seated a minimum of 3 feet from each other in classrooms where masks are used universally by students and staff. These findings and updates from the CDC are consistent with Connecticut's approach to keeping schools open during the pandemic. DPH and CSDE recommend that Connecticut schools:

- Follow the guidance in the *Adapt, Advance, Achieve* document and supporting materials for the remainder of this school year.
- Continuously review and ensure compliance with the suite of mitigation strategies employed in school buildings, including universal mask wearing, cohorting/limiting movement, ventilation, cleaning/disinfection, symptom-based exclusion and quarantine, and other strategies.
- Continue to maximize distance between student desks to the extent feasible, noting that the CDC definition of a "close contact" is not changing and decreasing the distance between students in a classroom may have the effect of requiring additional students to quarantine as a result of being identified as a close contact.
- Attempt to find and operationalize additional or alternative instructional space if a school identifies a classroom where the appropriate spacing cannot be maintained, such as instances where:
  - the person-density inside a classroom would necessitate a student seating distance of less than 3 feet
  - special circumstances exist that result in inconsistent universal mask use in the classroom and person-density necessitates student spacing closer than 6 feet.

- Communicate frequently with school staff, students, and families to reinforce the importance of staying out of school when they feel sick, when they are awaiting a test result, or when they are in an isolation or quarantine period.

What *individuals and families* can do to help us Finish Strong

At school

Anyone reporting to a school building to learn or work should be aware of the current school procedures in place to protect their school community and preserve in-person learning. These include:

- Correct and consistent wearing of a multi-layer cloth or similar material mask at all times while inside school buildings and outside when in close contact with others.
- Frequent hand washing or sanitizing, especially when sharing materials.
- Maintaining distance from others to the extent possible and avoiding large groups.
- Staying seated, masked, and not interacting in close contact with others when on the bus.
- Being aware of any symptoms that develop and stay home or leave school if symptoms develop, whether or not you think they are related to something other than COVID-19.
- Get tested if you are experiencing any symptoms or if you have been in contact with anyone with COVID-19 (whether at school or elsewhere) and stay out of school until you get a negative test result back.

Outside of school

- Employ all the same mitigation strategies that you use in school when you are in public or around individuals outside of your household, especially during sports or other group activities.
- Do not assume that because someone has no symptoms or because you know and trust them that they are not a risk for COVID-19 infection.
- Avoid unnecessary public interactions and consolidate errands into fewer trips to the extent possible.
- Move activities outdoors to the extent possible to allow for additional spacing and dilution air, especially if activities involve gathering with individuals outside of your immediate household.

When traveling

Individuals or families planning overnight out-of-state travel in the coming weeks, and even those planning only in-state or regional day-trips, have the potential to return home with **unrecognized SARS-CoV-2 infection**. This is especially true where travel involves states with fewer restrictions and safety measures in place, where compliance with masking and other mitigation strategies may be low, and where more contagious virus variants may be widely circulating. Of particular concern for families with members who either attend or work at K-12 schools and students and school staff returning from travel and subsequently reporting to school during their infectious period, **could significantly impact the continuing operation of schools for in-person learning** in the weeks following spring breaks.

The responsibility lies with individuals and families to take the steps necessary to protect themselves, their school communities, and others before, during, and after travel, as it would not be reasonable to expect schools to investigate or enforce recommendations related to private activities. Both the CDC and DPH continue to **recommend against out-of-state travel** during this time. **However, for individuals and families associated with K-12 schools in Connecticut who choose to travel in the coming weeks (for spring break or otherwise) the following actions are recommended:**

- Continue to utilize all appropriate mitigation strategies while traveling (including mask wearing, distancing, symptom recognition, etc.) regardless of whether the policies and procedures in place at your destination mandate them.
- Before travel, review the current DPH and CDC recommendations for travel during COVID-19 and be sure to plan sufficient time for any necessary actions.
- Follow DPH and CDC best-practice quarantine and testing procedures upon return, including:
  - quarantining for a full 7 days, **even with a negative COVID-19 test** result obtained between days 3-5; or
  - quarantining for a full 10 days without testing; and
  - continuing to monitor for symptoms during all quarantine periods.
- Individuals or families choosing not to observe quarantine should at a minimum:
  - get tested for COVID-19 after they return;
  - stay out of school until they receive a negative test result back from the laboratory;
  - be acutely and continuously aware of any symptoms of COVID-19 that they or their family members may develop in the two weeks after travel; and
  - be prepared to immediately isolate/quarantine themselves if/when symptoms develop.

If we all continue to work together with the goal of keeping our schools open and do all we can to keep each other healthy and safe, we will have a successful end to this school year and **Finish Strong**!

DPH and CSDE wish to thank all of our school and family partners for your contributions to this success.