

Important Reminders when Identifying Close Contacts in School Settings

September 24, 2021

As the end of the first month of school nears, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Department of Public Health (DPH) are issuing important reminders for districts and schools as they identify close contacts in school settings. Please continue to reference the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22](#) in implementing testing and quarantine protocols this year and contact the DESE Rapid Response Help Center at 781-338-3500 with any questions.

Definition of a close contact:

An individual should be identified as a close contact and may be subject to quarantine or testing protocols, **only** if they meet the definition of a close contact as defined by DESE and DPH and are not subject to the exemptions listed below:

- Close contacts are identified as individuals who have been within 6 feet of a COVID-19 positive individual while indoors, for at least 15 minutes during a 24-hour period.

Please note that the at-risk exposure time begins 48 hours prior to symptom onset (or time of positive test if asymptomatic) and continues until the time the COVID-19 positive individual is isolated. Additionally, multiple brief or transitory interactions, such as in a hallway or when entering or exiting a classroom, are unlikely to result in 15 minutes and do not meet the definition of close contact.

The definition of a close contact also specifies time spent indoors only. **Interactions that occur outdoors, whether masked or unmasked, do not count toward the definition of a close contact for the purposes of this document.** Schools are encouraged to use outdoors spaces to the extent possible, especially during lunch.

Exemptions to close contact quarantine and testing protocols:

While all individuals who meet the definition above are considered close contacts, **there are individuals who may be exempt from any quarantine or testing protocols in school. These individuals should not be asked to take a test, to quarantine, or to participate in Test and Stay.**

- **Asymptomatic, fully vaccinated close contacts:** Individuals who are asymptomatic and fully vaccinated are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- **Classroom close contacts:** An individual who is exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual in the classroom while both individuals were masked, so long as the individuals were spaced at least 3 feet apart, is exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- **Bus close contacts:** Individuals on buses must be masked according to federal requirements. As such, individuals who are masked on buses when windows are open are exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols.
- **Close contacts who have had COVID-19 within the past 90 days:** An individual who has been previously diagnosed with COVID-19 and then becomes a close contact of someone with COVID-19 is exempt from testing and quarantine response protocols if:
 - The exposure occurred within 90 days of the onset of their own illness AND

- The exposed individual is recovered and remains without COVID-19 symptoms.

Identifying close contacts in school settings:

Schools are strongly encouraged to work with students and teachers to identify which individuals are known to be close contacts based on the definition above. If it is not known that an individual meets this definition, they should not be identified as a close contact. Schools and districts should also make sure that anyone identified as a close contact does not meet one of the above exemptions from following the quarantine and testing protocols. Any individuals who qualify under one of the above exemptions should not be included in quarantine and testing protocols, including participating in Test and Stay.

If a student tests positive, it is rare that the entire classroom will be identified as a close contact, as most students will not have been within 3 feet of the individual for more than 15 minutes, while masked, or within 6 feet of the individual for more than 15 minutes, while unmasked. In practice, it is likely **only** the individuals sitting immediately next to the student who will be identified as close contacts.

Similarly, if a teacher is confirmed to have COVID-19, it is likely that only a few students, were close enough to that individual to be a close contact who needs to follow quarantine and testing protocols. If a teacher confirmed to have COVID-19 worked one-on-one with a student for more than 15 minutes, the student may need to quarantine or be tested, but a teacher stopping by student desks throughout a lesson is unlikely to result in any true close contacts given the brief nature of each interaction.

Schools have found it to be helpful to give staff and students a visual of what 6 feet and what 3 feet looks like when working to identify close contacts. Staff members should consider asking an adult to extend both of their arms to show an approximation of 6 feet (fingertip to fingertip), to identify any *unmasked* close contacts; or one arm, to show an approximation of 3 feet (chest to fingertip), to identify any *masked* close contacts. Schools may also consider using a yardstick or other measuring device to show the distances relevant to identifying close contacts.

Schools can also use the linked decision-tree to help correctly identify close contacts, [available here](#).