

Department of Elementary & Secondary Education and Department of Public Health

Frequently Asked Questions, Week of September 20, 2021

1. What is DESE's guidance on appropriate mask wearing?

At this time, per [DESE's Implementation of Mask Requirement document](#), all individuals in schools - including vaccinated individuals – must wear masks.¹ Individuals' masks must completely cover their nose and mouth and fit snugly against the sides of their face without gaps. The CDC has published [additional helpful guidelines](#) on proper mask wearing, including emphasizing that individuals should not choose masks that have any holes or vents, such as those for exhalation, which allow the virus particles to escape.

2. Are individuals considered close contacts if they were exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual while outdoors?

No. As a reminder, the Department of Public Health has updated its [definition of a close contact](#) to focus on contact that occurs when indoors. **As a result, exposure time outdoors does not count towards the time-based close contact definition. Only time spent indoors should be considered for the purposes of identifying close contacts for students and staff.**

Close contacts are individuals who have been within 6 feet of a COVID-19 positive individual while indoors, for at least 15 minutes cumulatively 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.

3. If individuals are exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual outside of school, can they participate in Test and Stay?

No. At this time, Test and Stay is intended for in-school close contacts only. Unvaccinated close contacts that were exposed to a COVID-19 positive individual in their household (such as siblings) or other non-school setting, must quarantine at home per [DPH/DESE's Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22 document](#). As a reminder, vaccinated close contacts are exempt from quarantine protocols and do not participate in Test and Stay.

4. What COVID-19 protocols should students at vocational/technical schools follow at their external internships and co-ops?

Students should follow the COVID-19 requirements as specified by the external placement site. If students do not wish to comply with their assigned placement site's requirements, vocational / technical schools are not required to find them an alternative placement.

¹ Students and staff who cannot wear a mask for medical reasons, and students who cannot wear a mask for behavioral reasons, are exempted from the requirement.

5. May individuals remove their masks when students are receiving speech and language services?

Masks should be worn during speech and language services, with clear face masks preferred. If students are unable to effectively receive services while individuals are wearing a cloth mask and the school does not have access to clear face masks, a face shield may be worn. Individuals should maintain distance as feasible whenever masks are removed.

6. Has DESE/DPH changed the definition of a close contact in the recent [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22 document](#)?

No. The definition of a close contact has not changed from DESE's guidance at the end of last school year and continues to align with [MA DPH guidelines on close contacts](#). In some cases, the quarantine protocols required for close contacts have changed and are outlined in the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22 document](#). As a reminder, asymptomatic vaccinated individuals do not need to follow quarantine protocols. However, any close contact should be monitoring for symptoms for 14 days.

7. Can symptomatic individuals participate in Test and Stay?

No. Symptomatic individuals (as defined on page 3 of the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY2021-22](#) document) **cannot** participate in Test and Stay.

However, if a close contact has symptoms **and** the symptoms resolve prior to day 7, they may return to school and participate in the Test and Stay program after receiving a negative PCR test. Please refer to page 4 of the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY2021-22](#) to see which individuals are exempted from Test and Stay and other quarantine protocols.

If symptoms (as defined on page 3) arise while an individual is participating in Test and Stay, they should go home and isolate until symptoms resolve. Please note that symptom resolution is defined as having improvement in symptoms and having been without fever for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications.

8. When individuals participating in Test and Stay are not in school, are they required to quarantine?

In alignment with DPH guidance, individuals participating in Test and Stay should stay home and quarantine whenever they are not in school settings, for the duration of the Test and Stay period. As a reminder, as noted on page 6 of the [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios - SY 2021-22 document](#), individuals can participate in school activities on the weekends and after school if they continue to test on those days and follow the other Test and Stay protocols.

9. Can individuals participating in Test and Stay ride the bus?

Yes. Individuals participating in Test and Stay can participate in all school setting activities, including riding the bus. They must remain masked unless eating or drinking and maintain 3' of distancing as feasible.

10. What kinds of tests are acceptable for the different quarantine protocols?

The COVID test required in Protocol A or B-2 can be a PCR or a rapid antigen test. Any proctored rapid antigen test (including tests administered at home with online observation) whose results are automatically and electronically reported to public health is acceptable.

To participate in the Test and Stay Program, only BinaxNOW tests may be used.

To return to school after symptom resolution in Protocol C, a PCR test is required.

Note: Nucleic acid amplification (NAAT) tests are a type of PCR test. Therefore, individuals may take a NAAT test whenever a PCR test is accepted.

11. What is the primary resource I should review to understand the protocols?

The [Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22](#) is the primary source on the DPH/DESE protocols for this school year. There is also a [high-level flowchart](#) that provides a visual summary of the core protocol components, but the protocol document is the primary and comprehensive resource for district and school staff.

If you have further questions on the Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios – SY 2021-22, you can contact the DESE Rapid Response Help Center at 781-338-3500.