Preliminary Guidance
for Phased Reopening of Pre-K to 12 Schools

Background

Over the past several months, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) engaged with educational leaders and other stakeholders regarding reopening for the 2020-21 school year. A clear theme that emerged from these conversations was the need for timely guidance to aid in planning for a return to in-person instruction, delivery of services, resumption of extracurricular activities and other programs (including those provided within schools by external organizations). This preliminary guidance document serves as a starting point for school leaders to consider in their preparations for the upcoming year. This guidance applies to school entities which include: school districts, charter schools, regional charter schools, cyber charter schools, career and technical centers (CTCs), and intermediate units (IUs).

Given the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, PDE's guidance will evolve as further research, data and resources become available. Any changes will be noted and date-stamped to foster usability. Every day counts as schools plan to reopen and resume in-person instruction. And every day, we are learning more about how to do that safely. PDE's guidance will continue to reflect the best available data and evidence on maximizing educational opportunities while mitigating disease spread. Accordingly, within the next three weeks, PDE will release additional guidance that outlines steps for school re-openings while addressing safe operations, teaching and learning, and student wellness—with attention to equity throughout.

Health and Safety Plans

Recognizing that each school entity is unique and that all plans for the upcoming year must reflect local needs, each school entity must create a Health and Safety Plan which will serve as the local guidelines for all school reopening activities. As with all school emergency plans, the Health and Safety Plan should be tailored to the unique needs of each school entity and should be created in consultation with local health agencies, if possible.

Health and Safety Plans must be approved by each school entity's governing body (i.e., board of directors). School entities must submit their approved Health and Safety Plans (and any questions) to PDE at RA-EDContinuityofED@pa.gov. Those plans must also be posted on the school entity's publicly available website prior to the reopening of school and providing services to students. To ensure a coherent, community-wide approach to reopening, charter schools are strongly encouraged to engage with local authorizers in finalizing Health and Safety Plans; this will ensure that students in the same locality – and even from the same family – experience similar safety and disease mitigation protocols. Private and parochial schools are strongly encouraged to create a Health and Safety Plan tailored to their unique needs and post the Health and Safety Plan on their publicly available website prior to reopening school.

School entities may want to consider piloting approaches on a smaller scale to inform broader implementation in the fall. Such activities may begin as early as July 1, 2020 as described in this document.

Phased Reopening Plan

All school activities must be informed by [Governor Wolf's Process to Reopen Pennsylvania.](#) The administration has categorized reopening into three phases: red, yellow, or green. These designations signal how restrictions on school, work, congregate settings, and social interactions will ease in each county:

- The **Red Phase** has the sole purpose of minimizing the spread of COVID-19 through stay-at-home orders, strict social distancing, closures of non-life sustaining businesses, closures of schools and in-person instruction, and building safety protocols. Schools that are currently closed, remain closed. Remote learning opportunities should be the method of providing any instruction to students. Support services for students such as school meal programs and at-risk student check-ins, should be provided as feasible.

- As counties move into the **Yellow Phase**, stay-at-home orders are lifted, but some restrictions on work and social interactions ease. Limitations around large social gatherings, remain in place. When the Governor announces that a county is changing from red to yellow, schools in yellow counties will be permitted to reopen for in-person instruction after July 1 provided the schools adhere to PDE guidance which includes the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines below.

- The **Green Phase** eases most restrictions, but still encourages social distancing and limitations on large social gatherings (250 people maximum) to allow the economy to strategically reopen while continuing to prioritize public health. While this phase will facilitate a return to a "new normal" for schools and communities, it will be equally important to continue to monitor public health indicators and adjust strategies to mitigate community spread. Schools in green counties must continue to adhere to PDE guidance.

Changing Circumstances May Impact Color Designations

Depending on the public health conditions, there could be additional actions, orders, or guidance that is provided by [PDE](#) or [DOH](#) as a county is designated as red, yellow, or green.

Some counties may not experience a straight path from a red designation, to a yellow, and then a green designation. Instead, cycling back and forth between less restrictive to more restrictive designations may occur as public health indicators improve or worsen. This means that each school should account for changing conditions and include those scenarios in their local Health and Safety Plans.

Conditions for Resuming In-Person Instruction

In May 2020, the [CDC](#) released two documents to assist states and local education agencies (LEA) in planning for a gradual scale up and eventual reopening of schools: the [Schools Decision Tree](#) and the [Interim Guidance for Schools and Day Camps](#). These documents along with guidelines from DOH and the aforementioned [Process to Reopen Pennsylvania](#) provide the foundation for this guidance from PDE.

RED PHASE

- Schools remain closed for in-person instruction and all instruction must be provided via remote learning, whether using digital or non-digital platforms.
- Provisions for student services such as school meal programs will continue.

YELLOW PHASE

- Schools may provide in-person instruction after developing a written Health and Safety Plan, securing approval by each school entity's governing body (i.e., board of directors) and posting this plan on the school or district's publicly available website. The plan must include the following:
  - Identification of a **"pandemic coordinator"** and/or "pandemic team" with defined roles and responsibilities for health and safety preparedness and response planning;
  - Steps to protect children and staff at higher risk for severe illness;
  - Processes for monitoring students and staff for symptoms and history of exposure;
  - Steps to take in relation to isolation or quarantine when a staff member, child, or visitor becomes sick or demonstrates a history of exposure;
  - Guidelines for when an isolated or quarantined staff member, child, or visitor may return to school;
  - Guidelines for hygiene practices for students and staff which include the manner and frequency of hand-washing and other best practices;
  - Guidelines on the use of face coverings (masks or face shields) by all staff;
  - Guidelines on the use of face coverings (masks or face shields) for older students, as appropriate;
  - Expectations for the posting of signs in highly visible locations, that promote everyday protective measures, and how to stop the spread of germs;
  - Procedures for cleaning, sanitizing, disinfecting, and ventilating learning spaces, surfaces, and any other areas used by students (i.e., restrooms, drinking fountains, hallways, and transportation);
  - Protocols for classroom/learning space occupancy that allow for 6 feet of separation among students and staff throughout the day to the maximum extent feasible;
  - Procedures for restricting the use of cafeterias and other congregate settings, and serving meals in alternate settings such as classrooms;
  - Protocols for sporting activities consistent with the CDC Considerations for Youth Sports for recess, and physical education classes (guidance for organized school sports will be published separately);
  - Schedules for training all faculty and staff on the implementation of the Health and Safety Plans before providing services to students; and

YELLOW PHASE

- System for ensuring ongoing communication with families around the elements of the local Health and Safety Plan including ways that families can practice safe hygiene in the home.
- Each Health and Safety Plan should also include the following to the extent possible:
    - Methods of limiting the number of individuals in classrooms and other learning spaces, and interactions between groups of students;
    - Methods of staggering the use of communal spaces and hallways and ensuring regular cleaning;
    - Procedures to limit the sharing of materials among students;
    - Processes for identifying and restricting non-essential visitors and volunteers;
    - Protocols for adjusting transportation schedules and practices to create social distance between students; and
    - Processes to communicate and coordinate with local child care regarding on site care, transportation protocol changes, and when possible, revised hours of operation or modified school-year calendars.
    - Additional steps required to adhere to the Guidance for Businesses Permitted to Operate During the COVID-19 Disaster Emergency to Ensure the Safety and Health of Employees and the Public;

GREEN PHASE

- Schools may provide in-person instruction after developing a written Health and Safety Plan, securing approval by each school entity's governing body (i.e., board of directors) and posting the plan on the school or district's publicly available website. The plan must include the following:
    - Identification of a **"pandemic coordinator"** and/or "pandemic team" with defined roles and responsibilities for health and safety preparedness and response planning;
    - Steps to protect children and staff at higher risk for severe illness;
    - Steps to take in relation to isolation or quarantine when a staff member, child or visitor becomes sick or demonstrates a history of exposure;
    - Expectations for the posting of signs in highly visible locations, that promote everyday protective measures and how to stop the spread of germs;
    - Procedures for cleaning, sanitizing, disinfecting, and ventilating learning spaces;
    - Procedures for the safe use of cafeterias and other congregate settings;
    - Protocols for sporting activities consistent with the CDC Considerations for Youth Sports for recess and physical education classes (guidance for organized school sports will be published separately);
    - Schedules for training all faculty and staff on the implementation of the Health and Safety Plan.

GREEN PHASE

- System for ensuring ongoing communication with families around the elements of the local Health and Safety Plan including ways that families can practice safe hygiene in the home.
- Each Health and Safety Plan may also include the following to the extent possible:
  - Guidelines for hygiene practices for students and staff;
  - Guidelines on the use of face coverings (masks or face shields) by staff and students;
  - Protocols for classroom/learning space occupancy that allow for 6 feet of separation among students and staff throughout the day when appropriate;
  - Methods of limiting the number of individuals in classrooms and other learning spaces, and interactions between groups of students;
  - Methods of staggering the use of communal spaces and hallways and ensuring regular cleaning;
  - Procedures to limit the sharing of materials among students;
  - Processes for identifying and restricting non-essential visitors and volunteers;
  - Protocols for adjusting transportation schedules and practices to create social distance between students; and
  - Processes to communicate and coordinate with local child care regarding on site care, transportation protocol changes, and when possible, revised hours of operation or modified school-year calendars.
  - Additional steps required to adhere to the [Guidance for Businesses Permitted to Operate During the COVID-19 Disaster Emergency to Ensure the Safety and Health of Employees and the Public](#)

Health and Safety Plan Considerations

Each school that considers a return to in-person instruction must create a Health and Safety Plan which will serve as the local guidelines for all activities. The Health and Safety Plans developed for each school should be tailored to the unique needs of each school and should be created in consultation with local health agencies. Given the dynamic nature of the pandemic, plans should incorporate sufficient flexibility to adapt to changing conditions. The table below can be used to assist in the planning process but the considerations for each plan requirement should not be considered exhaustive. Additionally, the department is creating an optional planning template that can be accessed on the website beginning Friday, June 5.

Plan Requirement	Possible Considerations
Identification of a "pandemic coordinator" and/or "pandemic team" with defined roles and responsibilities for health and safety preparedness and response planning	- Identify a staff member to serve in the role as the pandemic coordinator. - Identify members of staff and community to serve on a pandemic team to lead preparedness and response planning. - Define the roles and responsibilities of all members of the team. - Survey families within the school community regarding their perceptions and intentions related to in-person instruction and services.
Steps to protect students and staff at higher risk for severe illness	- Establish and maintain communication with local and state authorities to determine current mitigation levels in your community. - Adopt flexible attendance policies for students and staff. - Protect employees at higher risk for severe illness by supporting and encouraging options to telework. - Explore offering duties that minimize higher risk individuals' contact with others. - Limit or cancel all non-essential travel as necessary. - Address equity and truancy risks relating to vulnerable populations such as homeless students, migrant students,

Plan Requirement	Possible Considerations
	English Learners and those served by the juvenile justice system. • Determine additional considerations and supports needed for students with disabilities with complex medical needs to ensure the safety of these students and the individuals providing services to these students.
Processes for monitoring students and staff for symptoms and history of exposure	• Check for signs and symptoms of students and employees daily upon arrival. • Conduct routine, daily health checks (e.g., temperature and symptom screening) which include checks for history of exposure. • Consider a process to address privacy concerns of monitoring practices and the potential stigma associated with monitoring and confirmed exposure or cases. • Develop a system for home/self-screening and reporting procedures. • Encourage staff to stay home if they are sick and encourage parents to keep sick children home. • Adopt flexible attendance policies for students and staff.
Steps to take in relation to isolation or quarantine when a staff member, student or visitor becomes sick or demonstrates a history of exposure Guidelines for when an isolated or quarantined staff member, student, or visitor may return to school;	• Work with school administrators, nurses, and other healthcare providers to identify an isolation room or area to separate anyone who exhibits COVID-19like symptoms. • Establish procedures for safely transporting sick individuals home. • Close off areas used by a sick person and do not use before cleaning and disinfection. • Notify local health officials, staff, and families of exposure or confirmed case while maintaining confidentiality.

Plan Requirement	Possible Considerations
	• Implement flexible sick leave policies and practices, if feasible. • Create a communication system for staff and families for self-reporting of symptoms and notification of exposures and closures. • Refer to most recent DOH Guidance on Home Isolation or Quarantine and Returning to Work.
Guidelines for hygiene practices for students and staff which include the manner and frequency of hand-washing and other best practices Guidelines on the use of face coverings (masks or face shields) by all staff Guidelines on the use of face coverings (masks for face shields) for older students as appropriate	• Teach and reinforce washing hands and covering coughs and sneezes among students and staff. • Teach and reinforce use of face coverings among all staff. Face coverings may be challenging for students (especially younger students or students with special needs) to wear in all-day settings such as school. See CDC document for further considerations. The DOH has published Guidance on Homemade Masks During COVID-19. • Provide protective face coverings (masks or face shields) to adults, including visiting adults. • Purchase adequate supplies, and carefully monitor inventory, to support healthy hygiene behaviors, including soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol, paper towels, tissues, and no-touch trash cans. *(See Pennsylvania COVID-19 PPE & Supplies Business-2-Business (B2B) Interchange Directory.)* • Post signs on how to stop the spread of COVID-19, such as properly washing hands, promote everyday protective measures, and properly wear a face covering. • Ensure communications are in common languages spoken at school and easily understandable for children and adults.

Plan Requirement	Possible Considerations
	• Work with health departments and local health care systems to disseminate hygiene and disinfection strategies for transmission prevention at home. • Purchase adequate face coverings and other personal protective equipment as appropriate and carefully monitor inventory. *(See Pennsylvania COVID-19 PPE & Supplies Business-2-Business (B2B) Interchange Directory.)*
Expectations for the posting of signs in highly visible locations, that promote everyday protective measures and how to stop the spread of germs	• Post signs in highly visible locations (e.g., school entrances, restrooms) that promote everyday protective measures and describe how to stop the spread of germs (such as by properly washing hands and properly wearing a face covering). • Broadcast regular announcements on reducing the spread of COVID-19. • Include messages (e.g., videos) about behaviors that prevent the spread of COVID-19 when communicating with staff and families (such as on school websites, in emails, and on school social media accounts). • Print free digital resources on CDC's communications resources main page (link).
Procedures for cleaning, sanitizing, disinfecting, and ventilating learning spaces and any other areas used by students (i.e. restrooms, hallways, and transportation)	• Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects within the school and on school buses at least daily, including door handles, sink handles, and drinking fountains. • Ensure ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air by opening windows and doors when possible.

Plan Requirement	Possible Considerations
	• Take steps to limit or prohibit the use of communal drinking fountains and provide safe alternatives for providing water when possible.
Protocols for distancing student desks/seating and other social distancing practices classroom/learning space occupancy that allows for 6 feet of separation among students and staff throughout the day to the maximum extent feasible	• Develop a schedule so that student and staff groupings are as static as possible by having the same group of students stay with the same staff based on age and developmental level of students. • Restrict interactions between groups of students. • Create staggered schedules to limit the number of individuals in classrooms and other spaces. (CDC recommends no more than 25 individuals including staff). • Establish distances (CDC recommends 6 feet) between student desks/seating and other social distancing practices to the maximum extent feasible and appropriate. • Limit gatherings, events, and extracurricular activities to those that can maintain social distancing. • Hold classes in gyms, auditoriums, or other large spaces. • Turn desks to face in the same direction or have students sit on only one side of tables, spaced apart. Consider the unique needs of music programming (e.g., band, orchestra, choir) and transmission risk-mitigation protocols to address hygiene, disinfection of equipment, distancing during practice and competition, and numbers of participants. Due to potential increased risk of droplet transmission, physical distancing should be prioritized for wind instruments.
Procedures for restricting the use of cafeterias and serving meals in classrooms	• Serve meals in classrooms or other spaces as an alternative to the cafeteria. • Serve individually plated meals/box lunches and avoid buffet style meals whenever possible.

Plan Requirement	Possible Considerations
	• Avoid sharing of food and utensils.

Protocols for sporting activities consistent with the CDC Considerations for Youth Sports for recess, and physical education classes (guidance for organized school sports will be published separately)	• Select and provide safe opportunities for exercise and sports events for students. Consider the following;
	
	   • Physical proximity of players, and the length of time that players are close to each other or to staff.
	   • Amount of necessary touching of shared equipment and gear (e.g., protective gear, balls, bats, racquets, mats, or water bottles).
	   • Ability to engage in social distancing while not actively engaged in play (e.g., practice, games, locker rooms, showers).
	   • Engagement of players at higher risk of developing serious disease.
	   • Size of the team.
	
	• Limit travel outside of the local community.
	• Implement transmission risk-mitigation protocols in non-contact sports to address hygiene, disinfection of equipment, distancing during practice and competition, and numbers of participants.
	• Require enhanced surveillance and testing for any contact sports to minimize higher risk of transmission in participating athletes.

Schedules for training all faculty and staff on the implementation of the Health and Safety Plan before providing services to students	• Conduct training online to limit the size of gatherings. • Stagger in-person training schedules based on plan implementation timelines. • Disseminate and update training documents as a reference for staff.

Plan Requirement	Possible Considerations
Methods of limiting the number of individuals in classrooms and other learning spaces, and interactions between groups of students	• Close communal use spaces such as cafeterias and playgrounds; otherwise stagger use and disinfect in between use. • Stagger classes of students in hallways to limit numbers in hallways at any time. • Create one-way traffic pattern in hallways. • Separate students within common areas. • Pursue virtual group events, gatherings, or meetings, if possible, and promote social distancing of at least 6 feet between people if events are held. Limit group size to the extent possible.
Procedures to limit the sharing of materials among students	• Clean and disinfect shared items between uses. • Keep each student's belongings separated from others' and in individually labeled containers, cubbies, lockers or other areas. • Ensure adequate supplies to minimize sharing of high touch materials to the extent possible (e.g., textbooks, art supplies, equipment etc.) or limit use of supplies and equipment by one group of students at a time and clean and disinfect between use. For devices and materials that must be shared, ensure cleaning and disinfecting between uses.
Processes for identifying and restricting non-essential visitors and volunteers	• Refrain from scheduling large group activities such as field trips, inter-group events, and extracurricular activities. • Restrict nonessential visitors, volunteers, and activities that involve other groups.
Protocols for adjusting transportation schedules and practices to create social distance between students	• Stagger student arrival and drop-off times or locations.

Plan Requirement	Possible Considerations
	• Create social distance between children on school buses (for example, seating children one child per seat or every other row). • Coordinate transportation schedules with other LEAs when sharing students or transportation systems.
System for ensuring ongoing communication with families around the elements of the local Health and Safety Plan including ways that families can practice safe hygiene in the home	• Post Health and Safety Plan on public school/district website. • Provide regular update information on school website and in parent flyers/letters. • Encourage caregivers and families to practice and reinforce good prevention habits at home and within their families. • Remind parents to keep child at home if sick with any illness. • Prepare parents and families for remote learning if school is temporarily dismissed. • Provide training to prepare parents/guardians for digital and remote learning. • Discourage students and families from gathering in other public places while school is dismissed to help slow the spread of COVID-19 in the community.