

# Returning to School in Fall 2021: Frequently Asked Questions

On May 13, the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) published [K-12 COVID-19 health and safety guidance for summer 2021 and the 2021-22 school year](#). This frequently asked questions (FAQ) document details what students, their families, educators, and school staff can expect for school in the 2021-22 school year.

## In-Person Learning

### What will school look like next year?

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Department of Health, and Governor's Office share the expectation that **all** students will have the opportunity to attend school in-person full-time (five days per week) in the 2021-22 school year. School districts will not have the option to provide solely hybrid or remote learning.

### Will all school buildings be required to reopen fully?

Yes. Every school must provide every student with the opportunity to learn in-person full-time (five days per week).

### Will students have the option to attend school remotely?

Some school districts do not have the resources to provide *both* a fully in-person and fully remote learning experience for their students. Districts are required to provide a fully in-person option, but they are not required to provide a remote option. If a district is not offering a remote learning option and a student and their family want one, they may request to transfer to an alternative learning experience (ALE) program offered by a school outside their resident district.

### Will there still be health and safety measures in place next year?

Yes. The following mandatory measures will still be in place in the 2021-22 school year: face coverings for all students, staff, and visitors; ventilation; regular cleaning and disinfecting; and processes for responding to and reporting cases of COVID-19. Physical distancing is still recommended by DOH at this time – please see the next question for more information.

### What physical distancing requirements will be in place?

DOH recommends 3 feet of physical distancing in classrooms and 6 feet elsewhere to the greatest extent possible. Flexible language in the guidance related to physical distancing (i.e., “to the greatest extent possible” and “to the degree possible and reasonable”) ensures schools are able to provide full-time in-person instruction to every student and family who wants it. If a school needs to distance at less than 6 feet in common areas and less than 3 feet in classrooms to accommodate all students and staff, it is allowable within the guidance.



## **If a student or staff member is fully vaccinated, do they still need to wear a face covering?**

Yes. The guidance related to face coverings for vaccinated individuals released on May 13 does not apply to school settings given that children under 12 are not yet eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine.

## **Will schools still be required to screen all students, staff, and visitors for symptoms?**

No. For summer 2021 and the 2021–22 school year, DOH removed the requirement that schools need to screen students, staff, and visitors at entry to school buildings. However, schools should continue monitoring their students, staff, and visitors for symptoms, and follow the protocols included in the guidance for responding to someone who shows symptoms of COVID-19.

## **Is full-time in-person learning necessary when we are still in a pandemic?**

Yes. Schools are fundamental to child and adolescent development and well-being. Most students are more successful in a comprehensive, in-person learning environment surrounded by their peers and caring adults. In March of 2021, Governor Inslee issued an emergency order to support the mental and behavioral health of young people in Washington after seeing data showing that Washington’s young people were calling crisis hotlines and receiving urgent mental health care in hospitals at rates much higher than usual.

Extended time in remote learning has had academic impacts on students, too. In the 2020–21 school year, the percentage of students disengaging from school has increased significantly. In addition, at the high school level, more students than ever are receiving grades of F, Incomplete, or No Credit. We know most students learn and perform their best when they are in the classroom with their educators and peers.

## **Is there data on the number of COVID-19 cases in schools?**

Yes. Each month, the Department of Health [publishes a report](#) detailing the number of “outbreaks” (defined as two or more cases) within our school buildings. The report includes information about the outbreaks, including county, number of cases, demographics of those infected, and the learning modality of the school (fully in-person, hybrid, or remote).

## **Vaccines for Students**

### **Will the COVID-19 vaccine be required for eligible students in fall 2021?**

No. The State Board of Health, who has the sole authority to set immunization requirements for students, has not discussed requiring the COVID-19 vaccine for children in school settings. However, we encourage vaccination among all eligible students, staff, and volunteers.

## **What is the process for requiring the COVID-19 vaccine for students?**

The State Board of Health (SBOH) may formally consider requiring the COVID-19 vaccine for children in schools if a vaccine is licensed and recommended by federal authorities. The SBOH reviews vaccines that are fully licensed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP).

Once fully licensed COVID-19 vaccine(s) are recommended by the ACIP, the SBOH could convene a technical advisory committee to review the vaccine(s) against the [state's immunization criteria](#). If the vaccine(s) passed the criteria and recommendations of the committee, the SBOH would consider adding it to the state's list of required immunizations through a formal action to begin rulemaking at a future Board meeting.

## **Can a local school district decide to mandate the vaccine for students, even if the state doesn't?**

No. State law ([RCW 28A.210.140](#)) provides full authority to the State Board of Health to establish the procedural and substantive requirements for immunizations for students.

## **Can school districts offer COVID-19 vaccination clinics for eligible students?**

Yes. School districts are encouraged to offer COVID-19 vaccination clinics for eligible students and their families, likely through a partnership with a local health provider.

## **Is the vaccine safe for students?**

Yes. In Pfizer's most recent vaccine trial, they found the vaccine to be safe and 100% effective for kids as young as 12.