Reopening Guidance for Schools

Purpose

This guidance was created in partnership with the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) as a resource for administrators to safely open districts and nonpublic schools. It must be used in conjunction with all proclamations issued by the governor and guidance provided by the IDPH.

Planning

Districts and nonpublic schools may plan for reopening using the Return-to-Learn Support Document as a resource. The Health and Safety section, in particular, is relevant to reopening facilities. There are Health and Safety modules for district leadership teams and for school personnel that support health and safety in school that align with the Return-to-Learn Support Document.

Schools must put plans in place to protect staff and students at higher risk of developing illness. Whenever children are together in school or in the community, there is a risk of spreading communicable disease. Additional changes in health practices and measures by schools can create a culture of safety in the prevention of entry or spread of communicable disease, while minimizing disruption of access to educational programs, protecting the confidentiality of students and staff, and preventing discrimination.

July 1

Beginning July 1, school districts and accredited nonpublic schools may begin offering all school activities. The following health and safety requirements should be implemented:

HEALTH AND SAFETY

1. Consistent with IDPH guidance and school policies, staff or students who are ill should stay home.
2. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not recommend that schools screen students and staff upon entering the building. One symptom is not necessarily indicative of communicable disease. Some individuals may be ill and have no symptoms.
3. Teach and reinforce washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds following CDC guidance on when and how to wash your hands. If soap and water are not readily available, teach and reinforce use of a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol (if applicable or age-appropriate) using CDC guidance.
4. Requiring face coverings for all staff and students is not recommended. Allow the personal use of cloth face coverings by staff and students. Teach and reinforce the prevention of stigma associated with the use or non-use of facial coverings to support a respectful, inclusive, and supportive school environment (CDC).
5. Schools should protect the confidentiality of employees and students/families in their personal health who may or may not wear a face covering. Local decisions or policies related to facial coverings are made in collaboration with the school's local public health, current proclamations issued by the governor, and legal counsel.
6. Provide the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and training for employees who have a medium- to high-risk of exposure or as determined by their job-related tasks (OSHA Workplace Guidance, CDC). Teach and reinforce the prevention of stigma associated with the school personnel use of PPE to support a respectful, inclusive, and supportive work environment (CDC).

Iowa Department of Education guidance should be viewed as advisory unless it's specifically authorized by state statute, according to Iowa Code section 256.9A. This does not apply to administrative rules, declaratory orders, or materials required by federal law or courts.

7. The words schools use when communicating matter. If a district is going to require more than what Department guidance outlines, they should only do so in consultation with public health and legal counsel. Schools are reminded that when not using the Department's guidance word for word, they should indicate this was a locally-determined distinction.

8. Schools may not be able to guarantee that physical distancing can be met in all school settings throughout the entire school day, during school activities, or with transportation. This is similar to when children congregate in their community. It is important for schools to implement preventative health changes that can be sustainable and done with fidelity (examples: have a plan if a student or staff member becomes sick; educate and encourage students and staff on a range of preventative health practices to reduce risks associated with communicable disease spread; and use your emergency operations plan for communicable disease outbreaks).

9. Post signs on how to stop the spread of illness, properly wash hands, and promote everyday protective measures. Signs are available on the CDC and IDPH websites. Communicate with your school community on preventative health and safety measures while maintaining confidentiality of students and staff.

10. Have a general framework for routine cleaning practices of facilities, high touch surface areas, cafeterias, concession stands, health offices, and buses following CDC guidance and any state or federal sanitation regulations. Schools must also adhere to the Department of Inspection and Appeals (DIA) School Concession Stand Guidance.

ILLNESS REPORTING

Schools should communicate with student families that if there is a health concern, the family should speak with a health care provider. Maintain confidentiality in received reports of any staff member or student having a communicable disease or illness. Contact your local public health agency directly related to reports of communicable disease and draft communications prior to sending them out to the school community.

1. Contact tracing and self-isolation may be required upon recommendation by public health. Ensure you have a plan in place to support the needs of staff and students who may be impacted. This includes knowing how to contact your local department of public health and maintaining information about attendance and class schedules with contact information if needed for exposed or affected students and staff.

SCHOOL DISTRICT CLOSURE

SF 2310 authorizes school boards, if the governor proclaims a public health disaster, to close a school district due to an outbreak of COVID-19 in the school district or any school district attendance center. Decisions to close are made at the local-level in collaboration with public health.

RETURN-TO-LEARN

Beginning July 1, all school districts and accredited nonpublic schools may begin implementation of their submitted and approved Return-to-Learn plans.

Questions and Additional Guidance

If you have questions, please contact your school improvement consultant. If they are unable to assist you, they will connect you with the appropriate person. For additional COVID-19 guidance and information, please visit the Department's COVID-19 webpage.

Iowa Department of Education guidance should be viewed as advisory unless it's specifically authorized by state statute, according to Iowa Code section 256.9A. This does not apply to administrative rules, declaratory orders, or materials required by federal law or courts.