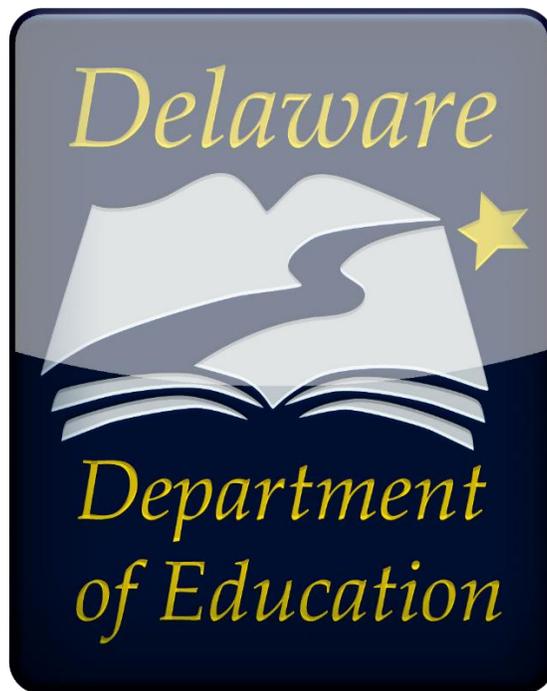


Mitigation Strategies: Working with Students with Special Needs

2020-2021



October 21, 2020

The Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) and the Delaware Department of Public Health (DPH) have developed this guidance to provide administrators and educators with information related to questions posed primarily when it is not feasible for students with disabilities or special healthcare needs to wear face coverings or to practice social distancing. Please note: Schools are community settings, not healthcare settings. For healthcare-related guidance, please refer to the [Considerations for Students with Special Healthcare Needs](#). This document is intended to answer frequently asked questions and complement previously issued guidance. Additional resources and references for the answers provided are available at the end of the document as well.

Q: In a classroom where students may not all wear face coverings or require educators to be in close distance, how can educators best protect themselves and other students from COVID?

A: When working with students with special needs who may seem unable to wear face coverings because of health conditions and/or require close contact, it is particularly important to be vigilant about implementing as many other mitigation measures as possible. Administrators and educators should consider:

- Collaborating with families to work with the student towards wearing a face covering for as much of the day as possible. In some cases, families have been able to practice with the student at home and educators at school to increase the student's tolerance for and ability to wear a face covering for increasing time periods.
 - Ideas for helping students adjust to face coverings are listed in the resources section below. These might include practicing with a favorite stuffed animal, putting on flavored lip balm so the student likes the smell, buying masks with characters or images that the student likes, using social stories, and other creative ideas.
- Integrating the skill of mask wearing with other skills being taught, gradually increasing the time and tolerance of mask wearing, or other instructional techniques to help the student advance with the acquisition of this new life skill.
- Helping students find the "best fit" face coverings to feel more comfortable. Students may need to try several types of masks before finding the one that fits best. For example, neck straps keep loose masks from falling down and relieve pressure on the ears that may bother students.
- Maintaining **at least** six feet distance between a student who is unable to tolerate a face covering and other students in the class, to the extent possible.
- Wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), such as a face covering, face shield, gowns, gloves, as appropriate to the classroom setting and task, ensuring safe procedures [for donning and doffing the PPE](#). Practice good hand washing before and after donning and doffing PPE.
- Increasing ventilation in the classroom by opening windows and doors, or working outside, as practicable and per district/charter guidelines.
- Working to ensure routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched surfaces or surfaces that are likely to collect droplets, such as tables or adaptive equipment.
- Washing hands frequently and/or using hand sanitizer.
- Emphasizing to family and staff members the importance of practicing strict mitigation measures and limiting interactions outside the home other than school to reduce the risk of exposure.
- Changing schedules to allow students with special needs to come when fewer students are at school.
- Using larger, better ventilated rooms for instruction.
- Ensuring that stable cohorts of students and staff are maintained throughout the school day and during the week, to the extent possible.
- Talking through scenarios with school leaders and educators about working in other classrooms if the risk seems too high to the individual or to better understand options for instruction to help feel more comfortable providing direct services to students.

Q: Can students be exempt from wearing face coverings? Under what conditions?

A: In rare instances, students and staff may be exempt from wearing face coverings. According to [Governor Carney's twenty-fifth modification to the State of Emergency](#), schools shall develop written procedures to respond to individual requests for reasonable accommodations or modifications to their face covering policy to allow a student who cannot wear a face covering because of his/her health or a disability to participate in, or benefit from, the programs offered or services that are provided by the school. Schools or districts may require a medical note. Otherwise, all students and staff are required to wear a face covering according to public health guidelines.

[Adaptations and alternatives](#) should be considered whenever possible to increase the feasibility of wearing a mask or to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading if it is not possible to wear one. Delaware Public Health (DPH) Liaisons can also provide assistance in helping educators balance mitigation strategies and the needs of individual students and staff.

Q: The [Returning to School Guidance](#) highly recommends that individuals remain 6 feet apart and mandates no less than 3 feet apart in the classroom. What should educators do if they must be closer to the students? Is there a minimum distance they must maintain?

A: Although a minimum of 3 feet with face coverings can mitigate the risk of viral spread, at least 6 feet is optimal. Some situations require close contact between adults and students on an ongoing, daily basis, such as when working with a young student or a student with a significant disability that requires hand-over-hand assistance.

When direct student support services are being provided to a student, the following measures are required regarding face coverings:

- Staff providing direct support services are required to wear a face covering with or without a face shield.
- The CDC does not recommend use of face shields instead of masks for normal everyday activities or as a substitute for cloth face coverings. Face shields may be worn in addition to masks, but masks must be worn. See [face-cover-guidance for further information](#).
- The same face covering or shield can be worn throughout the school day while working with multiple students unless the face covering becomes soiled, in which case it should be removed for laundering/cleaning and replaced with a new, clean one.

Educators can balance their need to be physically close with students by possibly shortening sessions together, working outside or increasing indoor ventilation, using PPE, and ensuring the use of as many other mitigation strategies as possible.

Q: What kinds of PPE should classroom educators wear?

A: In addition to a face mask (i.e., procedure mask or 2-ply), staff must wear a face shield or eye protection when directly supporting a student with personal care needs where physical distancing is unable to be maintained and there is potential for respiratory droplets, splashes or sprays (i.e., oral feeding, toileting, etc.).

[Standard precautions](#) should be used before and after incidental touching, providing hand-over-hand guidance with educational or technology materials, tactile American Sign Language, Print on Palm, Protractile Communication, or other similar points of touching.

Staff should also continue to practice [everyday preventive actions](#): avoid close contact as much as possible, clean hands often; avoid touching their eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands; and frequently clean and disinfect surfaces.

Staff should be alert to the proper techniques in handling and disposal of materials.

- [Disposal of PPE in School Disposable PPE can be placed in a lined trash can for proper disposal. Facility waste does not need disinfection](#)
- The school is a **community setting**. The CDC has separate guidance for healthcare settings.

Q: Should schools install plexiglass barriers in the classroom between educators and students if mitigation strategies, such as maintaining distance and wearing face coverings are not possible?

A: Although plexiglass barriers might help situations where brief interactions occur, such as the main office reception area, they will not provide adequate protection in the classroom with prolonged interactions and will inhibit educators' ability to safely and effectively work with students.

Q: How can schools help mitigate the risk for their medically vulnerable students in the school environment with other students and adults?

A: In a busy school environment, it is a challenge to protect students who might be at higher risk of complications from coronavirus if they contracted it. Schools might consider alternative scheduling, staggered arrival and departures, more frequent cleaning and disinfecting of commonly touched surfaces, small group settings, maintaining stable cohorts of students and working with families to increase the students' awareness of the situation, to the extent possible. Families should also work with their pediatricians for guidance.

Q: How can schools work on life skills with adolescents if they are unable to go into the community?

A: Schools might consider creating "centers" in classrooms, taking virtual visits to community sites, and participating in simulations to help students develop life skills. In the world of coronavirus, other life skills are also critical, such as helping students to understand social distancing and/or wearing a face covering.

Q: What are some ways schools can work with families/caregivers towards solutions?

A: Administrators and educators should work with families/caregivers to develop relationships and connections through as many informal interactions as possible, particularly if the school/educator is new to the student and his/her family unit this school year. Educators might consider outdoor get-togethers in person or virtual "coffee chats" to better get to know the students and family/caregivers. School administrators and educators should solicit input on what works best for the individual student and his/her likes and dislikes, as well as to understand how the student and the family unit have experienced the past six months, including any trauma experienced by the family.

Additional Resources and References:

- Autism Speaks' Tools and Resources: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/covid-19-information-and-resources-families>
- CDC Guidance for K-12 School Administrators on the Use of Masks in Schools: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/cloth-face-cover.html>
- DOE: Considerations for Students with Special Healthcare Needs: <https://www.doe.k12.de.us/cms/lib/DE01922744/Centricity/Domain/150/Considerations%20for%20Students%20with%20Special%20Healthcare%20Needs%20Final.POST%209.25.20.pdf>
- Face-Cover-Guidance: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html>
- Helping Students with Special Needs During COVID-19: <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/family-resources-education/700childrens/2020/05/masks-and-new-routines-helping-children-with-special-needs-during-covid-19>
- Masks Toolkit – Helping Students Feel More Comfortable: <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/strong-center-developmental-disabilities/resources/masks-toolkit.aspx>
- NASN's Considerations for post COVID Return to School for Students with Disabilities and Special Healthcare Needs: https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/NASN/3870c72d-fff9-4ed7-833f-215de278d256/UploadedImages/PDFs/2020_07_23_Considerations_for_Post_COVID_Return_to_School_for_Students_with_Disabilities_and_Special_Healthcare_Needs.pdf
- PPE- Disposal: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/general-business-faq.html#:~:text=Discard%20PPE%20into%20a%20trash,does%20not%20need%20disinfection>
- PPE Guidelines: <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/directsupport.pdf>
- Safety Measures to Implement for Students Who Can't Wear Masks: <https://districtadministration.com/5-safety-measures-to-implement-for-students-who-cant-wear-masks/>
- Supporting Students with Autism Through Uncertain Times: <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/sites/afirm.fpg.unc.edu/files/covid-resources/Supporting%20Individuals%20with%20Autism%20through%20Uncertain%20Times%20Full%20Packet.pdf>
- Tips to Help Students Wear Face Masks: <https://blog.cincinnatichildrens.org/healthy-living/covid-19-tips-help-kids-wear-face-masks/>
- United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights - Questions and Answers for K-12 Public Schools in the Current COVID-19 Environment: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/qa-covid-20200928.pdf>
- Wearing a Face Mask at School-Nemours Children's Health System: <https://www.nemours.org/content/dam/nemours/www2/childrens-health-system/documents/wearing-a-face-mask-at-school.pdf>
- Wearing Masks During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Strategies to Overcome Sensory Issues: <https://icahn.mssm.edu/files/ISMMS/Assets/Research/Seaver/COVID-19-Webinar-Masks.pdf>