

IDPH AND ISBE ISSUE NEW PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDANCE SUPPORTING A RETURN TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION

On March 9, 2021, the Illinois Department of Public Health (“IDPH”) and the Illinois State Board of Education (“ISBE”) issued [Revised Public Health Guidance for Schools](#). Through this guidance, IDPH and ISBE recommend and support a return to in-person instruction throughout Illinois as soon as practicable. To make this goal possible, the guidance lists certain practices which schools must follow to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 as schools open and return to in-person instruction. Specifically, schools must:

1. Require universal and correct use of appropriate personal protective equipment, including face masks;
2. Require social distancing be observed;
3. Require contact tracing, isolation of individuals with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, and quarantine of close contacts;
4. Require an increase in schoolwide cleaning and disinfection; and
5. Require promotion and adherence to handwashing and respiratory etiquette.

The guidance also contains new information and recommendations for how schools can comply with the above-practices and return to in-person instruction in a safe manner. Some of the key information found in the guidance includes:

- All people on school grounds and school buses are required to wear face masks. The guidance lists a limited number of exceptions to this rule including, for example, when students are eating, or when an individual has a documented medical condition which prevents him from wearing a mask.
- For in-person learning, social distancing is now defined as 3-6 feet for students and fully vaccinated staff. Although 6 feet is safest, schools can operate with a 3-foot social distancing to provide in-person learning.
 - Any time face masks are removed (*e.g.*, during lunch), schools must strictly adhere to 6-foot social distancing.
 - Unvaccinated staff should still maintain 6-foot distance as much as possible.
- Close contacts (exposure to a confirmed case within 6 feet of the confirmed case for a cumulative period of 15 minutes over 24 hours) are still required to quarantine. However, a person who is fully vaccinated is not considered a close contact and is therefore not required to quarantine.
- To minimize exposure to other individuals, schools should utilize cohorts in which students – and sometimes teachers or staff – stay together throughout the school day. Young children should stay in cohorts all day, and schools should utilize cohorts as much as possible for older children.

- Schools should continue to perform contact tracing in collaboration with local health departments.
- Schools should require self-certification by all staff, students, and visitors prior to entering school buildings.
 - IDPH and the CDC no longer recommend, however, that schools perform symptom screenings (*e.g.*, temperature checks) for all individuals. However, schools may continue to perform screenings themselves if they choose to do so.
- Schools should develop and implement sanitation procedures in accordance with CDC, IDPH, and local health department recommendations.
- During meals, students should sit at assigned seats and with the same group each day. If possible, all students should face the same direction during meals.
- Meals should be individually plated, and all food and drink items should be served to students rather than having students help themselves.
- Physical education activities must allow for 6 feet of distance between students as much as possible. Face masks are required to be worn at all times.
- Schools must educate students and staff on healthy hand and respiratory hygiene practices.

Finally, while the guidance strongly encourages all Illinois schools to return to in-person instruction, it clarifies that students who are at increased risk of severe illness as a result of COVID-19, or who live with people at an increased risk, must still be given the option of remote instruction.

If you have any questions, please contact one of our attorneys.