

NORTHAMPTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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August 6, 2021

Dear NPS Community:

I am looking forward to our return to in-person, full-time, five day a week learning. I am committed to doing everything in my power to prevent COVID-19 from disrupting a third consecutive year of learning. To that end, I am writing to explain the layered mitigation strategies we will implement to keep our schools open this year.

We have learned to manage COVID-19 with a flexible approach in which we enhance or relax our protective measures in response to the current potential for disease spread. Building on that successful harm reduction strategy, I would like to share the following blueprint outlining the various protective stances we may take in response to the ever-changing risk profile presented by the virus.

Phased Transition to Typical Safety Protocols

Phase	Physical Distancing	Masking	COVID-19 Testing	Quarantine Requirement
I	Implement physical distancing using outdoor spaces to the maximum extent	Required at all times except for mask breaks	Pooled testing	Asymptomatic close contacts required to quarantine
II	Implement physical distancing to extent possible within school	All individuals, including those who have been vaccinated, wear face masks while indoors and on school buses. Masks not required for recess	District will participate in statewide testing protocol	Vaccinated staff and students who are close contacts are exempt from quarantine Asymptomatic unvaccinated close contacts may “test and stay”
III	Implement physical distancing to extent possible within school	Masks required on buses and in health offices Masks not required for recess Masks not required for vaccinated staff in all grades or for vaccinated students in grades 7 and above	District will participate in statewide testing protocol	Asymptomatic unvaccinated close contacts may “test and stay”
IV	Implement physical distancing to extent possible within school	Masks required on buses and in health offices Masks not required for vaccinated individuals	Scaled-back testing protocols	Asymptomatic close contacts may “test and stay”

Our local health officials, school physician, and employee representatives, and I are in agreement that our schools will reopen at phase II of this blueprint. A large proportion of our students over 12 and our staff have been fully vaccinated, which reduces the overall risk of disease transmission. However, new variants of the virus present health challenges we must consider. Over the course of the school year, we may shift to a lesser or more protective stance depending on risk of disease spread. We may also adopt an “in-between” stance combining measures from different phases of this blueprint if conditions warrant.

What a Phase II Opening Means for Our Schools

As compared to last year, the biggest change many students and staff will notice is that **face masks will no longer be required outdoors, including recess**. The practice of cohorting groups of students to minimize mixing will also be discontinued. In the event of positive cases in school, staff and students identified as close contacts **will not be required to quarantine if they have been vaccinated**. Unvaccinated asymptomatic close contacts will also have the option to remain in school **if they agree to be tested daily** with BinaxNOW for at least 5 days. Physical distancing will be implemented to the extent possible. In most cases, classrooms will look much as they did at the end of last year. The one difference some students will notice is that tables and benches that had been removed from some classrooms may now be returned.

Face masks will still be required on transportation and indoors, except while eating. The district will continue to make accommodations for students who cannot wear a face mask due to medical conditions or behavioral needs In order to facilitate potential contact tracing, students will sign into lunch tables for unmasked indoor lunches. Tents will remain at each of the schools through the end of October to encourage use of outdoor spaces. Ventilation upgrades including Merv 13 filters and HEPA air purifiers will remain in place. The enhanced cleaning protocols adopted last year will also remain in place at least through the end of September. The district will also continue to participate in the state-funded COVID testing program. The program may change from pooled testing to diagnostic testing at some point during the school year.

Our Priority

Preventing another round of COVID-related school closures is of paramount importance for our students and their families. As COVID has shown us time and time again, we are each responsible for keeping each other safe. **The medical community has emphasized that vaccines are currently the best defense against COVID-19 and its variants-including Delta**. If you are above the age of 12 and have not yet been vaccinated, I urge you to consult with your family medical practitioner about the advisability of vaccination. Unfortunately, our youngest learners are not able to be vaccinated at this time, so it's up to the rest of us to do our part to keep them safe.

Sincerely,

John A. Provost, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools