



Healthy School Communities

**Public Health and
School Examples: Best
Practices**

COVID-19 and Beyond

Introduction

Arizona county public health experts and local school leaders answered the following questions to highlight the best practices to successfully mitigate COVID-19 during periods of in-person and hybrid learning.

- What are the best practices in mitigation that you have observed in schools over the past several months?
- What are creative ways you are encouraging LEAs to layer mitigation?
- What are some of the most important public health considerations for schools when planning to open for in-person learning?

The answers and examples from public health experts and colleagues can be applied to your own school community as in-person learning continues through and beyond COVID-19. Utilizing the public health guidance and learning from others has allowed our public schools to mitigate successfully the on-campus spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses during the 2020-2021 school year.



Overview of Mitigation Strategies

Regardless of the level of community transmission, all schools should use and layer mitigation strategies. Five key mitigation strategies are essential to the safe delivery of in-person instruction and help to mitigate COVID-19 transmission in schools:

- Universal and correct use of masks
- Physical distancing
- Handwashing and respiratory etiquette
- Cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities
- Contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine, in collaboration with the health department

Schools providing in-person instruction should prioritize two mitigation strategies:

- Universal and correct use of masks should be required at all levels of community transmission. Require consistent and correct use of face masks by all students, teachers, and staff to prevent SARS-CoV-2 transmission through respiratory droplets.
- Physical distancing (at least 6 feet) should be maximized to the greatest extent possible. To ensure physical distancing, schools should establish policies and implement structural interventions to promote physical distance of at least 6 feet between people. Cohorting or podding is recommended to minimize exposure across the school environment.
 - 03/19/21: Revised physical distancing recommendations to reflect at least 3 feet between students in classrooms and provide clearer guidance when a greater distance (such as 6 feet) is recommended.

All mitigation strategies provide some level of protection, and layered strategies implemented concurrently provide the greatest level of protection. CDC's K-12 Schools COVID-19 Mitigation Toolkit includes resources, tools, and checklists to help school administrators and school officials prepare schools for in-person instruction.

Guidance from Coconino County

Public Health

- **What are the best practices in mitigation that you have observed in schools over the past several months?**
 - The standard practices of facial coverings, physical distancing, handwashing, cleaning facilities, and contact tracing
 - Providing students with masks and having PPE on hand at schools as needed
 - Designate COVID-19 staff Liaisons at the Public Health Department and School
 - Public health can help schools prepare for when someone is sick or been exposed to a positive case
 - Online case reporting form made available to schools- a process of assigning case investigators to school cases, including developing a school investigator team
 - Information Practices that Aid School and Public Health Decision Making:
 - On-going scheduled (and, as needed) communication with local Public Health – from specific positive cases to reviewing School Re-Open Plans (and Athletic Event Plans) for local public health recommendations/ guidance
 - Bi-weekly updates and information sharing between schools and public health – this has resulted in stronger relationships and a greater appreciation of the challenges each system is experiencing
 - Weekly Data Reports at the zip code level
 - School reporting flowchart, exposure notification template, isolation and quarantine recommendations
 - Virtual and hybrid approaches helped reduce transmission; after school events (i.e., sports) were challenging

Guidance from Coconino County

Public Health

- **What are the creative ways you are encouraging LEAs to layer mitigation?**
 - Establishing a school point of contact – channeling communication to that person
 - The use of BinaxNOW test kits (results in 15 to 20 minutes) for persons with symptoms, followed by saliva or NP swab tests
- **What are some of the most important public health considerations for schools when planning to open for in-person learning?**
 - Continuation of facial coverings, physical distancing, handwashing, cleaning, and contact tracing
 - Behaviors: if someone is ill or been in close contact with someone with COVID-19, encourage them to remain home
 - Adaptability
 - Transparency and Openness: with local public health, the school community, and the public
 - Case Reporting: Do not be reticent to report positive cases to local public health – it's necessary to intervene and slow community transmission
 - Vaccine: Encourage staff and those eligible to get vaccinated – vaccines are effective at preventing hospitalization and death



YUMA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT ONE

The following answers were summarized from a presentation provided by Yuma Elementary School District One.

- **What are the best practices in mitigation that you have observed in schools over the past several months?**
 - Our students have been great at wearing masks - much better than we imagined they would be. Masks have been the easiest to implement.
 - Go to [Yuma School District One's Return to Learn](#) to view their entire plan, including mitigation strategies.
- **What are creative ways you are encouraging LEAs to layer mitigation?**
 - We have implemented social distancing in the cafeteria that I think we will keep beyond the pandemic. Putting fewer students to a table and spreading them out facing one direction has been helpful. We have noticed that young students will talk to anyone who sits near them, it does not necessarily have to be their "friend". Separating them has worked to eliminate excessive behavior while allowing more controlled socialization. We have also allowed our Jr. High students to eat outside under the shade. This has worked very well.
- **What are some of the most important public health considerations for schools when planning to open for in-person learning?**
 - We know that great instruction includes group work. In the younger grades, it is especially important to do guided reading in small groups. It's unrealistic to have a class full of children and expect that they will sit in rows behind a shield for six hours a day, day after day. As a leader, I believe it is important that we are transparent to our parents and community of what we are and are not implementing.

Union Elementary School

District #62



The following answers were summarized from a presentation provided by Union Elementary School District #62.

- **What are the best practices in mitigation that you have observed in schools over the past several months?**
 - With federal recovery dollars, we hired a full-time registered district nurse who helped with rapid testing and existing health aid staff. Rapid testing was offered to students and staff to help identify and isolate positive cases.
 - For student mitigation, we used cohorts to manage contact tracing. One example included changing who rotated classes in middle school. Instead of students rotating, middle school teachers rotated to classrooms to limit the number of students in the halls. E-hall pass to limit how many students left the classroom at any given time and to contact trace if students came into contact outside of the classroom.
 - Each school did a daily run-through of absences categorizing them as out/not COVID, sick/not COVID, sick/COVID, or unverified. Committed to not having any unverified absences as though were those were the ones that could potentially bite you back, removed the autodial option for absences and made sure each family spoke to an attendant when calling out.
 - Go to [Union ESD's Back to School Plan](#) to read the entirety of their in-person learning and mitigation plan.

Union Elementary School District #62



- **What are creative ways you are encouraging LEAs to layer mitigation?**
 - Leadership practiced in-person mitigation strategies ahead of rolling them out to teachers and provided planning for all contingencies including how to employ mitigation in all areas. The practice ahead of time and with the teachers allowed classroom teachers to practice them with their students.
- **What are some of the most important public health considerations for schools when planning to open for in-person learning?**
 - Strong communication with families to build trust with them and help them understand why they implemented certain mitigation strategies.
 - Structured feedback loops to see what is working and what is not working. Each campus was assigned a Superintendent Cabinet Liaison and a Site COVID Response Team which ran a thirty-minute daily check-in to run and walkthrough



The following answers were summarized from a presentation provided by Legacy Traditional Schools Arizona.

- **What are the best practices in mitigation that you have observed in schools over the past several months?**
 - Students and staff required masks anytime indoors with daily hand washing built into their schedules every two hours. Seating charts were used in the classroom and in the lunchrooms to allow for them to track each student if a positive case occurred. For lunch, classes rotated, some days in the lunchroom with a seating chart and some days eating lunch in the classroom or outside.
 - Each school took sanitization seriously, cleaning high-touch areas every two hours. Using federal recovery dollars, we hired additional teacher aides to help teachers manage their classrooms and implement mitigation strategies.
 - Go to [Legacy Traditional Schools Arizona Mitigation Plan](#) to read the entirety of their plan.

- **What are the creative ways you are encouraging LEAs to layer mitigation?**
 - Encouraging LEA administrators to prioritize mitigation strategies and health schools over some of the day-to-day things that may not have taken precedence during this school year. For example, showing flexibility and understanding that returning phone calls and emails may take longer than normal.



- **What are some of the most important public health considerations for schools when planning to open for in-person learning?**
 - Following public health guidelines was the most important – it takes a lot of time to implement those strategies and if there's a positive case, even more time to submit documentation, contact trace, and notifying close contacts. It was important to communicate with families and communities, so they understand the work that goes into healthy and safe schools amid a pandemic, and why that is a priority for in-person learning.



Cottonwood-Oak Creek

School District #6

The following answers were summarized from a presentation provided by Cottonwood-Oak Creek Unified School District (COCUSD).

- **What are the best practices in mitigation that you have observed in schools over the past several months?**
 - The best mitigation strategies are similar to those highlighted by Union Elementary and Legacy Traditional – face masks when inside, cohorting students throughout the day, handwashing, and sanitization.
 - Go to [COCUSD Safety Measures](#) to see a full list of the mitigation strategies taken at Cottonwood-Oak Creek Unified School District.
- **What are creative ways you are encouraging LEAs to layer mitigation?**
 - Trust and communication are key. And part of that is the visibility of principals and leadership is important to be connected to students but also shows the “flag” to teachers and staff who may feel uncomfortable or scared about in-person learning.
- **What are some of the most important public health considerations for schools when planning to open for in-person learning?**
 - One of the silver linings of this process has been strengthening partnerships and connections with the community. (Yavapai) county government, county education superintendent, and county health partners were critical to supporting in-person learning, explaining the “why” to the community, and helping fully vaccinate teachers.