

Layered Mitigation Strategies for Safe School Reopening

Schools around the world can and should reopen and stay open for in-person learning. Here is how they can keep students and staff safe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended schooling around the world. Closing schools to in-person education can undermine academic progress and exacerbate educational inequalities. There is abundant evidence that schools can safely open for in-person learning during the pandemic provided they use layered mitigation measures, particularly where community transmission is low.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS:

1 Case rates have consistently been lower among children than adults.

[From March-December 2020, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention analysis found that COVID-19 case rates were consistently lowest among children 0-10 years.](#)

2 Children rarely get severely ill from COVID-19.

Most infected children are asymptomatic or experience mild illness. [As of June 30, 2021, the CDC reported more than 3.3 million cases and 471 deaths \(0.01% of cases\) among children under age 18 in the United States.](#)

3 Teachers are not at greater risk of COVID-19 than other essential workers.

[An analysis of data from September through October 2020 from England found no differences in COVID-19 positivity rates between schoolteachers and other professions involving in-person interactions.](#)

4 Layered mitigation measures reduce transmission in schools.

[An analysis of contact tracing data from schools in North Carolina suggested that when mitigation measures were in place, transmission was limited. A study conducted in Wood County, Wisconsin from August 31-November 29, 2020, found that COVID-19 case rates among students and staff members were lower than those in the county overall.](#) Layered mitigation measures including mask-wearing, physical distancing and quarantine as needed were put in place.

To reopen safely, schools must use layered mitigation measures.

[Per recent CDC guidance for COVID-19 prevention in K-12 schools, these measures include:](#)

- ✔ Consistent and correct mask use
- ✔ Physical distancing of at least three feet
- ✔ Screening testing to promptly identify cases, clusters and outbreaks as they emerge
- ✔ Increased ventilation in classrooms and other indoor areas
- ✔ Hand-washing and respiratory etiquette
- ✔ Staying home when sick and getting tested
- ✔ Contact tracing, in combination with isolation and quarantine as needed
- ✔ Cleaning and disinfection of school spaces
- ✔ Continued promotion of vaccine uptake among eligible populations

5 When layered mitigation measures are not in place, or when community transmission rates are high, increased COVID-19 spread in schools may occur.

In Israel, in May 2020, a large COVID-19 outbreak occurred in a high school 10 days after reopening; face masks were not used, and classrooms were crowded. In England, higher community incidence was strongly associated with increased risk of school outbreaks: the risk of an outbreak in schools increased by 72% for every five cases per 100,000 population increase in community incidence.



As increasingly transmissible COVID-19 variants such as alpha and delta spread, while young children remain unvaccinated, and as other COVID-19 mitigation measures are relaxed in many countries, it will be crucial for schools to look at the data to drive their response. The lower the rate of community spread, the lower the risk of cases in schools. **Vaccination is our most potent tool to reduce community spread, including in the face of new variants—it is critical that everyone who can be vaccinated does so, and that global access to vaccinations is increased quickly and equitably.**

About Us

Resolve to Save Lives, an initiative of the global health organization Vital Strategies, focuses on preventing deaths from cardiovascular disease and preventing epidemics. It is led by Dr. Tom Frieden, former director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.