



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

M. Norman Oliver, MD, MA
State Health Commissioner

Department of Health
P O BOX 2448
RICHMOND, VA 23218

TTY 7-1-1 OR
1-800-828-1120

January 14, 2021

Dear Superintendents, Local School Leaders, and Local Health Directors:

In early 2020, throughout the world, K-12 schools were closed in response to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In [March 2020](#), Governor Northam directed the “cessation of all in-person instruction at K-12 schools, public and private, for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.” At the time, school closure was widely viewed as a necessary mitigation strategy, given the onset of a pandemic where much was unknown. Since then, [data increasingly suggest](#) that school re-openings are unlikely to contribute significantly to community transmission when rates of community transmission are low and schools have infection prevention measures in place. However, there appears to be a correlation between increased community transmission and the incidence of cases and outbreaks in schools. While we must remain vigilant regarding the prevention and spread of SARS CoV-2, we need to balance this important objective with the shared goal of providing in-person educational instruction to the children of Virginia.

In September 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published [Indicators for Dynamic School Decision-Making](#), in which they propose core and secondary indicators that states, localities, and schools can use to aid in decision-making regarding school re-opening for in-person learning. CDC recommendations are based on current knowledge of COVID-19 in the United States; they are intended to supplement state and local laws, rules, and regulations with which schools must comply.

Attached is a new, revised document entitled *Interim Virginia Department of Health (VDH)/Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Guidance for Re-opening PreK-12 Schools-Implementing Mitigation Measures*. This new document incorporates and replaces the [Phase Guidance for Virginia Schools](#) previously issued by the Commonwealth. VDH and VDOE recommend that schools use the CDC Indicators for Dynamic School Decision-Making framework together with the VDH/VDOE Interim Guidance to assess the risk of introduction and transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in schools, to help inform decisions about school operations, and to implement necessary mitigation strategies.

Key updates to the guidance include:

- Consideration of the “Level of School Impact,” for schools that previously have been open for in-person instruction. This includes a description of how schools can assess the level of COVID-19 impact to a particular school.
- A decision matrix to help decision makers understand how to consider multiple factors in decision making.
- A step-by-step guide to thinking through school program decisions and the factors to consider

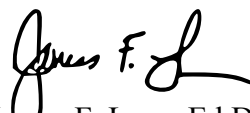
A school division’s capacity to successfully implement mitigation strategies AND local community disease data should be factored into school operations plans. The three CDC core indicators serve as a starting point to make determinations on what to do in a school or division but should not solely dictate the decisions that school divisions make to best serve their communities. **As local school and health leaders evaluate and adjust instructional offerings in 2021, they must carefully balance the risks associated with operating during a pandemic and the long-term effects of students not attending school in person.** Even when a school carefully plans and prepares, during a pandemic, cases of COVID-19 still may occur. It is not possible to eliminate all risk of disease in community settings, such as schools. Students and staff most at risk of serious complications from COVID-19 should continue to have remote learning and working options. But the risks of not opening schools need to be carefully considered and given proper weight. Long-term school closures as a mitigation strategy for COVID-19 transmission may cause inadvertent harm to children; for example, children who do not have in-person instruction may suffer learning loss with long-term effects, mental health issues, or a potential regression in social skills.

VDH and VDOE are committed to continuing to provide scientifically grounded and research-based guidance to local communities regarding school operations during the COVID-19 pandemic and stand ready to assist in any way needed. Thank you for your continued leadership and service during these challenging times. Please let us know if our agencies can be of additional assistance.

Sincerely,



M. Norman Oliver, MD, MA
State Health Commissioner



James F. Lane, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Public Instruction
Virginia Department of Education