



**STATE OF HAWAII**  
**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH**  
P. O. BOX 3378  
HONOLULU, HI 96801-3378

In reply, please refer to:  
File:

February 26, 2021

Dear Senator Schatz and Department of Education Colleagues,

The Hawaii Department of Health (DOH) recognizes multiple health benefits of children attending school in person, including first and foremost the fundamental links between education and long-term health outcomes. In-person instruction is particularly important for younger children and those with special educational needs. Social and emotional support resources made available on school campuses are also critical to the health of our keiki, and for some families, food security is provided through school meal programs. All of these factors must be considered in the overall health benefits of in-person learning.

As we have learned more about COVID-19 and schools, we have also learned that schools are *not*, as initially anticipated, amplifiers of COVID-19 transmission. Rather, schools are one of the safest environments for children when it comes to COVID-19. Schools that have implemented mitigation measures are able to control COVID-19 transmission better than many community settings, where children may interact in less structured ways or attend gatherings with their families. For all of these reasons, DOH supports the Department of Education (DOE) in returning to in-person learning as soon as possible.

Through a collaborative process with the DOE, Hawaii Association of Independent Schools, Hawaii Keiki Nurses, the American Academy of Pediatrics Hawaii Chapter, and other stakeholders, DOH published guidance for schools in September of 2020, and updated this guidance in October of the same year. The intent of this guidance was to outline a layered approach to mitigation of COVID-19 transmission in school settings that would allow schools to take concrete steps to return to in-person learning. The guidance also provides suggested thresholds for moving between different learning models, prioritizing return to in-person learning for younger and more vulnerable students ahead of older and more independent learners for schools in areas of higher community transmission or in need of staged Return to Learn plans. However, these thresholds are provided as a framework and are not meant to be prescriptive. DOH has reviewed the newly released CDC guidance and finds it is very similar to existing DOH guidance as far as defining risk thresholds and in the types of mitigation measures recommended. We also stand on our experience in having worked closely with the schools over the past year to implement these recommendations in a way that makes sense for Hawaii.

The DOH COVID-19 guidance for DOE is intentionally layered and flexible. We understand that not every school can accomplish 6-foot distancing at all times while bringing classrooms back to full capacity. We encourage those schools to implement all OTHER mitigation measures to the full extent possible, to provide a layered mitigation approach that will still maximize safety. While the color “zones” in the DOH guidance are provided for consideration of overall

community transmission levels in learning model planning, in any color zone it may be acceptable for schools to progress to in-person learning if they are able to implement key layers of mitigation. This should include 6-foot distancing when feasible, but for schools where full in-person learning is not feasible with 6-foot distancing, other mitigation measures as outlined in the DOH guidance can be layered to maximize safety.

A few of the key measures include (see the [DOH School Guidance](#) for a more comprehensive list):

- Masking indoors must be consistently implemented for students and staff at all times
- Mask breaks are to be taken **ONLY** when outdoors or (for schools that do not have any viable outdoor space for mask breaks) in designated mask break areas spaced **GREATER** than 6 feet from others and with direct monitoring by a responsible adult (even now, mask breaks should not be taken indoors at desks)
- Students and staff should interact only within designated cohorts, as much as possible, and with cohorts as small as is feasible

Vaccination of teachers or staff is not a prerequisite for in-person learning, but vaccination is now being offered to school staff statewide, and this should further increase readiness of teachers and staff to return to this model.

DOH recognizes that this transition will be more challenging in secondary schools than in elementary schools. Consistent with prior conversations, returning to in-person learning has been considered a higher priority for younger and more vulnerable students. Taking this step first with elementary students is therefore appropriate and can give schools confidence in their ability to move forward with bringing older students back to campus as well. DOH is committed to continued partnership with DOE to help navigate these transitions by interpreting new CDC guidance and answering questions as they arise.

I hope this clarification of the DOH guidance is helpful in allowing Hawaii's schools to move forward with expansion of in-person learning.

Sincerely,



Sarah Kemble, MD  
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Hawaii Department of Health