

A Local Coalition of Superintendents Announces Strategies for Reopening Schools in January with New COVID-19 Measures

A coalition of Denver-area superintendents and public health leaders gathered Tuesday afternoon for a virtual press conference **to discuss new measures to ensure the safe reopening of schools for in-person teaching and learning.**

In partnership with the Denver Metro Partnership for Health and COVIDCheck Colorado, the leaders outlined a **series of mitigation strategies that will allow schools to reopen even if cases in the community remain relatively high.** The leaders also discussed the point at which cases in the community become so high that they are unable to maintain staffing and safely keep schools open.

The leaders who participated in Tuesday's press conference are:

- Dr. Scott Siegfried, Superintendent of Cherry Creek Schools
- Bill Burman, M.D., Executive Director of Denver Public Health and co-chair of Metro Denver Partnership for Health
- Mike Johnston, President and CEO, Gary Community Investments and Chairman, COVIDCheck Colorado
- Susana Cordova, Superintendent of Denver Public Schools
- Dwight Jones, Senior Deputy Superintendent for Equity for DPS
- Kristopher Schuh, Interim Superintendent of Jeffco Public Schools
- Rico Munn, Superintendent of Aurora Public Schools
- Chris Gdowski, Superintendent of Adams 12 Five Star Schools
- Brian Ewert, Superintendent of Littleton Public Schools
- Corey Wise, Interim Superintendent of Douglas County Public Schools

Schools do not meaningfully contribute to the spread of COVID.

State and national health experts have recommended that schools can reopen even with high rates of COVID in the community based on the fact that COVID rarely spreads in schools. Local data from Colorado districts also shows that when schools follow overlapping health safety strategies, such as mandatory mask wearing and COVID testing of staff, virus spread is minimal.

A multi-district effort to collect student and staff case data from 35 districts revealed that of 41,000 students placed under quarantine from August through mid-November, only 166 tested positive during quarantine, or 0.41%. While this may be attributed to exposure at school – the percentages are low.

Widespread community transmission of COVID makes operating schools difficult

While data shows that schools are safe places during the pandemic, district leaders learned that high incidence rates can make it nearly impossible to operate schools, due to staffing concerns and increasing numbers of quarantines from cases coming into schools from the community. Data and experience demonstrate that a community incidence rate at, or slightly above, 500 cases per 100,000 people is the level at which it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain in-person learning.

New COVID Measures

The following new health and safety measures will be implemented starting in January among the Metro Denver school districts:

Quarantine Guidelines

- Schools will have the ability to do targeted quarantines at all levels, including middle and high school.
- Additionally, in alignment with updated CDC guidance, students and staff will have the ability to test out of quarantine on day seven. This strategy will allow students and staff to safely return to class sooner and will lessen the impact on the ability to keep schools open.
- Students and staff will have access to fast and reliable no-cost COVID tests through a partnership with COVIDCheck Colorado, a social benefit enterprise of Gary Community Investments.

Testing

- No-cost testing will be also available for students and staff to test out of quarantine in alignment with new CDC guidelines. With a test on day 5 or after, students and staff can test out of quarantine as early as day 7 with a negative test result and no symptoms.
- We will work to provide access to regular no-cost COVID testing for students and staff at elementary schools to allow for early identification of COVID-positive children and adults who could also be asymptomatic, creating a safer, more operationally feasible environment. Some school districts will begin the semester with this testing system ready to go. These tests will be offered on a regular basis through a partnership with COVIDCheck Colorado, with results delivered in 36-72 hours. Testing is not mandatory and will not be performed without parental permission, but it is strongly encouraged as a critical safety strategy.

Educator Vaccinations

- We strongly advocate for educators to be prioritized in the vaccination schedule. Schools not only prepare students for the future, but also serve as a foundational aspect of the economy by supporting working parents. Once educators have the opportunity to receive a vaccination, schools will have a greater chance of remaining open regardless of the spread of the virus.

Additional Resources

- The districts appreciate the support provided by the state to this point, however, educating students during a pandemic has a significant impact on school district budgets and ultimately will impact the ability of schools to meet the needs of students in the future.

District leaders said the new strategies will support the goal of returning students to the classroom starting second semester.

“Getting students back in school and with their teachers is critically important,” Cherry Creek Schools Superintendent Scott Siegfried said. “As a learning organization, we must use the most up-to-date science, data and facts when making decisions about opening schools. Regular testing of students to identify asymptomatic cases along with the other new strategies will help us be more successful in that goal.”

“In-person learning is critical for the health and development of children, particularly, the youngest children,” said Bill Burman, MD, Executive Director of Denver Public Health and co-chair of MDPH. “Re-

opening schools for in-person learning, beginning with the youngest children, should be a public health priority for the Denver metro area.”

“Access to fast and reliable COVID tests is one of the most critical mitigation strategies to help schools maintain the safest environment for in-person teaching and learning,” said Mike Johnston, president and CEO of Gary Community Investments. “Estimates suggest our kids, many of whom are already behind, could lose nearly an entire year of academic gains, all while their parents can't go to work and Colorado's economy continues to decline. We must give kids the best possible start in 2021, by providing them the best opportunities to learn in the safest environment possible.”

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