

Ventura County Public Health Guiding Principles and Communication for School Districts

Background

In mid-January, Ventura County Public Health (VCPH) began monitoring travelers returning from COVID-19 impacted areas and had our first case reported on March 4, 2020 in a returning traveler. Subsequently, Ventura County has taken numerous steps to curb transmission of the virus and allow time for our healthcare systems to increase their capacity to accommodate a potential surge. Ventura County declared a local health emergency on March 12, 2020 and since has issued several Public Health Officer Orders that are available at <https://www.vcemergency.com/staywellvc>.

While the Stay Well at Home Order has been in place, schools transitioned to a 100% online learning environment. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) issued COVID-19 industry guidance for Schools and School-Based Programs on June 5, 2020 to be effective starting June 12, 2020 for re-opening schools. This guidance was updated as of August 3, 2020 and can be found at <https://covid19.ca.gov/pdf/guidance-schools.pdf>. The following VCPH specific guidance is meant to augment the CDPH guidance, not replace it. Therefore, VCPH expects school administrators to adhere to the CDPH guidance except where more restrictive VCPH guidance is outlined within this document. Like the CDPH guidance, this document is intended to help school districts prepare to resume in-person instruction and outline how VCPH will support the schools in creating and maintaining a safe environment as students, teachers, and staff return to campus and allow for as much in-person instruction as is safe.

While the California Department of Education (CDE) also released a guide for local schools that may be a resource (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/strongertogether.asp>), VCPH recommendations are based upon CDPH guidance.

The CDPH and CDE documents should be used for a reference for guidance not addressed in this document. After the Guiding Principles section, the headings will mirror the sections outlined in the industry guidance for Schools and School-Based Programs from CDPH.

Guiding Principles

VCPH recognizes the following guiding principles in developing this document:

- Social determinants such as poverty status, housing, and education play an integral role in overall health and wellness.
- Gaps in educational achievement are being exacerbated by transitioning to a completely online learning environment because those who are most vulnerable are more likely to have lack of access to internet, lack of devices, increased parental burden and stress, increased student stress, food insecurity, etc.
- Access to healthy foods and opportunities to participate in physical activity are imperative to helping to reduce the risk of severe morbidity and mortality from COVID-19.

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- Students, teachers, and school staff should be considered essential during this pandemic and plans for exclusion and quarantine of these individuals after exposure should be developed accordingly.

General Measures – VCPH Guidance

In counties on the monitoring list, CDPH guidance allows a district superintendent, private school principal/head of school, or executive director of a charter school to apply for a waiver from the local health officer to open an elementary school for in-person instruction. This waiver is applicable only for grades TK-6, even if the grade configuration at the school includes additional grades. VCPH strongly encourages all eligible schools to submit a waiver. This means that local schools are eligible to resume in-person instruction and should comply with the following:

- Monitor local epidemiologic data provided on www.vcemergency.com.
- Submit a waiver application to covidschools@ventura.org.
- Develop a plan for re-opening that complies with state and local guidance to be submitted to the Ventura County Office of Education (via e-mail to Antonio Castro Acastro@vcoe.org and Dawn Anderson Daanderson@vcoe.org) no later than August 5, 2020. The VCPH Health Officer will not review or approve plans prior to submitting to VCOE. VCOE will be checking for compliance with guidance and providing feedback, but no formal approval will be granted. The plan should adhere to the CDPH and VCPH guidelines and include the following components:
 - Promote Healthy Hygiene Practices – Explain how the schools will implement non-pharmaceutical interventions.
 - Plans for Cleaning, Disinfecting, and Ventilation.
 - Plans for Physical Distancing Inside and Outside the Classroom.
 - Employee and Staff Education - This should include training on how to wear PPE/face coverings, checking for signs and symptoms, and cleaning and disinfection procedures.
 - Family Education – This section should include a family communication plan.
 - Screening Procedure for Staff, Students, and Visitors.
 - Surveillance - This section should include a plan for monitoring for attendance, verifying absences, and notifying VCPH.
 - Plans should not require universal testing of students and staff prior to reopening schools.
- Each school district will be required to designate two liaisons, or one liaison per private school, to communicate with the VCPH Communicable Disease Program when a concern arises related to COVID-19; it is preferred that one of the designees will have a medical background (i.e. school nurse). All communication between VCPH and the school district will be coordinated through these liaisons to avoid confusion and duplication of efforts.

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School district designees should be e-mailed to VCPH at covidschools@ventura.org no later than August 5, 2020, but before the start of school.

Promote Healthy Hygiene Practices – VCPH Guidance

In order to promote alignment between guidance documents, it is expected that school plans consider all recommendations proposed in [COVID-19 Industry Guidance: Schools and School-Based Programs](#). The following statements represent required CDPH guidelines.

- Teach and reinforce [washing of hands](#), avoiding [contact with one’s eyes, nose, and mouth](#), and [covering coughs and sneezes](#), among students and staff.
- Teach and reinforce use of [cloth face coverings](#), masks, or face shields, as indicated. Face coverings are most essential when physical distancing is not feasible but must be worn if required by local or state guidance. Face coverings should not be used for children with special healthcare needs if they have any respiratory related or breathing issues, or if they cannot communicate that they are having trouble breathing.
- Develop schedules for routine handwashing before and after eating, after being outside, and before and after using the restroom.
- Provide information to all staff and families in the school community on proper use, removal, and washing of cloth face coverings.
- Ensure adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors.

Intensify Cleaning, Disinfection, and Ventilation – VCPH Guidance

In order to promote alignment between guidance documents, it is expected that school plans consider all recommendations proposed in [COVID-19 Industry Guidance: Schools and School-Based Programs](#). The following statements represent required CDPH guidelines.

- Prohibit use of shared playground equipment in favor of physical activities that require less contact with surfaces.
- Limit sharing of objects and equipment, such as toys, games and art supplies to the extent feasible. But where allowed, clean and disinfect between uses.
- When choosing cleaning products, use those approved for use against COVID-19 on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-approved list “N” and follow product instructions, including for application and storage.
- Ensure proper ventilation during cleaning and disinfecting.

Implementing Distancing Inside and Outside the Classroom – VCPH Guidance

VCPH will not specify the number of people that can be in a classroom and has the following recommendations:

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- Each school may determine the number of students and staff in a classroom based on the classroom size (square footage) while maintaining physical distancing of at least 6 feet between all individuals.
- To the extent possible, and as recommended by the CDC, attempt to create smaller student/educator cohorts to minimize the mixing of student groups throughout the day. Minimize movement of students, educators, and staff as much as possible.
- Maximize space between seating and desks. Distance teacher and other staff desks at least six feet away from student desks. Consider ways to establish separation of students through other means if feasible, such as, six feet between desks, partitions between desks, markings on classroom floors to promote distancing or arranging desks in a way that minimizes face-to-face contact . Partitions or use of cloth face coverings do not lessen the need for physical distancing.
- Students should be encouraged to use cloth face coverings. Cloth face coverings are most essential in settings where physical distancing cannot easily be maintained, such as school buses or other settings where space may be insufficient. Masking of students and staff does not allow for greater density of individuals in a classroom.

Limit Sharing

No further VCPH guidance is provided for this section.

Train All Staff and Educate Families

No further VCPH guidance is provided for this section.

Check for Signs and Symptoms – VCPH Guidance

As indicated above, VCPH requires that each school district designate two liaisons to work with our Communicable Disease Program when there is a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 exposure within the school district. Notifications can be sent to covidschools@ventura.org or by calling 805-981-5101 and following the prompts for K-12 schools.

VCPH realizes that implementing active screening upon entering the facility for all students, staff, and visitors may create challenges for timely school entry and passive screening for staff and students may be appropriate.

* **Passive Screening.** Instruct parents to screen students and staff to self-screen before leaving for school (check temperature to ensure temperatures below 99.5 Fahrenheit by the no-touch temporal or forehead method or 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit orally and observe for symptoms outlined by public health officials).

* **Active Screening.** Engage in symptom screening as students and staff enter campus and buses, consistent with public health guidance, which includes visual wellness checks and temperature checks with no-touch thermometers.

Plan for When a Staff Member, Child or Visitor Becomes Sick – VCPH Guidance

VCPH provides the following clarifications to the CDPH provided guidance:

- VCPH encourages schools to have a separate health office or space where routine health related procedures for students should take place (i.e. providing insulin, catheterization, etc.) and an additional health office or space for sick children to be evaluated.
- VCPH clarifies that sick staff members and students with **confirmed COVID-19** should not return until they have met CDC criteria to discontinue home isolation which would be determined by VCPH, but all other communicable diseases should follow the [School Quick Reference: Exclusion of Students](#).

Maintain Healthy Operations – VCPH Guidance

VCPH will designate Public Health Nurses (PHNs) from the Communicable Disease Program to address issues that arise in the schools due to COVID-19. These PHNs will maintain a SharePoint site with disease specific protocols and guidance documents for school appointed liaisons. In addition, VCPH recommends the following:

- School districts should conduct daily absence verification of symptoms to enter into their respective student information system and report weekly COVID or influenza-like illness (ILI) absenteeism for staff and students utilizing the VCPH surveillance survey. Report absenteeism rates immediately to VCPH if more than 10% of staff and students are out in a single day at any school site.
- Designated school district liaisons will be required to work with the VCPH PHNs on contact tracing for confirmed COVID-19 in a student, teacher, or staff member in their district. School district liaisons will be provided with training on contact tracing by VCPH.

Considerations for Partial or Total Closures – VCPH Guidance

In most cases, entire schools may not be required to close even if there is a confirmed case in a staff member or student. Closure of a classroom or multiple classrooms may be necessary to prevent disease transmission, but any decision to close a portion of or the entire school should be made in consult with VCPH. VCPH may also implement partial or full school closures where 6-foot social distancing requirements are not met.

SB 98 allows for distance learning either as a result of an order or guidance from a state or local public health officer, or for students who are medically fragile or would be put at risk by in-person instruction or who are self-quarantining because of exposure to COVID-19. While VCPH is encouraging as much classroom-based instruction as possible with social distancing in place, consistent with the intent of SB 98, the Ventura County Public Health Officer supports the use of distance learning or other means of non-classroom based instruction for school districts, as necessary to support continuity of instruction.

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For the purposes of this guidance, VCPH considers students, teachers, and staff as essential learners and workers. VCPH recognizes that hundreds of children present to the health offices throughout the county each day school is in session. School nurses and health technicians will play a crucial role in triaging students and staff to determine if testing is warranted for COVID-19. VCPH recommends the following:

- Students and staff that present to the school health offices with a fever of 99.5 Fahrenheit by the no-touch temporal or forehead method or 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit orally **and** a cough and/or shortness of breath and/or gastrointestinal illness should be considered a suspect COVID-19 case and referred for testing.
 - Parents should be notified to pick up their child and call their primary medical doctor for referral to a site for COVID-19 testing.
 - For those students that do not have a usual source of care, coordinate with the VCPH PHN to arrange for same day testing through the Public Health Lab (PHL) by contacting 805-981-5101 and following the prompts for K-12 schools.
 - While the individual is awaiting test results, they should isolate at home and be provided with a distance learning option.
- Only a minority of students and staff who have COVID-19 infection fit the above description. School nurses and health technicians must use their judgement to identify additional suspect cases to refer for testing.

When there is an individual with a **confirmed COVID-19** test, the school liaisons will coordinate with VCPH to determine who should be considered as a close contact. A close contact is someone who was within 6 feet of an individual for a sustained period of time (10-30 minutes). Students and staff identified as close contacts will be excluded from school/work per CDPH guidelines, however, can still engage in distance learning, if applicable.

- For middle and high school students, teachers and classmates of the positive individual may not be considered close contacts with physical distancing measures in place. Nevertheless, all such individuals should be advised to redouble their efforts at sanitary behaviors and social distancing inside and outside school for the next 14 days and to consider any symptom outside of normal as evidence of possible COVID-19 infection and seek testing. Close friends should be considered close contacts and treated as such.
- VCPH will work with the school district liaisons to help coordinate testing of large groups of staff and students as needed.