

A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Vermont Schools

FAQ 3: Instructional Practices

Introduction

The Agency of Education and the Department of Health, with the collaboration and assistance of many stakeholders, have developed the following guidance for Vermont schools. It is recommended that all educators read these documents to familiarize themselves with recommendations and to answer questions they may have. They are available on the [Agency of Education's COVID-19 Guidance for Vermont Schools](#) website.

- [A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Vermont Schools](#)
- [A Strong and Healthy Start: Social Emotional and Mental Health Supports during COVID-19](#)
- [Special Education Guidance](#)
- [Fall Sports Programs for the 2020-2021 School Year](#)

This set of questions was developed as an aid to educators planning for in-person instruction at Step II. The questions highlight and develop some areas of the [Strong and Healthy Start guidance](#); it is strongly recommended that all educators read the latest edition of that guidance. While these FAQs seek to apply the recommendations and requirements in guidance to concrete classroom scenarios so that educators can extrapolate to their own contexts, it is impossible to anticipate and respond to every permutation. Should educators have follow-up questions, they are encouraged to direct them to the COVID-19 Coordinator for their Supervisory Union/School District (SU/SD) or independent school. These individuals are well-qualified to answer these questions.

The Agency of Education would like to thank Vermont's Teachers of the Year, including Bibba Kahn, 2020, Tom Payeur, 2019, and Susan Koch, 2016, for their contributions in the development of this guidance.

Materials

Please refer to p. 18-20 of the [Strong and Healthy Start guidance](#) for full details on the use/cleaning of materials in a classroom.

Q1. The guidance recommends limiting the use of shared electronic devices. What precautions should be taken if it is necessary to share materials?

Students should not share electronic devices. Computer equipment should only be shared if necessary and should be cleaned and disinfected between uses.

Q2. An Art teacher is offering a virtual lesson to a cohort. Does s/he need to provide individual material packs for each student? Or can students within the same cohort share scissors, glue guns, paintbrushes?

If possible, students should have their own supplies. When students need to share, hand washing before and after use is important.

Q3. Is it safe to use paper in class? What precautions should be taken?

It is safe to use paper for classwork. As it states in the guidance, “paper-based materials such as mail or envelopes, are not considered high risk for transmission and do not need additional cleaning or disinfection procedures.” (p. 19)

Q4. How do we manage books from our classroom library?

As per the guidance, library books may be returned to circulation after three (3) days. Teachers will need to ensure enough copies of books so that students do not need to share books and, as with all materials, students should store their belongings in separate spaces such as cubbies or bins.

Movement

It is commonly accepted that students learn better if they engage in movement every 20-25 minutes. The following questions were developed to understand what types of movement are acceptable in our classrooms.

Q5. On page 22, the guidelines say that we should avoid “group activities with the potential to generate increased respiratory droplets or aerosols,” such as singing/playing instruments. What implications does this have for physical movement in classrooms?

General movement leads to regular breathing and does not generate increased respiratory droplets the way singing and playing musical instruments do.

Q6. In my class, I often play charades to practice new vocabulary. Could a student stand by their desk and act out terms while those seated at nearby desks call out guesses?

The students should be wearing masks and spaced out per guidance (At least 3 feet for students PreK-5, and 6 feet for grades 6-12.) If this is possible, the scenario described is fine.

Q7. One way that I have built community in my classroom is to develop a class cheer, complete with hand gestures. Is that level of exertion acceptable?

Yes, that is acceptable.

Q8. Many classrooms use GoNoodle, an online app that encourages students to sing/dance along with the characters. Is that level of exertion acceptable?

The guidance describes the increased risk of singing indoors (p. 22). We are encouraging classrooms that use a lot of singing to do so outdoors. Short bursts of physical exertion, such as dancing, are permissible.

Distancing

Many educators are concerned about how to teach students who are seated 3-6 feet apart, facing all the same direction. The following questions are designed to provide some suggestions for how best to accommodate some common classroom practices.

Q9. Think-Pair-Share/Turn & Talk: How does it impact safety if students briefly turn to talk to a neighbor?

Students with masks can turn and converse with each other without increased risk. Students should maintain the recommended physical distance (3 feet for grades PreK-5; 6 feet for grades 6-12) whenever possible. Brief periods of “closer contact” are permissible but should be kept to under 15 minutes.

Q10. Small group instruction: Can students safely change desks so that students can be grouped differently for different content areas? What precautions could be taken so that this is possible?

Yes, your classroom is one pod and movement within that pod is allowable. Students and staff should continue to employ standard precautions such as wearing masks, washing hands frequently, and distancing when possible. Educators should use assigned seating to facilitate contact tracing.

Q11. Can students use large indoor spaces like the gymnasium to pair off (6 feet apart) or circle up (6 feet apart) for more collaborative structures?

Yes, the Health and Safety guidance states that, at Step II, gymnasiums may be used as an “extension of the classroom.” (p. 22) Administrators are making decisions about the use of cafeterias and gymnasiums.

Q12. Do adults always have to be 6 feet from students? What about if a student needs help?

The Aug. 11, 2020 update to the Health and Safety guidance provides detail on staff-student distancing (p. 20). It reads: “Teachers and staff should maintain a distance of 6 feet from students as much as possible. However, brief periods of closer contact, such as when a student may need one-on-one guidance, clarification, or assistance are expected and permitted. In these

cases, staff should stand/kneel/sit side-by-side students (rather than face-to-face) for brief amounts of time (less than 15 minutes).”

Q13. Effective classroom management relies heavily on proximity and/or quiet conversations or redirects. Can a staff member be closer than 3 feet to a student? If so, for how long?

Keep close interactions to under 15 minutes when possible.

Q14. Many educators would like to bring their classes outdoors. How do distancing recommendations differ when outside? Are masks required outside?

When outside, students and staff should follow the same distancing guidance as indoors except that when 6 feet apart, masks can be taken off for breaks.

Q15. If educators are using outdoor spaces, handwashing stations may not be available. What precautions should be taken?

It is best practice to bring hand sanitizer with you. Childcare and summer camps have used waist pouches to hold the sanitizer.

Masks

While the following questions are not directly tied to instruction, it is inevitable that the use of masks will require considerable attention from educators. The following questions are designed to help educators manage their classrooms.

Q16. Anticipating having student(s) that are exempt from wearing a mask, what additional precautions can staff working closely with these students expect?

For the rare student who is exempt from wearing a mask, the other mitigation strategies should have increased attention (stay home when sick, hand hygiene, and try to minimize less than 6 feet of exposure for more than 15 minutes).

Q17. Students will need to remove masks to eat lunch, snacks, and for drinking water. If students are eating at their desks 3-6 feet apart, what precautions should be taken?

Staff should facilitate hand washing and remind students to put masks back on as soon as done with eating or drinking. Students should be spaced out desks according to the guidance.

Q18. I have seen several plans where schools are using mask breaks. What parameters would you recommend for these breaks?

It is preferable to take mask breaks outside, but it is possible to take them indoors if necessary. In both settings, students and teachers who take mask breaks should remain at least 6 feet apart and limit the break to under 15 minutes.

Q19. How should we respond when a mask gets wet/dirty/damaged?

Educators should have the student remove the mask, store it separately and replace it with a second mask. Schools will have extra facial coverings available for students and staff. (This supply would also be available for students who arrive to school without a mask.) Your COVID-19 Coordinator and school nurse are great resources for this.

Miscellaneous

Q20. What is the maximum number of pods with which adults should come into contact? What precautions should adults take when moving between pods?

It is important to recognize that when mitigation strategies (cleaning, stay home when sick, wearing masks and distancing when you can) are followed, pod size is not as important. Still, there are two concepts to keep in mind in a pod model:

1. When possible, keeping a group or groups that mix to a total of 25 people is best for prevention of COVID-19. This is not always possible.
 2. When there is a positive case, contact tracing is more straightforward when there are fewer people who came into contact with the case.
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Q21. Having all desks facing forward means that all air movement is coming at the teacher. Is this safe for the teacher?

Teachers and students will be masked and maintaining physical distancing to the extent possible which will minimize exposure even with forward facing desks.