



Considerations for Schools and Districts in Purple Counties

Since the ordered school-building closure began on March 17, and subsequent Reset and Restart phase, Ohio's education community has continually stepped up to ensure a student-centered approach to caring, teaching and learning. Ohio is experiencing increased COVID-19 cases each week, and as a result, Ohio currently has numerous counties categorized as *Red* (characterized by very high COVID-19 exposure and spread), according to the [Ohio Public Health Advisory System](#). **As counties across the state face the prospect of potentially being classified as *Purple* (characterized by severe COVID-19 exposure and spread), questions and subsequent debates are arising over the implications for schools and the safest and most effective mode of instruction.** In particular, there are questions about the implications of the Purple level guidance to "only leave home for supplies and services." Education qualifies as a service for purposes of this quoted statement. Many districts and schools have linked their reopening plans and contingencies to the Public Health Advisory System and have specified actions that would be taken at the Purple level. That said, **there is no state mandate that schools operate exclusively in a remote manner** should a county be categorized as *Purple*.

Local Decision:

As conditions change, **the decision to hold classes in person, remotely or through a hybrid approach remains a local decision.** Decisions should be informed in consultation with local health departments. Ohio's education system must continue to be flexible and responsive to ensure the health and safety of all students, teachers and other employees. Actions may change as circumstances change; considerations should include the level of COVID-19 transmission in the community (as indicated by the Ohio Public Health Advisory System public emergency level), the school's ability to implement key mitigation strategies to reduce transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19, and the risk of transmission in schools presented by different learning modalities. District and school decisions also should be informed by their own in-person learning experiences. Many have gained important and meaningful experience over the past several weeks with students on campus.

Community Burden of COVID-19 Impacts the Risk of Introduction and Transmission of COVID-19 in Schools:

Schools have done well through the reset and restart phase of returning to in-person settings, and there has been little documented spread of COVID-19 attributed directly to the classroom setting. It bears recognizing that, by most indications, ***while in school buildings***, Ohio students and educators are doing an effective job of complying with recommended health practices, especially mask-wearing guidelines. This is no small accomplishment, and the Ohio Department of Education congratulates school leaders, students and staff across the state for their efforts to keep one another safe and healthy.

At the same time, schools must remain vigilant in maintaining COVID-19 precautions. **School leaders and students should be voices in their communities to reinforce the importance of wearing masks, distancing and not holding gatherings beyond the schoolgrounds – particularly in communities where there is elevated concern for spread.**

Collaboration:

As decisions are made, continue to work with stakeholders and partners, especially being mindful of existing collective bargaining agreements and any previously negotiated Memoranda of Understanding. Treat all stakeholders with respect, honoring protocols for decision making and changing environments. There are polarized opinions on what is right and safe, so it is important to maintain respectful, collaborative relationships especially with staff and parents – while navigating the many decisions required through the changing landscape of COVID-19. Students, parents, teachers and staff should be a focus for collaboration and communication about decisions made regarding how educational programming will be delivered based on circumstances. Flexibility also should be a primary consideration affording options that meet the specific needs of students, and respectful of the wishes of parents as they make decisions based on the health and safety of their family.