

2022: Staying In School In-Person

JANUARY 2022



Dear School Leaders,

We've made it halfway through the school year and due to your hard work, schools opened and have remained open for in-person learning. To the delight of students, parents and teachers, kids are chatting in the hallways, working together on projects, and participating in extracurricular activities. We must make sure these pursuits continue for the rest of the school year. The goal remains to keep all schools open for in-person learning five days a week throughout the 2021-22 school year and beyond—let's make this goal a reality!

We know how hard it's been to implement all of the recommended mitigation strategies this year, but they're necessary to maintain our students' health, safety and access to in-person learning. We know that adherence to mitigation strategies lessened disruptions since the pandemic began, and gave teachers and families peace of mind that everyone was committed to a healthy learning environment. To keep our students and staff safely in school and avoid quarantines and unnecessary closures or disruptions, seek out meaningful and regular collaboration with your local health department, ensure high levels of vaccination in your school community, conduct widespread school-based screening testing and implement Test to Stay strategies. As President Biden recently reminded everyone: "Today, we know more and we have more resources to keep schools open... we don't have to shut down schools because of a case of COVID-19. Now, if a student tests positive, other students can take the test and stay in the classroom if they're not infected rather than closing the whole school or having to quarantine. We can keep our K-12 schools open, and that's exactly what we should be doing."

Thank you for your continued partnership in keeping students and educators safe and learning in-person.

Miguel

Secretary Miguel Cardona

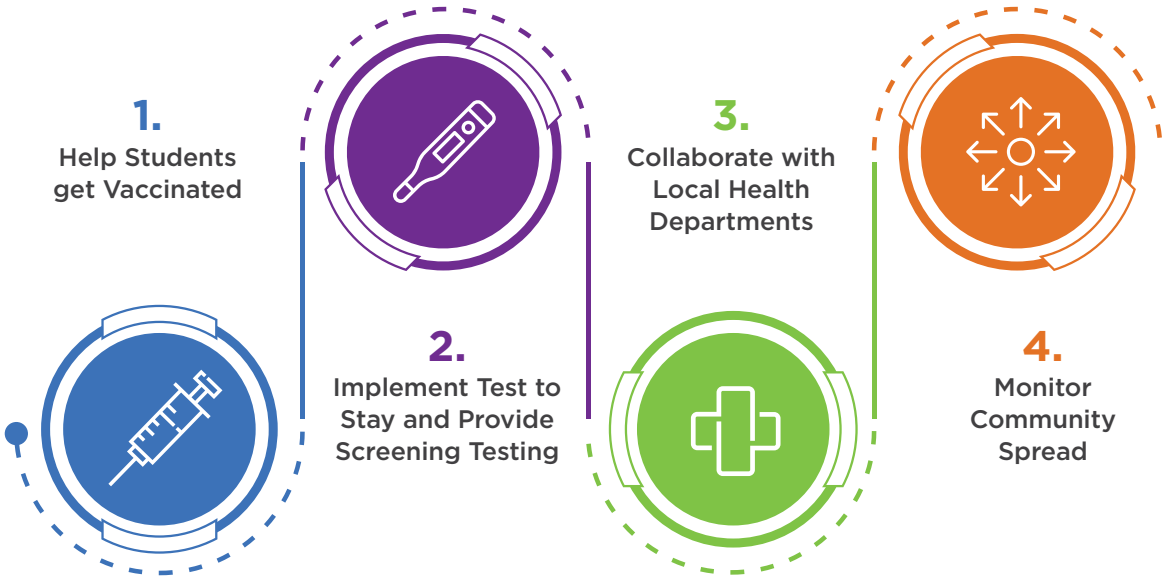
Introduction & Background

In December 2021, 99 percent of schools were open in-person, compared with just 46 percent in the beginning of the Biden Administration. This remarkable accomplishment was due to the hard work, dedication and commitment of district and school leaders, educators, families and school communities. We know students learn best when they're in school in-person. The Department is proud to support schools across the country that helped make our goal of in-person learning a reality.

Getting students in the building was step one. The work continues—we need to keep students in-person safely, to tackle the impact of lost instructional time, to accelerate learning and to create new opportunities. After settling back into a school routine, many districts are eager to return to the ease of pre-COVID interactions and learning experiences, but we urge significant caution before decreasing any mitigation strategies. It is incredibly important that all schools work to remain open for in-person learning five days a week, especially in light of the Omicron variant.

The Department reminds you that following the CDC's guidance is the best way to keep everyone in schools safe from COVID-19. This includes universal masking indoors and getting vaccinated. The CDC is regularly evaluating and evolving its COVID-19 guidance based on the latest available science, infection rates, variants, and vaccine coverage. The Department relies on the CDC's updated guidance to keep students and school communities safe. Now is not the time to remove mitigation strategies. As our CDC partners noted in their "**Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools**," local monitoring of community transmission, vaccination coverage and boosters, and screening testing give schools the information needed to guide decisions on the level of layered prevention strategies (e.g., physical distancing, screening testing). These mitigation strategies, coupled with testing strategies, like Test to Stay, will help keep schools open for in-person learning for the rest of the school year.

Below are four important strategies to keep students and staff safe, healthy and ready for in-person learning:



We know what to do and how to do it – as we return from winter break, it's important that we remain committed to mitigation strategies and prioritize in-person learning.

1. Help Students Get Vaccinated

The COVID-19 vaccine is safe, effective and free. It is the best way to keep students, educators, families and the community safe. **Vaccination is the leading public health prevention strategy to end the COVID-19 pandemic**, and the best way to help your school community remain in school, in-person during the pandemic.

- **School-based vaccination clinics:** Schools are a central part of all communities and a safe space that children and families trust. All schools should host vaccination clinics. In fact, according to the **Kaiser Family Foundation**, parents of 5-11 year-olds whose schools encouraged vaccination are four times as likely to get their children vaccinated.

  We are here to help make hosting a clinic for your school straightforward. We have developed **resources**, **toolkits** and other materials to help you implement school-based vaccination clinics. And we will **match you with a vaccine provider** in your area to administer vaccinations. There is ample funding and resources available through the American Rescue Plan Act's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) fund, as well as reimbursement through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to ensure that you can cover costs of hosting a clinic—including on-site set-up and operations as well as outreach and engagement activities.

- **Encourage all eligible school staff, parents and family members to get vaccinated and a booster shot:** Even one infected person can lead to dozens of sick students. In addition, all vaccinated people 16 and over are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine booster six months after their second Pfizer/Moderna shot, or two months after their single J&J dose. Boosters can help increase protection against COVID-19, including severe illness and death. Find a booster site at **vaccines.gov**.

- **Host family vaccine clinics:** Family vaccination sites serve the whole family, as well as school staff, offering primary COVID-19 vaccinations, booster shots and the vaccine for kids ages 5–11. **Learn how to host these in partnership with local health departments or pharmacies**.



2. Implement Test to Stay and Provide Screening Testing



As part of President Biden's COVID-19 Action Plan, the Administration called on all schools to set up regular testing in schools for students, teachers and staff. The Administration provided $10 billion in funding for COVID-19 screening testing, in addition to the $130 billion from the American Rescue Plan provided to states and school districts that also may be used for testing.

Test to Stay: We know that quarantining can significantly interrupt students' learning and make it challenging for parents to work. If someone tests positive for COVID there is no longer a need to ask those in close contact to quarantine at home. **Test to Stay (TTS) strategies** allow exposed students to remain in school, wear masks and test repeatedly in the days following exposure to identify and contain the infection.

The **CDC studied TTS approaches** and found that – when implemented along with other prevention strategies – TTS limited transmission of COVID-19 in school buildings, while also saving valuable in-person learning time for students.

The CDC found several key factors in successful TTS programs, including:

- Frequent testing of close contacts after exposure – repeated at least twice during a seven-day period post-exposure;
- Consistently wearing masks while in school while participating in TTS;
- Robust contact tracing;
- Staying home and isolating for anyone who tests positive or develops symptoms; and
- Continued implementation of layered prevention strategies as described in the CDC K-12 guidance.

Screening Testing: Screening testing is a critical strategy to rapidly identify positive cases of COVID-19 in students and staff.

The Department is partnering with the CDC and the Rockefeller Foundation to help districts accelerate school-based testing for students and staff. As part of this effort, the Rockefeller Foundation published a **testing how-to start-up guide for schools** and the CDC launched a **directory and website** to make it easy for schools to identify testing providers within their state. The directory points schools to the contracted provider(s) their state is working with, the state's landing page for how to get started with provider(s) and a point of contact with clear contact information for schools and districts to reach out to if they have any questions. Strong school-based screening testing programs rely on robust participation from the school community to ensure that they can identify and remove infected individuals from the school before any COVID-19 infection can spread. The Department released a fact sheet on how funding from the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund can be used to provide incentives to parents or guardians whose children participate in school-based COVID-19 screening testing. The resource can be found on the **Department's website**.



3. Collaborate with Local Health Departments

Vaccination rates and community spread vary across states and impact decisions at a local level. Collaborating with local health departments is crucial in making sure you have a coordinated and supported response to COVID in your school. At the foundation of this relationship should be meaningful, regular and consistent interactions with your local, county and state health departments so that schools are best equipped to respond to new data, pivot in response to evolving information and reassess any changed policies as needed.

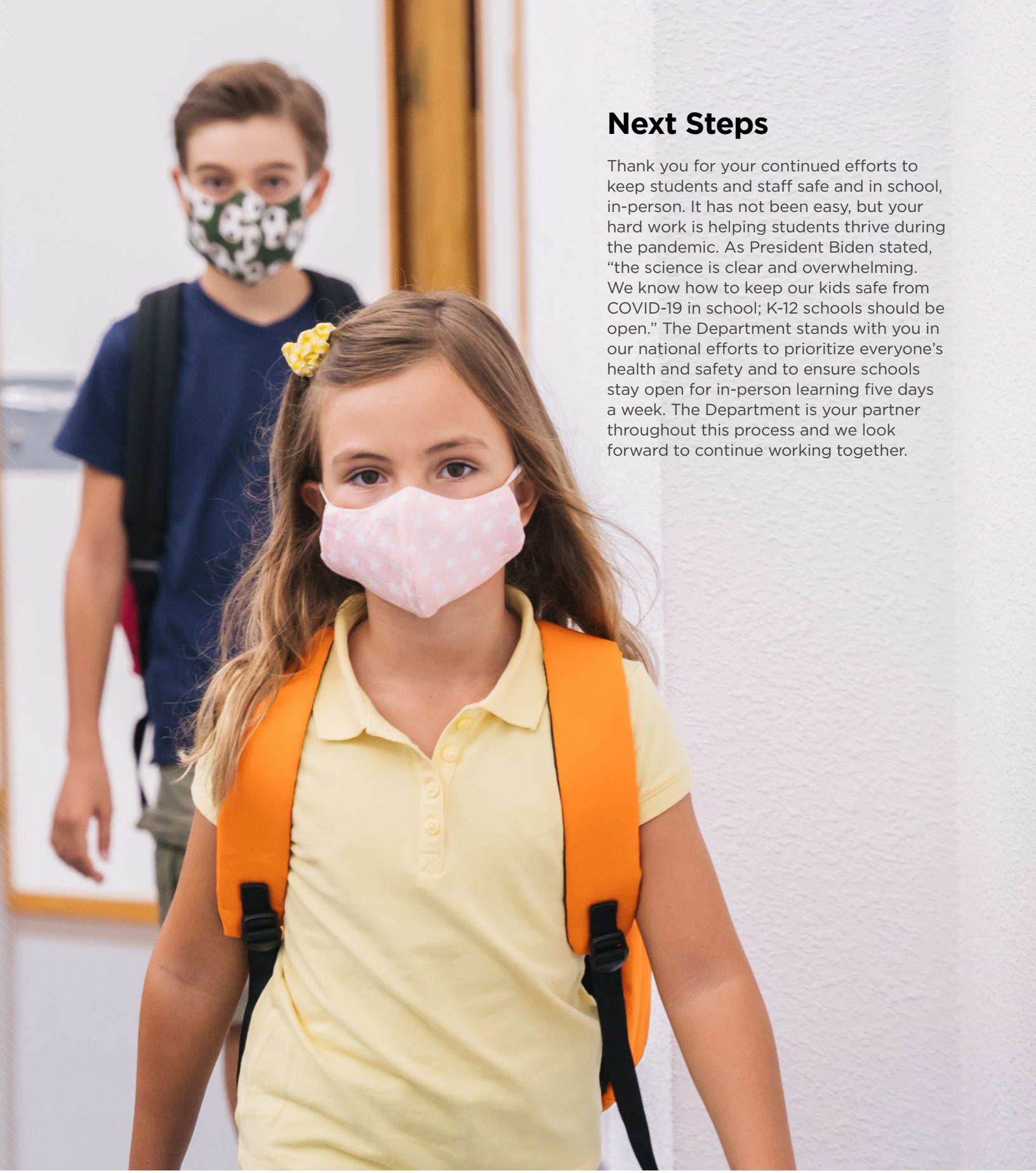
Throughout the pandemic, State and Local Education Agencies have forged a tight bond with their local, county and state health department counterparts. These close relationships have helped keep students safe as COVID has evolved and should continue to guide state and local decisions that keep students in school, in-person.

4. Monitor Community Spread

Children can be infected with and spread COVID-19 to others, including high-risk members of their family and community, even if the children are asymptomatic. **According to the CDC**, schools should consider levels of community transmission as they assess the risk of transmission within their schools.

The CDC has stated that although outbreaks in schools can occur, multiple studies have shown that transmission within school settings is typically lower than—or at least similar to—levels of community transmission, when prevention strategies are in place in schools. Implementing mitigation strategies at all levels of community transmission is important to keep in-school transmission low. When there are higher levels of community transmission, it is particularly important to strengthen strategies like screening testing to identify cases early.





Next Steps

Thank you for your continued efforts to keep students and staff safe and in school, in-person. It has not been easy, but your hard work is helping students thrive during the pandemic. As President Biden stated, "the science is clear and overwhelming. We know how to keep our kids safe from COVID-19 in school; K-12 schools should be open." The Department stands with you in our national efforts to prioritize everyone's health and safety and to ensure schools stay open for in-person learning five days a week. The Department is your partner throughout this process and we look forward to continue working together.

There are several Department of Education COVID-19 resources available for states, communities, educators, and families. These resources include guidance and policies related to elementary and secondary education, special education, postsecondary education, and other aspects of lifelong learning.

For more information please visit ed.gov.