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## A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Vermont Schools FAQ 1: Physical Distancing

Rev. Oct. 6, 2020

The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) has released joint guidance with the Vermont Department of Health on safely reopening schools. This document, [A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Vermont Schools](#), provides health guidance to school administrators and school personnel as they plan and implement the reopening of schools for the 2020-21 School Year in the context of COVID-19.

This Frequently Asked Questions document responds to follow up questions from educators and administrators and is intended to clarify and expand on the guidance.

This FAQ has been updated to reflect [Interim Guidance: Physical Distancing and Step III](#).

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**UPDATED** Q1: The guidance states that the six-foot number for separating student workspaces is a recommendation not a requirement. I know that there are many educational leaders who are taking the spacing measure as a requirement and are feeling like they cannot comply with that “expectation.” Could you clarify the intent of the measures?

The best way to prevent the spread of coronavirus is to wear a facial covering when unable to stay 6 feet apart. The guidance reflects that reality and reopening schools need to adhere to both strategies as much as possible.

The best practice is to maintain six feet of distance between students (three-to-six feet of distance for students PreK-**Grade 6**) to minimize the risk of spreading the virus. At the same time, we recognize this may not be possible in all settings. Therefore, it is a strong recommendation but not required. Schools should set up classrooms as best they can.

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**UPDATED** Q2: Could best practices include spacing student workstations closer than 6 feet apart when aligned in the same direction? If plastic barriers are installed between student work stations, how might that measure help reduce the spacing?

Maintaining a six-foot distance (three-to-six-foot for PreK-**Grade 6** students) is preferable but may not always be possible. If installed properly, plastic barriers between students would eliminate the need for the six-foot distancing. Turning workstations to face in the same direction is a best practice detailed in the [Strong and Healthy Start Guidance](#).

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**NEW** Q3: How can we be sure our plastic barriers are properly installed?

Barriers should be securely installed on desk surfaces and be high enough to account for students sitting and/or standing behind them depending on their intended use. Barriers may have gaps or separation between the desk surface and the bottom of the barrier, but should, at minimum, block the student's natural breathing zone (i.e. front and/or sides of the desk/table depending on room configuration) while sitting and/or standing. Barriers should be cleaned and disinfected regularly, using the same protocol as desktops and other surfaces. For more information, see the [American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine](#).

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**Q4: Is there a way to balance the risk of physical distancing and facial coverings depending on the settings?**

We suggest that school leaders review the guidance and note when words like “possible” or “feasible” are included so you can see where the opportunities for “doing the best you can” come in.

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**UPDATED** Q5: Do kids PreK-Grade 6 who are outside need to be masked if they are between 3 and 6 feet apart? Is it ok for them to not wear masks at a 3-foot distance?

Students of all ages need to wear masks if they can't maintain a 6-foot distance, including students in PreK-Grade 6 and including when students are outside. The 3-to-6-foot distancing for the younger grades is only allowable if the students are wearing masks.

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**NEW** Q6: Does the transition from Step II to Step III affect the requirement for physical distancing?

No. The transition from Step II to Step III allows some additional flexibility around the cafeteria and gymnasium, pods and cohorts, and allows for the scheduling of interscholastic sport competition, but it has no effect on physical distancing requirements. In Step III, same as in Step II, students PreK-Grade 6 must be spaced 3-6 feet apart and students Grades 7-12 continue with the strong recommendation that students maintain a 6-foot distance wherever possible.

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**NEW** Q7: How should schools manage distancing during snacks and meals when masks are off?

Students of all ages need to be 6 feet apart or separated by properly installed plastic barriers when eating since they cannot be masked during those times.