

Interim Guidance: Physical Distancing and Step III

Purpose

As Vermont schools transition from Step II to Step III (see [FAQ: Transitioning from Step II to Step III](#)), many districts are adjusting hybrid learning models to provide more in-person learning for students, consistent with recommendations in [A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Vermont Schools](#) that schools return to full-time in-person learning as soon as practical, especially for students in the younger grades.

This interim guidance serves two purposes:

- Updates the grade levels with the more flexible 3-6 foot distancing requirement to include Grade 6 at the recommendation of the Vermont Department of Health. This change will be integrated into an upcoming update of the Strong and Healthy Start guidance, but we are issuing it now to assist schools making changes to in-person instruction based on the Step II to Step III transition.
- Reiterates physical distancing requirements in the Strong and Healthy Start guidance which remain in effect in Step III.

The Agency of Education, in consultation with the Health Department and education stakeholders, is currently considering revisions to the Strong and Healthy Start guidance based on updated scientific information and experiences gained from the first month of operating schools in Vermont. The next update to the Strong and Healthy Start guidance, expected later this month, will be consistent with this interim guidance.

Update to Physical Distancing Guidance for Grade 6

The Strong and Healthy Start guidance delineates two age groups with different requirements for physical distancing. The guidance stated that older students should be distanced at least six feet apart whenever possible, while younger students can be distanced three-to-six feet apart. This is based on scientific evidence that younger children are less likely to transmit to others when infected, even in close-contact scenarios.

Initially, younger students were defined as PreK-Grade 5. Based on ongoing review of the medical literature, the Vermont Department of Health has advised that it is appropriate to include Grade 6 in this cohort. Therefore, the upcoming revision of the Strong and Healthy Start guidance will reflect the 3-to-6-foot distance as acceptable for PreK-Grade 6, while the 6-foot distance will apply to Grade 7 and up.

Existing Strong and Healthy Start Guidance on Physical Distancing

Detailed guidance on physical distancing begins on page 19 of [A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Vermont Schools](#). With the exception of the expansion of the 3-to-6 foot distancing cohort to PreK-Grade 6 as detailed in this interim guidance, please continue to follow this Strong and Healthy Start guidance as written, including the distancing

requirements for students and staff that apply in both Step II and Step III. For additional clarification on physical distancing guidance, please see [Safety and Health Guidance FAQ 1: Physical Distancing](#).