

Area Cooperative Educational Services

Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan

Introduction

The Connecticut Department of Education and the federal government have created new guidelines that require all schools in the state to draft, revise, and implement a *Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Service Plan* for the 2021-2022 school year. The creation of this plan and its regular revision is a component of ACES application for the American Rescue Plan – Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP-ESSER). These funds will be used to support the reopening of our schools and programs as well as provide the resources necessary to support our students as we recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This plan incorporates the best practices for health and safety as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic and implements what we have learned from our experiences this year in responding to the changing public health realities and guidance. This plan is further intended to provide the operational flexibility necessary to address the safety needs of students and staff. With limited exception, ACES will offer only in-person instruction during the 2021-2022 school year. ACES reserves the authority to respond to changes in guidance or public health circumstances as necessary.

The ACES *Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Service Plan* takes into consideration the most recently updated information from the CDC. The following points have served as critical components in the development of this plan:

- Students benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person instruction in the fall 2021 is a priority.
- Vaccination is currently the leading public health prevention strategy to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Promoting vaccination can help schools safely return to in-person learning as well as extracurricular activities and sports.
- The CDC recommends that masks should be worn indoors by all individuals (age 2 and older) who are not fully vaccinated. Consistent and correct mask use by people who are not fully vaccinated is especially important indoors and in crowded settings, when physical distancing cannot be maintained. *At the time of this writing, ACES will continue to follow guidance from the state of Connecticut with regards to mask wearing.*
- CDC recommends schools maintain at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms, combined with indoor mask wearing by people who are not fully vaccinated, to reduce transmission risk. When it is not possible to maintain a physical distance of at least 3 feet, such as when schools cannot fully re-open while maintaining these distances, it is especially important to layer multiple other prevention strategies, such as indoor masking.
- Screening testing, ventilation, handwashing and respiratory etiquette, staying home when sick and getting tested, contact tracing in combination with quarantine and isolation, and cleaning and disinfection are also important layers of prevention to keep schools safe.
- Students, teachers, and staff should stay home when they have signs of any infectious illness and be referred to their healthcare provider for testing and care.

- Many schools serve children under the age of 12 who are not eligible for vaccination at this time. Therefore, the CDC guidance emphasizes implementing layered prevention strategies (e.g., using multiple prevention strategies together consistently) to protect people who are not fully vaccinated, including students, teachers, staff, and other members of their households.
- COVID-19 prevention strategies remain critical to protect people, including students, teachers, and staff, who are not fully vaccinated, especially in areas of moderate-to-high community transmission levels.
- Localities should monitor community transmission, vaccination coverage, screening testing, and occurrence of outbreaks to guide decisions on the level of layered prevention strategies (e.g., physical distancing, screening testing).

The ACES *Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Service Plan* functions as an extension of our reopening efforts since the start of the pandemic and provides a broad framework to both respond rapidly as well as to focus on those items required by law and statute. The information in this document is not intended to replace the finite details, practices, and procedures already developed by the agency but, rather, serves as a supplemental broad framework that considers and contemplates the evolving circumstances of the virus. As this information continues to change rapidly, this plan will be revisited and revised as needed with updates communicated at least every six months.

The revision cycle is as follows:

- June 23, 2021
- December 23, 2021
- June 23, 2022
- December 23, 2022
- June 23, 2023

ACES will continue to work closely with its health partners, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), and the Connecticut Department of Public Health (CDPH) to assess its operational practices and procedures. Additionally, the rate of community spread of the virus will be monitored. As a result, these plans may be modified rapidly based upon federal and or state guidance or due to changing conditions related to the COVID-19 virus.

The vast student population served by ACES requires a flexible approach in the development of practices and procedures related to mitigation strategies. Age and program appropriate lessons will be implemented related to these practices and revisited as necessary. Specific time will be set aside to educate our students so that they may make appropriate decisions and comply with school health policies and practices.

This plan incorporates details related to health and safety strategies and the continuity of services. As noted above, this document is a working draft and ACES reserves the right to adjust its practices and procedures in accordance with prevailing conditions related to the COVID-19 virus and any accompanying changes in guidance from local, state, or federal entities. While the aforementioned revision cycle has been developed, this plan will be modified as the circumstances dictate.

Health and Safety Strategies

Universal and correct wearing of masks

- *ACES will follow guidance from the state of Connecticut with regards to mask wearing. Presently, masks are required in all schools and programs. At the time of this writing, mask wearing is still required in schools. The CDC currently recommends Masks should be worn indoors by all individuals (age 2 and older) who are not fully vaccinated. Consistent and correct mask use by people who are not fully vaccinated is especially important indoors and in crowded settings, when physical distancing cannot be maintained. As the rate of community spread and conditions related to the COVID-19 virus are changing rapidly, parents, students, and staff will be informed of the need to wear masks prior to the start of the 2021-2022 school year*
- Students and staff will be permitted to remove masks while eating or drinking when outdoors when distancing is maintained, or on specific mask breaks provided by school staff.
- We will continue to monitor guidance and update this plan as needed.

Physical distancing

- ACES will follow the CT Department of Health, State Department of Education and the CDC recommendations with regards to physical distancing. The CDC currently recommends schools maintain at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms, combined with indoor mask wearing by people who are not fully vaccinated, to reduce transmission risk. When it is not possible to maintain a physical distance of at least 3 feet, such as when schools cannot fully re-open while maintaining these distances, a layer-strategy approach will be utilized.

Handwashing and respiratory etiquette

- Schools will continue to teach and implement routines for hand-washing at specified points during the school day inclusive of before and after lunch periods and after outdoor activities. All classrooms and school offices will have hand sanitizers available. Students will be educated to the fact that hand washing is more effective than hand sanitizing.
- Respiratory etiquette, emphasizing covering the mouth and nose when sneezing or coughing, using and immediately disposing of tissues, and washing hands will be enforced with signage and reminders.
- Hand sanitizer and disinfectant will continue to be available in all schools, programs, and facilities.

Cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities, including improving ventilation

- ACES will continue to utilize ongoing inspections of its facilities and respective operational systems to ensure proper functioning and programming of air exchange controllers. Filter replacement will occur in accordance with recommendations.
- Isolation rooms and treatment rooms will be cleaned after each use, when requested by school nurse.
- Disinfectant and sanitizer will continue to be available in all schools, programs, and facilities.

Contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine, in collaboration with the State, local, territorial, or Tribal health departments

- ACES will continue to follow the [CSDE Addendum 9: Contract Tracing Scenarios in Schools](#) and its definition as a close contact as an individual spending a total of at least 15 minutes (within 24 hours) within 6 feet of a person with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 during their infectious period or having direct contact with an infected person's droplets (e.g., cough, sneeze). In the event an individual is identified, ACES will continue its practices in isolation and quarantine as outlined in [CSDE Addendum 5: Interim Guidance for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios in Connecticut School Districts](#).

Diagnostic screening and testing

- Self-screening and staying at home when sick are important layered mitigation strategies.
- Regardless of vaccination status students, teachers, and staff should stay home when they have signs of any infectious illness and be referred to their healthcare provider for testing and care. Staff must use their sick time when staying home as there is no longer an available bank of supplemental COVID-related sick time.
- ACES will continue to work with CTDPH and other local health organizations to monitor the rate of community spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Efforts to provide vaccinations to educators, other staff, and students, if eligible

- As soon as the vaccine was available to adults, ACES began entering all eligible staff into the VAMS system as directed by the Governor's executive orders. Every ACES staff member has been given the opportunity to be vaccinated.
- ACES has and will continue to send information home to staff and eligible families promoting the vaccination of eligible students.
- ACES has and will continue to staff and survey families to gauge their interest in their eligible students to receive the vaccination and make arrangements with local health departments to schedule vaccination clinics at sites accessible to students and families.
- In May of 2021, ACES sent out a survey to staff and families of students who are eligible to receive the vaccine and based on the response a vaccination clinic was scheduled in June of 2021 at an ACES site. The follow-up was scheduled for the 2nd week in July 2021.

Appropriate accommodations for children with disabilities with respect to the health and safety policies

- The nurse at each school site, in conjunction with the nursing supervisor and the administration, worked with sending school districts and families to ensure the health and safety precautions support a healthy and safe school environment for all ACES students.
- Specific accommodations were made per IEP or based on the specific need of the student. For example, sensory issue prohibited some students from wearing masks and to accommodate the students ACES provided additional layers of protection to the staff working with the students.

Continuity of Services

The ACES Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan is built upon the efforts to reopen schools in September, 2020. The prior plan reflected the input of a broad range of ACES stakeholders and served to provide the necessary clarity related to procedures and protocols that were necessary to operate during the initial phases of the pandemic. The preparation for the 2021-2022 school year additionally utilizes the five priority areas from the Connecticut State Department of Education which are as follows:

- *Learning Acceleration, Academic Renewal, and Student Enrichment*
- *Family and Community Connections*
- *Social, Emotional, and Mental Health of the Student and of our School Staff*
- *Strategic Use of Technology, Staff Development, and the Digital Divide*
- *Building Safe and Healthy Schools*

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER) provide the opportunity to bold, high impact plans to address the impact on student learning, social emotional well-being, and interpersonal interactions. Work conducted throughout the funding period will seek to incorporate the above priorities.

Throughout the past year, ACES responded to changing conditions of the pandemic and ensured the continuity of services during whole school or cohort transitions to remote learning due to contact tracing by:

- Providing the technology needed to each student so they could access learning remotely
- Providing internet access via hotspots for families with connectivity issues
- Providing a parent portal to the ACES technology support service desk, so that parents could submit questions or requests for services and access the agency's knowledgebase articles on common at home issues with technology and software applications
- Providing information to families to support them in accessing low/no cost connectivity
- Providing training for families on how to support their students in accessing learning via technology
- Providing students and families with daily schedules for classes and therapies
- Outfitting classrooms with the needed technology so that the teachers could facilitate in-person and remote learning simultaneously
- Delivering materials to homes of students when needed
- Training the related service staff to deliver effective tele therapy to students so that the students
- Providing accessible sites for families to be able access breakfast and lunch services
- Delivering food to students in special cases
- Continuously engaging with families to support their ability to work with their students at home.
- Integrating technology into everyday teaching and learning.

These strategies will continue to be implemented and replicated as conditions warrant.

Public Comment

This draft was developed based upon previously developed plans which incorporated broad outreach to all stakeholder groups as well with input on revisions from school and district leadership. Stakeholder engagement was initially sought from staff, families, and students

through the use of the agency's Parent Square interface. Future periodic reviews will utilize scheduled forums, surveys, and feedback loops in order to meet the ongoing and changing needs of students, families, and staff.

Period Review Process

LEAs are required to periodically review and, as appropriate, revise their *Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan* at **least every six months** through September 30, 2023. Each review must include seeking public comment on the plan and developing the plan after considering the public comment.

ACES will be submitting a reviewed or revised *Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan* to the Connecticut State Department of Education according to the schedule in the following table. In order to allow time for both subtle and substantive adjustments to this plan, a schedule has been established for the collection of public feedback.

Submission Due Date	Public Feedback Due Date
6/23/2021	
12/23/2021	12/1/2021
6/23/2022	6/1/2022
12/23/2022	12/1/2022
6/23/2023	6/1/2023

Understandable and Uniform Format

The needs of ACES families are not unique from the needs of families in traditional school districts. There is a need to over communicate information to parents and make the information as accessible as possible. To that end ACES has done the following to support accessibility to important information to families.

- The agency reopening plan was sent to families and posted on the ACES.org website
- School re-opening plans were sent to every facility electronically
- School re-opening plans were and are accessible on the school and agency web site.
- Schools created PowerPoint presentations with voice and created instructional/informational videos that were sent to families via parent square and posted on the schools external website and their social media pages.
- School re-opening plans were translated and sent to families upon request.
- Schools provided regular opportunities to entertain questions from families.

ACES strives to ensure that its website meets the requirements stated in Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act and level AA of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0. We are actively working to provide content that is user friendly and accessible for to the widest possible audience.

The ACES website includes the following accessibility features:

- ADA Compliant documents (task currently in progress). Documents added to the site prior to February 2018 are in the process of being updated
- Inclusion of alternative text detail for images (task currently in progress). Images added to the site prior to February 2018 may lack some alt text detail
- Captioned videos (task currently in progress). Videos added to the site prior to February 2018 may lack some captioning

In the event that inaccessible content or functionality is encountered, such content can be reported so that the content or functionality can be made accessible.

Individuals are encouraged to contact the agency webmaster if, because of a disability, she/he/they are unable to access content on the ACES website, have questions about the accessibility of content or technology used by ACES, and/or would like to report barriers to accessing any technology used by ACES, including this website.