

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is updating K–12 school guidance to reflect the latest science on physical distance between students in classrooms. CDC now recommends that, with universal masking, students should maintain a distance of at least 3 feet in classroom settings. CDC has updated its operational strategy to say:

- In elementary schools, CDC recommends all students remain at least 3 feet apart in classrooms where mask use is universal — regardless of whether community transmission is low, moderate, substantial, or high.
- In middle and high schools, CDC also recommends students should be at least 3 feet apart in classrooms where mask use is universal and in communities where transmission is low, moderate, or substantial.
- Middle school students and high school students should be at least 6 feet apart in communities where transmission is high, if cohorting is not possible. [Cohorting](#) is when groups of students are kept together with the same peers and staff throughout the school day to reduce the risk for spread throughout the school. This recommendation is because COVID-19 transmission dynamics are different in older students – that is, they are more likely to be exposed to SARS-CoV-2 and spread it than younger children.

The updated [Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Prevention](#) is part of CDC’s existing resources for K–12 schools to open and remain open for in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since release of the Operational Strategy on February 12, 2021, CDC has continually reviewed the evolving evidence on SARS-CoV-2 transmission in K–12 schools, as well as the latest science on the effectiveness of different prevention strategies within schools. The updated guidance complements CDC’s existing [guidance, resources, and tools](#) for K–12 schools.

Three studies, published in today’s *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR), also address spread of SARS-CoV-2 in schools. Taken together, these studies build on evidence that physical distancing of at least 3 feet between students can safely be adopted in classroom settings where mask use is universal and other prevention measures are taken.

“CDC is committed to leading with science and updating our guidance as new evidence emerges,” said CDC Director Rochelle P. Walensky. “Safe in-person instruction gives our kids access to critical social and mental health services that prepare them for the future, in addition to the education they need to succeed. These updated recommendations provide the evidence-based roadmap to help schools reopen safely, and remain open, for in-person instruction.”

These updated recommendations are specific to students in classrooms with universal mask wearing.

CDC continues to recommend at least 6 feet of distance:

- Between adults in the school building and between adults and students.
- In common areas, such as school lobbies and auditoriums.
- When masks can’t be worn, such as when eating.
- During activities when increased exhalation occurs, such as singing, shouting, band practice, sports, or exercise. These activities should be moved outdoors or to large, well-ventilated spaces whenever possible.
- In community settings outside of the classroom.

Given the crucial services schools offer and the benefits of in-person learning, it is critical for K–12 schools to open and remain open for in-person instruction, as safely and as soon as possible. Schools should be the last settings to close because of COVID-19 and the first to reopen when they can do so safely. Working together, school leaders and community members can take actions to keep schools open for in-person learning by protecting students, teachers, and school staff where they live, work, learn, and play.

[Vaccines](#) are an important tool to help stop the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier this month, as part of ongoing efforts to reopen K–12 schools, President Biden directed all states to [prioritize K–12 teachers, school staff, and childcare workers for COVID-19 vaccination](#),pdf iconexternal icon and he challenged states to give these educators their first shots by the end of March. CDC is taking a leading role in helping to achieve the President’s goal through its Federal Retail Pharmacy Program, which has over 9,000 participating pharmacies nationwide prioritizing K-12 teachers, school staff, and childcare workers for vaccination appointments throughout the month of March. Additional information is available on the [CDC website](#).