



Montana Catholic Schools

COVID-19 Guidance

Our expectation is that the Coronavirus pandemic will be challenging our schools through 2021. Even if a vaccine is developed soon, the widespread distribution and administration should stretch through the end of 2021. Until that time, we need to implement new policies and procedures, regardless of which phase we're in. It's also possible that our understanding of the virus and guidance (including the use of phases) might change. For example, yesterday we heard that contact surfaces might not be the concern we thought they would be.

We are guided by our desire to follow policies and directives, to keep our community members safe, to minister to the mental and spiritual health of our community, and to continue to provide an excellent educational experience.

Until the pandemic is over, school leaders need to monitor guidance from their local health departments, the CDC, OPI, MHSA, their respective chancery, and the governor's office.

- Link to [draft CDC](#) guidelines.
- [Link to published](#) CDC flowcharts.
- [Additional guidance](#) from CDC; this is the [CDC resource page](#) with detailed guidance
- Link to the [Governor's COVID](#) page
- Link to [OPI guidance](#) on COVID
- [Link to MHSA](#) (for guidance on athletics and activities)

In a state of emergency, the governor will order all public schools to be closed. If the governor or the local health department closes your county's public schools, you should follow suit. We expect that during the school year 2020-21, we will see localized school closures as well as the possibility of a statewide closure. When our buildings are closed, we will follow the same published school schedule in a remote setting. That is why it is extremely important that we establish protocols and processes for remote learning in the first two weeks of school.

Since we are following all state and local guidance, there is no need for a liability waiver from our students and families. We need to communicate our planning for every contingency.

Our high schools will also follow direction from the MHSA regarding athletics and activities. Our expectation is that all activities will be impacted—whether they happen at all, and under what form.

We expect that our grade schools will take into consideration the MHSA's guidance as well as their local health departments. Either way, it might be time to establish/strengthen intramural sports. If intramural competitions can occur without out of school visitors, for instance, they can be held during all phases of reopening. In the absence of clear guidance from MHSA, schools should follow directives from local health departments for practices and competitions.

Our hope is to return to as much face-to-face learning as possible. It is a reality, however, that some of our vulnerable students and faculty might not return to face-to-face instruction out of an abundance of caution. The CDC has established criteria for lowest risk, more risk, and highest risk individuals. While there is growing (but inconclusive) research that students are less likely to contract or suffer from COVID-19, we need to remember that we are concerned about all members of our community—staff, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. We need to design a robust hybrid program to accommodate every member of our school community.

As the state moves through different stages of reopening (what is now called “phases one, two, and three”) we need to design plans of instruction that are responsive. For each phase, the following need to be part of your operational plan:

- Instructions for every teacher, staff member, and student to stay home when sick. This will [require signage](#).
- Health monitoring of each person entering the building. This will require the purchase of thermometers and identification and training of staff for monitoring. This might require additional staffing, including the hiring of a school nurse.
- Limited access to the building for visitors. Procedures will need to be developed for deliveries and drop offs. This will require new signage.
- To protect front office staff, plexiglass partitions should be placed around desks in open office areas and/or reception.
- Expectations and practices of good hygiene will be taught and emphasized—how to wash one's hands, how frequently, how to cover a cough/sneeze, etc. This will require new signage.
- Soap, hand sanitizer, and cleaning wipes should be widely available.
- Students will need to wear face coverings when moving around the building and perhaps even when seated at his/her desk, depending on the phase.
- Faculty and staff should be provided masks. This will require sourcing and ordering of materials that are in high demand.
- New protocols for cleaning and sanitation should be developed. Every school should investigate the purchase of ozone sprayers, UV lights, air filtration systems, and other new cleaning devices appropriate for their facility. High contact areas should be continually cleaned. [Here is the EPA site](#) with the most up-to-date information and the [CDC site](#) has information, too. These new protocols will expect more from teachers, students, and janitorial staff.
- Ventilation should be increased in the school (purchase of air movers/fans?) and outdoor learning should be emphasized. This will require new procedures in light of recent security/safety guidance.
- Drinking fountains should be off limits.
- Occupancy limits should be posted for each room depending on the phase.
- Social distancing should become the norm. No handshakes or hugs or close physical contact. This will [require signage](#) and continued training and monitoring by staff and administration.

- Pay attention to the financial impact of increased supplies, materials, and perhaps even staffing (custodial, nurse, staff, etc). This budgeting process should begin ASAP.

Implications for Scheduling

- This might be time for schools to re-examine their annual calendar. As universities have moved to an earlier start to finish by Thanksgiving, it's worth examining for our schools to consider beginning earlier to either give more flexibility in case of closures or to end the first semester by Thanksgiving
- During **closure**, schools should engage in outreach to students and staff members to ensure that everyone is cared for and included.
 - There needs to be both synchronous and asynchronous instruction as well as intentional outreach to build connections.
 - Staff members should be assigned a group of students to contact frequently.
 - Students should be divided into groups (or use the same cohort groups from phase one) so they can build connections online and other processes.
 - Virtual faith formation needs to be enacted—Masses, prayer services, rosaries, etc.
 - Virtual town meetings with parents should be instituted.
- **In phase one**, no groups larger than 10 are allowed and social distancing is expected. For most classes, this will require a reduction in the number of students.
 - High and medium risk community members should be encouraged to stay home.
 - For primary grades, morning and afternoon shifts are recommended. In these settings, the school time would be the central instruction time and out of school would be supplemental (reading, homework, projects).
 - For middle and high school, alternate days are recommended. It is also possible that Friday could be a recovery/project day. In this setting, schools should adopt a flipped classroom model, meaning that the instruction happens remotely and school time is spent with guided practice and collaboration, allowing for personalized help and community building.
 - There should be intentional community building activities with students when they are in the building. There should be attempts to check on the mental and emotional wellbeing of students.
 - Desks should be placed six feet apart.
 - Schools should consider encouraging all students in each grade cohort (all the 2nd graders who go to school together, for example) to mix outside of school. That would aid families by allowing parents to share childcare responsibilities and return to work sooner. It also promotes social connections on the days that students aren't attending school.
 - Staggered starts and end times as well as different passing periods are recommended to reduce mixing. Students should be moving between classes as little as possible.
 - There should be no large gatherings over 10—meaning that the lunchroom and other assemblies would be canceled.
 - If social distancing can be maintained, Mass can take place. Some other faith formation activities (rosaries, for example) might have to be hybrid.

- If a student or staff member tests positive, the school would have to be closed for a deep cleaning (1-2 days) and the cohort might need to stay home for a while but the other cohorts could resume. Remote learning would have to increase.
- This might be the most demanding phase for faculty members. School leaders should make sure to reach out to faculty and support their mental and emotional health.
- **In phase two**, social distancing is still expected but groups can grow to 50.
 - High risk members of the community are encouraged to stay home.
 - With modifications, it would appear that face-to-face instruction could resume.
 - For the early primary grades, I suggest trying to isolate them as much as possible (separate entrances, bathrooms, and little or no interaction outside of their classroom).
 - Facial coverings would still be required for students moving around the school.
 - For middle and high school, I would recommend resuming normal days. However, you might want to consider keeping Friday as a recovery/project day—even possibly as a remote day. You could keep the alternate day cohort plan, however.
 - Staggered starts and end times as well as different passing periods are recommended to reduce mixing. Students should be moving between classes as little as possible.
 - There should be no large gatherings over 50—meaning that the lunchroom and other assemblies would be canceled.
 - If social distancing can be maintained, Mass can take place. Most faith formation activities can resume in person.
 - If a student or staff member tests positive, the school might have to be closed for a deep cleaning (1-2 days) and then might have to revert to phase one.
 - The emphasis on checking in on student staff emotional/mental wellbeing should continue. Community building activities should continue.
- **In phase three**, normal activities could resume although the highest risk individuals (students and staff) would be encouraged to stay home. Therefore, the remote learning aspect of your hybrid instruction would need to continue.
 - Staggered starts and staggered bell schedules should continue to be implemented
 - The lunchroom would be re-opened. However, new practices would be required for distributing lunch (such as disposable boxed lunches) and seating should be assigned by class.
 - Decisions about the use of facial coverings in the building could be made on the local level.
 - Good hygiene would continue to be emphasized.
 - Large gatherings would still be discouraged.
 - Community building activities and faith formation activities can now resume fully on a face-to-face basis.