

Sonoma County Social Distancing Guidance for School Reopening

This guidance from the Sonoma County Department of Health Services and Sonoma County Office of Education is meant to help Sonoma County schools and districts interpret new social distancing guidelines from the California Department of Public Health and Centers for Disease Control. Each school district and school board independently develops its own reopening plans and communicates the details to its students and families.

In response to new Centers for Disease Control guidelines about social distancing, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) issued updated guidance for schools on Saturday, March 20. Under these changes, schools are now allowed to set up classrooms with a minimum of **three feet of distance, rather than six**, between student chairs. This is intended to provide schools and districts greater flexibility and options for bringing students back to in-person instruction. Following are considerations to help schools and districts implement these state guidelines if they choose to do so.

General Guidance

- All grade levels may observe the new 3-foot minimum for spacing student chairs when setting up classrooms.
- For many elementary schools, this may mean that children can return to campus full-time.
- However, as schools reopen campuses for the first time during the pandemic, they may still wish to consider a phased reopening of a few grades at a time to ensure all safety protocols are working as intended before bringing back a full campus.
- When spacing children closer together, other mitigation measures are critical. Ensure good ventilation, mask wearing, and hand-washing practices.
- **Per state guidance, face masks must be worn at all times when children are less than 6 feet apart. If children are not wearing masks, they still need to be at least 6 feet apart** - i.e. lunch rooms. **Updated April 7:** Schools must also observe current capacity limits for large spaces such as gymnasiums and cafeterias, per the latest CDPH guidance pertaining to these areas.
- School staff should still maintain 6 feet distance between each other and students.
- The CDC advises that it is even more important to limit the mixing of stable groups (classrooms), when children are spaced closer together.
- Schools that adopt a 3-foot social distancing standard should amend their COVID-19 Safety Plans in consultation with stakeholders, including staff and families. They should also update their school boards and post the information on their websites. They should also ensure they are in conformance with Cal/OSHA requirements and make any changes in consultation with stakeholder groups.

Secondary School Specific Guidance

- For secondary (comprehensive middle and high schools – does not apply to elementary K-8 schools), each additional stable group a child participates in, increases the risk of exposure and the need to quarantine a larger number of children. The greater the mixing of stable groups, the greater the risk of a school closure due to an outbreak of COVID-19. This is combined with evidence that middle and high school students are at a higher risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19.
- With this in mind, we highly recommend the following evidence-based approach for reopening secondary schools:
 - Middle and high schools should limit the mixing of stable groups per day as much as possible (consistent with their existing/approved safety plans) for at least the first 3 weeks after reopening to in-person learning.
 - During this time, schools should monitor for outbreaks or higher exposure rates.
 - If, after 3 weeks, there have been no significant outbreaks, and in consultation with county health, the school may choose to adopt a full day schedule for the remainder of the school year.
- Using this measured approach will also ensure that Sonoma County is closer to the orange tier, where community spread and overall risk is lower.

More information about COVID-19 and how it impacts schools can be found at scoe.org/covid and socoemergency.org.