

A Back-to-School Message from the Sonoma County Office of Education and Sonoma County Public Health

August 12, 2022

Dear Sonoma County School Families,

We are excited to see students once again for the beginning of the 2022-23 school year. About half of our public school students returned to campus on Wednesday and Thursday, and most of the rest will return next week.

This will be the fourth consecutive school year affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the priority for this year once again is to ensure safe, in-person learning for all students. Our medical and educational experts agree that students learn best when they are in a classroom with other students, an environment designed to support education, as opposed to at home, where school takes place on a screen and potential distractions abound.

Since March of 2020, we have learned a great deal about the virus that causes COVID-19, and we are fortunate to have one of the highest pediatric vaccination rates in the state. That, along with other measures such as rapid testing, a recommendation that students wear masks, and antiviral medications should help us greatly as we seek to hold classes and extracurricular activities safely.

Safety Measures for the Start of 2022-23

Health guidelines for the start of this school year are set by the California Department of Public Health and, for school staff and volunteers, by Cal/OSHA. At this time, there are no Sonoma County health orders that override these guidelines, though Sonoma County's health department and individual school districts have the authority to implement more stringent guidelines in the future if they feel they are warranted.

Under the Current CDPH Guidance

We urge everyone to review the CDPH's guidelines for K-12 school settings, which you can find a link to via scoe.org/covid. Some notable highlights include:

- Masks are not required, but are **strongly recommended** for students, staff, and volunteers. When available, high-quality surgical, KN-95, or N-95 masks offer the best protection against the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19.
- The COVID-19 vaccines are not required but again are **strongly recommended** for the coming school year.
- Guidelines for students who have COVID-19 or have been exposed to COVID-19 have been streamlined. Any student who tests positive for COVID-19 or has symptoms should

stay home from school for at least five days. These students can return after the fifth day from exposure if they have no symptoms and test negative, provided they wear a mask while around others for a total of 10 days from the date of their positive test. Students no longer need to stay home if they have been exposed to COVID, but they should test three to five days after exposure. If they test negative and have no symptoms, they should wear a mask for 10 days after exposure. If they test positive, they should follow the guidelines noted above.

What We Are Doing Locally

Although there are no local COVID-19 health mandates, please know that school leaders and health officials in Sonoma County are working hard to keep your students safe. Some of the measures we are taking include the following:

- The Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) recently distributed antigen tests to public and private schools so that students and staff could screen for COVID-19 before returning to school. Additional tests that families have received can be held in reserve in case a student is symptomatic and needs to test. In general, we recommend testing for COVID-19 antigen when returning to school after a break, vacation, or absence.
- Each school district is required to have a COVID-19 safety plan posted on its website.
- SCOE is monitoring the status of booster shots that are expected to address more recent, highly transmissible variants of the virus that causes COVID-19. Once such boosters are available, we plan to work with health partners to coordinate clinics for school staff.
- Sonoma County Public Health continues to monitor COVID-19 trends, including case rates, hospitalizations, and the emergence of new variants. We also provide testing, vaccination opportunities, and consultation as questions arise.

The Importance of Vaccinations

Although the COVID-19 vaccine is recommended but not required for the current school year, we are finding that many children have fallen behind on other life-saving vaccinations that are **required by state law**. Students who have not started the process of receiving these vaccinations are to be excluded from school. Please make sure your students are up-to-date on shots for preventable childhood illnesses including measles, polio, tetanus, and whooping cough. For a full list of the vaccines that are required for school, visit shotsforschool.org.

Thank you for working with us to ensure a safe and successful school year,



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