



STATE OF MICHIGAN

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

LANSING

GRETCHEN WHITMER
GOVERNOR

ELIZABETH HERTEL
DIRECTOR

December 30, 2021

Dear Superintendents and Public School Academy Directors,

As we start the year 2022, it is a great opportunity to reinforce actions that can help alleviate the risks associated with this COVID-19 pandemic—especially in anticipation of the highly transmissible Omicron variant. The goal of implementing prevention measures is to protect students, teachers, and staff, and maintain in-person learning. Schools are an important part of communities. They provide safe and supportive learning environments for students that support social and emotional development, provide access to critical services, and improve life outcomes.

The guidance provided below is intended to keep school buildings open and allow students and staff to return to school safely after the winter break. The benefits achieved by continuing in-person learning are vast while the risks associated with it can be reduced by implementing proper protocols to curb the transmission of Covid-19.

The most effective way to prevent transmission within school buildings and reduce prolonged disruptions to in-person learning is to layer multiple prevention strategies as recommended by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The CDC and Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) recommend universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors (age 2 and older), regardless of vaccination status. As Michigan remains in high community transmission, universal indoor masking is a critical prevention strategy for all school districts to allow students to maintain in-person learning. Mask use has been proven to substantially reduce transmission in school settings.

MDHHS also recommends regular testing in all school settings. Frequent testing can help identify infected people, including those without symptoms who may be contagious, so measures can be taken to prevent further transmission or outbreaks. To support schools that incorporate COVID-19 testing into their safer school prevention plans, MDHHS is offering rapid antigen testing to K-12 schools through the [MI Safe Schools Testing Program](#). To take advantage of this program, schools and school districts should follow this process when submitting rapid antigen test orders.

Further, MDHHS encourages all schools to participate in the MI Backpack Program, which offers free at-home COVID-19 tests to students, their families, teachers, and school staff. This program offers one more tool to create a safer environment for students, teachers, staff, and families. Your school district can indicate interest in participating in this program, by submitting this form. We are excited to offer the MI Backpack Home Test program to you as one extra layer of safety and protection.

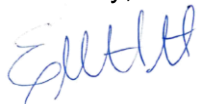
The CDC continues to work with state and local public health officials to monitor the spread of the Omicron variant. The Omicron variant spreads more easily than the original SARS-CoV-2 virus and the Delta variant. Current vaccines prevent severe illness, hospitalizations, and deaths due to infection with the Omicron variant. Therefore, we continue to reinforce that those vaccines remain the best public health measure to protect people from COVID-19, slow down transmission, prevent illness, and reduce the likelihood of newer variants emerging. Schools should encourage all who are eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine and booster dose, and where possible host vaccine clinics to facilitate access for students, families, teachers, and staff.

As Omicron variant cases increase in Michigan, it is important for all schools to review their planned activities for events and gatherings. MDHHS advises modifications to planned activities during and after school where the ability to maintain social distancing between people who live in different households cannot be maintained. Large gatherings (involving 100 or more people) should be held using remote technology or postponed, if not essential. Large gatherings would include events with large numbers of people from multiple households such as conferences or meetings, sporting events, and concerts.

Wearing masks, washing hands often, maintaining social distance wherever possible, and getting staff and students vaccinated all remain important safety measures. All prevention strategies provide some level of protection, and layered strategies implemented at the same time provide the greatest level of protection.

If you have any questions or concerns, please send them to MDHHS-COVIDTestingSupport@michigan.gov.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Hertel
Director
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services



Michael F. Rice, Ph.D.
State Superintendent
Michigan Department of Education