



Colchester School District

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CSD Families,

The Vermont Agency of Education recently updated the [Safety and Health Guidance](#) to reflect changes that will prepare our schools for winter. Many of the changes in the document are in anticipation of students spending more time indoors during the colder weather months. It is important to note that this guidance does not go into effect until Monday, November 16. It was released early so that schools would have time to take the necessary steps to implement the changes and be in compliance with the guidance. Over the past two weeks, the district's administrators have been working in collaboration with teachers to determine what adjustments we will need to make. We are at the spot where we are ready to share what our plan will be moving forward. This email is lengthy but includes an overview of how we will implement the new guidance in our schools.

What's new?

Arrival, Dismissal and Transportation

Temperature checks and health screening questions will remain in place for all individuals who enter our buildings. In addition, there will now be a question regarding travel. If your student is being dropped off at school by an adult, please be aware that individuals should not do drop-off or pick-up if they are showing symptoms of COVID-19, are quarantining due to close contact with a positive individual, are quarantining due to recent out of state travel, or are in isolation due to testing positive. School buses are required to leave a minimum of four windows open for air circulation, even during the winter months. If your student rides the bus, make sure they're dressed appropriately for the weather.

Physical Education

Low impact physical education classes are now permitted indoors as long as students are wearing masks and can physically distance from each other. We will continue to strive to have PE outdoors if the weather permits.

Playgrounds

Playground structures are now open for one cohort of students at a time. Students will need to have their masks on and they will be required to wash their hands or use hand sanitizer before and after their time on a play structure. Playgrounds will be disinfected each weekday morning prior to the start of school. Playgrounds will not be disinfected on the weekends. Please be aware that our playgrounds will not be open before school, students will still report directly to their classroom upon arrival.

Amy Minor
Superintendent
of Schools

George Trieb
Business & Operations
Manager

Carrie Lutz
Director of Student
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Winter Sports

We anticipate further clarification on the winter sports guidance and we will provide more information soon, but for now, here are a few highlights. Tryouts and practices can begin on November 30, 2020. All winter athletes, coaches, officials, and other event participants will be required to wear a mask. Spectators will not be permitted for indoor events, and they will be limited to 150 spectators for outdoor events. One of the things we're waiting for clarification on is if these events can be livestreamed. All athletes, coaches, officials, staff and spectators should complete a health check before arriving at school-sponsored practice sessions, scrimmages, games, meets or competitions. Some winter sports have further restrictions that are specific to that sport.

Physical Distancing

Before we go over changes to the guidance around physical distancing, I want to give you a bit of history about our journey thus far. This fall, all schools in Vermont opened in Phase II. The guidance required six feet of space between student seating. In Colchester, the only way we could have six feet between students was to open in a hybrid model, which scheduled half of the students in the building for two days a week and the other half of the students on the remaining two days of the week.

On September 26, 2020, Vermont moved schools into Phase III and they changed the physical distancing requirement for grades K-5 to three feet. They also started to strongly encourage schools across our state to bring back elementary grades for more days of in-person instruction. The guidance at the time also stated that, "Maintaining a six-foot distance (three-to-six-foot for PreK-Grade 5 students) is preferable but may not always be possible. If installed properly, plastic barriers between students would eliminate the need for the six-foot distancing." After careful consideration and lots of measuring, it was apparent that because of our class size, we could not guarantee three feet of distance without the use of plexiglass. Knowing how important it was to increase the days of in-person learning for our elementary students, we purchased plexiglass for every classroom in grades K-5 and began welcoming back our students back for four days of in-person instruction on Monday, October 16.

As you can see, the original guidance around the use of plexiglass was a critical component in the district's plan to bring back our elementary students for more days of in-person learning. However, the new guidance states that ***plexiglass can no longer be a substitution for physical distancing***. It states that student seating should be spaced out by *a minimum of three feet in grades PK-6, and a minimum of six feet in grades 7-12*, regardless of the use of plexiglass barriers. As you can see, this change in the guidance created a monumental challenge.

The health and safety of our students and staff is paramount. Across the district we will be continuing to use plexiglass as an additional layer of protection, however, it will no longer allow us to sit students closer than 3 or 6 feet. Since the updated guidance came out, we have spent considerable time going over every solution we can think of to keep our elementary students in the building four days a week while also meeting the 3 feet physical distancing minimum. Below is an overview of our plan that will bring us into compliance before the November 16th deadline. Our elementary principals will share additional details with their families directly.

PPS and UMS

- We are in the process of creatively rearranging existing classroom furniture. In some cases that means removing anything that wasn't essential and swapping out different shaped tables.
- We are purchasing some individual student desks so that student seating is spaced out a minimum of three feet.

- We currently have space for all of the students that are learning in-person.

MBS

The enrollment at MBS (as well as the fact that they're bigger than kindergarteners!) makes finding solutions a bit more complicated. In all the grades at MBS we are in the process of rearranging classrooms, removing non-essential furniture, purchasing new student desks and making adjustments so our students are able to properly distance. Additional grade-specific details are outlined below.

GRADE 3

- One of our third grade classrooms will begin using a portion of the library for additional space.

GRADE 4

- Fourth grade has the largest in-person enrollment at MBS, with class sizes ranging from 22 - 24 students.
- We are relocating one classroom to the MBS cafeteria and one classroom will expand into two rooms using an adjoining door.
- We are adding/creating a new fourth grade class. Adding a new classroom is critical to ensure that we can meet the three feet physical distancing requirement to allow our students to continue attending school four days per week. We are very pleased to share that our very own Mr. Mark Winchester, a long time MBS teacher, will be at the helm of this new class. It is important to note that creating this classroom is essential for us to continue offering four days of in-person learning. If we did not create this additional section in fourth grade, we would be out of compliance with state guidelines regarding distancing. Over the next week, we will be communicating with families regarding any potential teacher changes.

GRADE 5

- One of our fifth grade classrooms will move to the music room. Music will be relocated.
- We will need to reassign a small number of students to a different classroom so we can ensure that we have enough space for students to distance. Over the next week, we will be communicating with families regarding any potential teacher changes.

Virtual Learners in Grades K-5

As outlined above, we are already having to make significant modifications to support the current number of students learning in-person. The change to the physical distancing requirements is directly impacting our ability to shift any interested students from a virtual classroom to an in-person classroom. Thank you for your patience as we further develop our plans to bring interested virtual learning students back to in-person instruction. If your K-5 student is currently enrolled as an in-person learner and wishes to switch to a virtual learning classroom, please reach out to your building principal.

CMS and CHS

The physical distancing guidance for students in grades 7-12 is remaining at six feet. Our classrooms at CMS and CHS are in compliance with six feet, as long as we remain in the current hybrid learning model.

The new guidance now allows students in 6th grade to be spaced a minimum of three feet apart instead of six feet. With our 6th graders being housed alongside 7th and 8th grade, there are a number of unique challenges with having two sets of distancing expectations for students located in the same building. At this time, our 6th graders will remain in the hybrid model and spaced six feet apart. As with any of our reopening plans, we will continue to assess this decision.

What is staying the same?

- Students will continue to consume their meals in classrooms.
- There is still a hold on field trips and we are continuing to encourage virtual field trips.
- Our buildings will remain closed for visitors and volunteers.
- In general, our buildings will remain closed to the public, however there are a few limited situations where the building may be open to the public, for example, voting.
- We will continue to offer full-time virtual learning.

Dressing Warm

Even as the weather turns colder, we will continue to open windows in classrooms and buses so please make sure that your children are dressed in layers. Students will also continue going outside for mask breaks, recess, and PE, making warm clothing, hats, and gloves essential. For our younger students, we also recommend sending in some extra clothes to leave at school.

Washing Gloves and Masks

Masks and gloves should be washed regularly in the washing machine or by hand to remove germs, dirt and impurities from them and keep them sanitary. If using a washing machine, don't be afraid to wash your mask along with your regular laundry with standard laundry detergent and using the warmest water the cloth material of your mask can handle.

In closing, I have had many folks ask me if this will be the last time the guidance changes and I wish I had the answer to that question. What I do know is that as we shift into the winter months and spend more time indoors, this new guidance is reflective of what schools need to do to keep students and staff healthy. My hope is that Colchester, along with the rest of Vermont, will continue to be vigilant by limiting group gatherings, wearing a mask and washing our hands. Doing these simple tasks, both when we're at school and when we're at home, will keep our community's cases low and our schools open. The last thing that we want to happen is to have to move to fully remote learning again. However, with the current increase in cases throughout the state, we should all be prepared to adjust our plans. Let's stay safe to stay open. Thank you for doing your part!

Be well,

Amy Minor
Superintendent of Schools

