

Guidance Regarding Use of Face Coverings for Students Participating in Blended Learning

All staff, students, and visitors over the age of two years old entering a New York City Department of Education (DOE) building **MUST** wear a face covering in accordance with this guidance. As discussed below, developmentally appropriate efforts will be made to increase face covering adherence and tolerance for all students as needed.

What Is a Face Covering?

For the purposes of this guidance, a face covering is any well-secured cloth covering or disposable mask that covers a person's nose and mouth and is worn to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19.

- Acceptable face coverings include but are not limited to cloth-based face coverings (e.g., homemade, sewn, or quick cut masks), and disposable surgical masks that cover both the mouth and nose.

What Types of Face Coverings Are Not Permitted on DOE Property?

- Bandanas and neck gaiters are not permitted.
- Face coverings with an exhalation valve or vent are not permitted as exhalation valves allow unfiltered exhaled air to escape to others.
- Face coverings that completely cover or hide an individual's face, such as ski masks, are not permitted.
- Unless otherwise approved by school administration, clear face shields cannot be worn unless accompanied by a face covering.

Face Covering Storage and Disposal

Proper removal and disposal of face coverings is important to everyone's health. Before removing a face covering, you must wash hands and then remove the face covering by its straps. It is important to note:

- Single-use face coverings must be thrown away after use.
- A reusable face covering should be stored with the outer surface folded inward and against itself to reduce contact with other surfaces.
 - Reusable face coverings can be stored between uses in a clean, sealable paper bag or breathable container.
 - Reusable face coverings must be washed regularly.
- Hands should be washed or sanitized after touching a used face covering.

Adherence with Face Covering Requirements

All students are expected to comply with face covering requirements in accordance with this guidance.

DOE may determine, through the exemption process described below, that a student cannot medically tolerate a face covering. School staff may also determine that a student can only minimally tolerate a face covering due to a documented social-emotional or developmental impairment. No student shall be excluded from school or bussing for these reasons; note additional precautions below when students are not wearing face coverings. A parent must seek an exemption from the face covering requirement where a specific medical condition prevents the student from wearing or tolerating a face covering at all; the process for seeking and reviewing such medical exemptions is described below.

If a student can medically tolerate a face covering but needs additional support towards compliance, the school should provide additional adherence support and additional breaks, explore the use of alternative personal protective equipment (PPE), and ensure other risk mitigation strategies such as handwashing and physical distancing are adhered to while the child progresses towards compliance. Students shall not be required to participate in remote-only instruction as they progress towards compliance.

Parent or student disagreement with the face covering requirement is not an acceptable basis for relaxation of the face covering requirement. Students who do not comply with the face covering requirement for reasons not based on a documented medical, social-emotional, or developmental impairment, and notwithstanding the school's provision of a face covering and support

towards compliance, will be required to participate in remote-only instruction as described below.

Breaks from Wearing a Face Covering for All Students

- Students must be allowed to remove their face coverings when eating or drinking.
- For safety reasons, face coverings should never be worn by 3-K and Pre-K students during nap/rest time. For additional information on face coverings for 3-K and Pre-K students, please refer to [Policy Guidance for Daily Routines in Early Childhood Classrooms](#)(Open external link).
- Schools may allow students to remove their face coverings for a brief period of time. These “mask breaks” can be offered throughout the day, at a school’s discretion. The frequency of mask breaks may vary by grade level within a school.
 - Mask breaks should not last for more than five minutes.
 - Mask breaks can only occur when:
 - Students are outdoors or well-ventilated areas.
 - Students can remain at least six feet apart.

Face Coverings on School Buses

All students are required to wear face coverings on the bus, except if approved for a medical exemption. If a student does not have a face covering, the bus driver will distribute one.

Students with a medical exemption will not be required to wear a face covering on the bus, but must maintain at least six feet of physical distance from the driver or other passengers on the bus.

Students without a medical exemption but who need support because they struggle with wearing a face covering due to a documented medical, social-emotional, or developmental impairment:

- Will be reminded to wear the face covering,
- Will be permitted to have mask breaks, as defined above,
- Must remain physically distant from the other passengers.

The attendant must remind students to wear the face covering if they remove it. Face covering breaks may be allowed for brief periods as necessary.

Medical Exemptions

The following sets forth the procedures for parents seeking a face covering exemption for their child for medical reasons only:

- Parent must submit documentation from a doctor or other health care provider specifically documenting the medical condition and why the student's condition makes the student unable to wear or tolerate a face covering.
- The school administration will forward the request to the school's Health Director who will review the request and supporting documentation and may approve the exemption based on such documentation.
- Health Directors with questions about a request or documentation or in need of consultation regarding a request can contact the Office of School Health by emailing dhodge@health.nyc.gov or calling 917-628-5776 or 718-310-2918.
 - Emails with any medical or healthcare documentation must be encrypted.
 - Students must be permitted to attend school while requests are reviewed. During the review, the school should provide additional adherence support and additional breaks, explore the use of alternative PPE, and ensure other risk mitigation strategies such as handwashing and physical distancing are adhered to.
- If the exemption request is approved, schools must notify OPT if the student takes a bus to/from school by contacting Jodi Sammons Chen at jsammons@schools.nyc.gov.
- The school must advise the parent of the outcome of the review.

Students with face covering exemptions must continue to adhere to other health and safety requirements, including hand hygiene and physical distancing requirements. Staff working with students with a face covering exemption will be provided with additional PPE.

Guidance for Supporting Students Who May Struggle with Wearing a Face Covering

Supports for Students with Disabilities

For a student with a significant disability that limits their tolerance for wearing a face covering, schools should provide support as described below. This support should be provided based on the school's experience with the child, knowledge of the child's needs (for example, if the child's disability as documented on the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) is the cause for the child's inability to tolerate a face covering), and considering any additional documentation or information shared by the parent:

- Inform the parent that the expectation is for students to wear face coverings throughout the school day as much as possible, and that their child will receive training/instruction on increasing face covering-wearing tolerance and will be provided with mask breaks.
- Provide a face covering upon entry to the bus or school and instruct the student on how to wear it. If the student removes the face covering, the student should be reminded to wear the face covering. If the student is unable to keep the face covering on after 3 attempts, the student should be given a mask break, which may take place indoors, in a well-ventilated area, while ensuring that other students maintain at least six feet of distance. The mask break can last longer than five minutes at the discretion of the teacher/provider, as appropriate for the student's needs.
- Additional training and guidance have been developed to support schools in working with students who struggle with face covering-wearing for long periods of time.

Supports for Children in Early Childhood Programs (3-K and Pre-K)

As with any behavior changes in early childhood, children and families should be supported in a positive and developmentally appropriate way to change their behavior regarding face coverings in their program environment. Teachers in 3-K and Pre-K classes can incorporate a wide variety of strategies to introduce children and families to this expectation, which may be accomplished over time. This situation should be approached with empathy toward the family and child taking into consideration their cultural

and linguistic needs. Reassure families and children that this is being done to ensure that everyone is safe and healthy. The Division of Early Childhood (DECE) will support teaching teams and families in introducing and reinforcing this expectation.

It is important that this expectation not lead to conflict between or among children and teaching staff. Children who refuse to wear a face covering, are crying, or are dysregulated may be experiencing mental distress. In these cases, teaching staff and families should use positive, nurturing strategies to prevent conflicts over face covering, and encourage the child to consistently use a face covering over time.

Children in early childhood programs should not be isolated, suspended or expelled for not wearing a face covering. For children who need additional support acclimating to the face covering requirement, schools must create and implement a positive behavior intervention plan that supports a child towards consistently wearing a face covering. Please see [this resource](#)([Open external link](#)) for a detailed guide to positive behavior supports and planning regarding face coverings.

The positive behavior intervention plan should include the following:

- A detailed behavior plan whose duration is at least one month in length that includes some milestones for successful integration of the face covering for the child,
- The different positive behavior approaches and strategies that will be taken with the child,
- A communication and support plan with the family,
- Principals may reach out to DECEMHW@schools.nyc.gov for support to develop the positive behavior plan and may also consult the school nurse on the development of the plan.

Children who do not respond to a DECE-approved positive behavior intervention plan will be transitioned to remote learning. To submit a request to transition a 3-K or Pre-K child to fully remote learning for consistently not wearing a face covering, principals should:

- Notify the child’s parent/guardian and the superintendent of the request.
- Send an email to DECEMHW@schools.nyc.gov with the subject “Request for Temporary Transfer to Fully Remote Learning”. The request should include details of implementation of the positive behavior plan, including a description of the interventions that were made and the outcomes of the plan.
- A member of the Division of Early Childhood Education will follow up with the principal to approve the request or ask for additional information. Absent a request from the child’s parent/guardian to change learning models, the child should not be transitioned to fully remote learning until the request is approved.

If this request for temporary removal is granted, the student must receive all instruction remotely. Principals should continue to communicate with families about the process for transitioning back to in-person learning, including strategies that the family can implement at home to support their child in acclimating to wearing face coverings.

Guidance on Supporting Students Who Are Non-Compliant with Wearing Face Coverings in Grades K-12

Parent or student disagreement with the face covering requirement is not an acceptable basis for relaxation of the face covering requirement. Students who do not comply with the face covering requirement for reasons not based on a documented medical, social-emotional, or developmental impairment, and notwithstanding the school’s provision of a face covering and support towards compliance, will be required to participate in remote-only instruction in accordance with the requirements and procedures set forth below. **This does not apply to those students documented social-emotional or developmental impairments who can only minimally tolerate wearing a face covering, or early childhood students in 3-K and pre-K, who may require additional reminders and/or mask breaks in order to increase their ability to tolerate mask-wearing.**

Process for requesting placement of student in remote learning due to non-compliance:

- All instances of non-compliance must be documented in ILOG and the student's parent must be informed.
- Schools may make a request for a student to be temporarily excluded from in-person learning in cases only after three documented instances of refusal to wear a face-covering in five or fewer in-person days and the school has taken the following steps, which must be documented in ILOG:
 - An informal, restorative pedagogical school staff conversation with student to address the behavior and its impact, with an emphasis on the role of face coverings in keeping the school community safe
 - Attempts to provide age appropriate supports including education materials on complying with health and safety protocols and
 - Directing the student to a school counselor and/or social worker to discuss concerns.
 - Holding a remote conference with the student's guardian.
- Notify the Superintendent of the request for temporary remote learning
- Submit the request for temporary remote learning by emailing covid19virus@schools.nyc.gov, with the subject line "Request for Temporary Remote Learning."
- The email must include the ILOG reports and indicate notifications of the request to the Superintendent and parent.
- School must also notify the student's parent that a request to have the student placed on remote learning has been made.
- DSCW will review the request, with partner offices, if necessary, and follow up with the school.
 - All requests will be reviewed and determined as expeditiously as possible. In the interim, the student must remain in school and the school must continue to provide all supports and interventions.
 - The school must immediately advise the parent of the outcome of the review.
 - If the request for removal is granted the student must receive all instruction remotely. If a student who has been removed appears at school, the school must immediately contact the parent and notify them that the child will not be permitted to attend classroom instruction and request that the parent immediately pick up the child.

- The student can only return to school after a meeting is held with parent and student about the need for the student to adhere to wearing a face covering and an agreement is reached that the student will comply with face covering protocols going forward. These removals are not considered disciplinary. Should non-compliance with wearing a face covering persist, the school must consult with DSCW and senior field counsel.
- If the request for removal is denied, the Division of School Climate and Wellness will contact the principal, discuss the rationale for denying the request, and work with the school to develop supports for the student.