



nbps

**New Bedford
Public Schools**

Fall Reopening Overview



**Thomas Anderson
Superintendent**

July 7, 2020



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Dear New Bedford Public Schools Community,

After a spring unlike any before, I write to you about our plans for the fall with the wellbeing of our students and staff firmly in mind. It is sobering to think of the impact of COVID-19 on people in our state, in our nation, and across the world. The social justice issues over the last few months are a reflection of a series of incidents and a long history of inequity. Through the lens of these two issues, we look at how to best open our schools this fall.

Based on weeks of discussion with many stakeholders and collaboration with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), including our members of our Return-to-School Working Group, infectious disease physicians, pediatricians, and other public health experts, a thorough review of the medical literature, and evaluating what works best for our students. We want to start the school year with as many of our students as possible returning to in-person settings safely. If the current positive public health metrics hold, we believe that when we follow critical health requirements, we can safely return to in-person school this fall with plans in place to protect all members of our educational community. The fall reopening guidance comes from a place of deep care and concern, with a focus on translating the public health data and evidence into practical application for school settings. Our goal is to provide a safe school environment that best meet students' academic, social, and emotional needs and supports our staff to engage in-person in the teaching and learning.

In the memo that follows, we are providing an outline based on the initial DESE guidance for school reopening this fall that prioritizes our students and teachers engaging in the teaching and learning process safely in-person.

We are preparing for three scenarios should medical data indicate necessary changes at any given time. The DESE guidance provides a framework for all schools and it further supports our work over the last several weeks as the NBPS team has been collaborating to create plans to address the following scenarios:

- **Onsite:** all students and staff in school buildings - *full return with modifications/restrictions*
- **Blended:** on campus and distance learning combined – *a mix between face-to-face instruction and distance learning*
- **All distance learning:** students and staff would continue in an improved - *fully distance (remote) learning environment.*

Parent/Guardian input remains a critical component of our planning and we will use the information from parent surveys and other feedback that we have received. Please review the DESE full report here: [DESE Return to School Guidance](#).

We know that every concern or topic is not addressed in these initial guidelines, but it is an ongoing process and more guidance will be forthcoming from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in the coming weeks. Below are some key components of the new guidance:

- **Current medical research** supports a safe in-person return to school, with preventive measures in place as infection and transmission rates are lower for children than adults.
- **Preventive measures** include masks/face coverings, physical distancing, hand washing, and cleaning frequently touched surfaces.
- **Schools should maximize physical distance (6-feet)**, however, based upon current medical research, and in conjunction with other preventative measures, 3-feet is the minimum distance required.

Based upon the current medical situation and the trajectory of the disease in Massachusetts, the expectation today is that students will return to full in-person/onsite instruction in September; however, we understand that can change based upon how the medical situation develops. We are in an ongoing process of assessing all classrooms to implement the health and safety measures outlined. Although this work is challenging and may require some adjustments, the well-being of our students and staff is paramount. I know at this time we still have a lot more questions than answers; rest assured we will maintain frequent communication with you during the coming weeks and months. Your support and partnership continue to be appreciated as we work together during these challenging times.

As always, please feel free to contact us with any questions and/or concerns.

Sincerely,



Thomas Anderson

Our New Bedford Public School educators and staff are essential to a safe and successful fall reopening. We recognize that educators have been concerned about the challenges of remote learning and student learning loss during our school closure this past spring. Many educators have been balancing their teaching duties with their own family and personal needs. Some have felt the devastating impact of the virus personally. We also know that our educators are eager to engage students in person again, and that staff members are concerned about the health and safety of students as well as their own.

Based on the combination of health and safety requirements and rigorous protocols, aligned with guidance from state and federal agencies, that we will implement in the fall, we believe the risk of transmission in schools is likely lower than the risks of transmission in many other settings.

To have a successful school year, we will all have to be problem-solvers, flexible and responsive to data, and willing to course-correct as necessary. It is also important to acknowledge that there will be COVID-19 positive cases in schools, and we will have protocols to help determine the appropriate next steps when this happens to keep the school community safe.

The considerations below are not exhaustive but will be used with early operational planning in these areas.

- **Cleaning and supplies:** We will execute frequent cleaning and sanitization of all facilities and especially high-touch surfaces (e.g., doorknobs, handrails). We will provide hand sanitizing at key locations in the building (e.g., entryways, bathrooms, classrooms) and have signage and equipment to enable effective health and safety procedures.
- **Capacity:** We will evaluate classroom capacity on a case-by-case basis, based on the maximum capacity consistent with health and safety guidelines (e.g., distancing), including adequate space for the teachers. For the overall facility, we will plan for traffic, drop off, and pick up (e.g., staggered pickup/dismissal as needed).
- **Ventilation:** We will consider ways to increase facility ventilation (e.g., open windows through fall, perform an HVAC inspection) and ensure that proper maintenance protocols are followed in terms of changing filters, etc.
- **Food:** We will strive to hold breakfast and/or lunch in classrooms, instead of the cafeteria or common areas. If serving food in the cafeteria, we will develop staggered schedules that minimize mixing of cohorts and enforce physical distancing protocols, and support compliance with health and safety. For students continuing with remote learning, we will provide school meals as needed for days they are not in the school building.

Staff, in all roles, who are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 will want to consult with their health care providers about whether and under what circumstances a return to in-person school settings would be medically inadvisable. We will work with our staff on critical reopening issues, including those who are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

Masks/face coverings: As the primary route of transmission for COVID-19 is respiratory, masks or face coverings are among the most critical components of risk reduction. Masks/face coverings protect the general public against COVID-19 infection, with a recent retrospective study estimating near 80% effectiveness in reducing COVID-19 transmission, especially when worn prior to symptom onset. At this time, our initial requirements and related guidance are as follows:

- **Students in grade 2 and above are required to wear a mask/face covering that covers their nose and mouth.** Students in kindergarten and grade 1 will be encouraged to wear a mask/face covering. Face shields may be an option for those students with medical, behavioral, or other challenges who are unable to wear masks/face coverings. Transparent masks may be the best option for both teachers and students in classes for deaf and hard of hearing students. They may also be useful for teachers and younger students who rely on visual / facial cues.
- **All adults, including educators and staff, are required to wear masks/face coverings.**
- **Exceptions to mask/face covering requirements** will be made for those for whom it is not possible due to medical conditions, disability impact, or other health or safety factors.
- **Mask breaks will occur** throughout the day. Breaks will occur when students can be six feet apart and ideally outside or at least with the windows open. Further guidance on mask breaks including duration and frequency will be forthcoming, as well as more information about properly removing and putting on masks.
- **Masks/face coverings will be provided by the student/family.** Reusable masks/face coverings provided by families should be washed by families daily. Families experiencing financial hardship and unable to afford masks/face coverings should contact their school principal.
- **Masks/face coverings are required to be worn by everyone on the bus during school bus transportation.**

Physical distancing: Physical distancing is required as it is another important practice that helps mitigate transmission of the virus.

Our initial requirements and related guidance for physical distancing are as follows:

- **Distancing requirements:** As reviewed and advised by the Massachusetts COVID-19 Command Center Medical Advisory Group, NBPS will aim for a minimum physical distance of 3-feet, however physical distance of 6-feet will be implemented whenever feasible. We will seek to maximize physical distance among individuals within our physical and operational constraints.
- **Classroom and facility configuration:** To the extent possible, desks will be spaced no closer than 3-feet apart (seat to seat and facing the same direction).
- **Alternative spaces in the school** (e.g., cafeteria, library, and auditorium): all spaces are being assessed to allow maximum flexibility to increase available space for instruction.

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- **Additional safety precautions are required for school nurses and/or any staff supporting students with disabilities in close proximity, when distance is not possible:** These precautions will include eye protection (e.g., face shield or goggles) and a mask/face covering. Precautions may also include gloves and disposable gowns or washable outer layer of clothing depending on duration of contact and especially if the individual may come into close contact with bodily fluids.

Student groups: To the extent feasible, elementary schools will aim to keep students in the same group throughout the day. Middle and high schools are encouraged to minimize mixing student groups to the extent possible.

Our initial requirements and related guidance are as follows:

- **Cohorts:** Schools should divide students into small groups that remain with each other throughout the day, with smaller cohort sizes preferred. Schools will look for ways to isolate cohorts of students and prevent inter-group contact to the extent feasible.

Screening upon entry: It is critical that each morning families and caregivers serve as the primary screening mechanism for COVID-19 symptoms. We will provide a universal checklist of symptoms and other information to families in their primary language to support them in conducting this symptom check and families should not send children to school if they exhibit COVID-19 symptoms.

- **Screening procedures are not required at the point of entry to the school.** However, school staff (as well as bus drivers) should observe students throughout the day and refer students who may be symptomatic to the school healthcare point of contact.
- **Temperature checks are not recommended** as screening for all students due to the high likelihood of potential false positive and false negative results.

Hand hygiene - Handwashing and hand sanitizing: Handwashing removes pathogens from the surface of the hands. Handwashing with soap and water is the best option, however alcohol-based hand sanitizer (at least 60 percent ethanol or at least 70 percent isopropanol) will be utilized when handwashing is not available. As has always been the case, handwashing should be used whenever hands are visibly soiled and after using the bathroom.

Our initial requirements and related guidance are as follows:

- **Students and staff are required to exercise hand hygiene** (handwashing or sanitizing) upon arrival to school, before eating, before putting on and taking off masks, and before dismissal.
- **Handwashing:** When handwashing, individuals should use soap and water to wash all surfaces of their hands for at least 20 seconds, wait for visible lather, rinse thoroughly, and dry with an individual disposable towel.

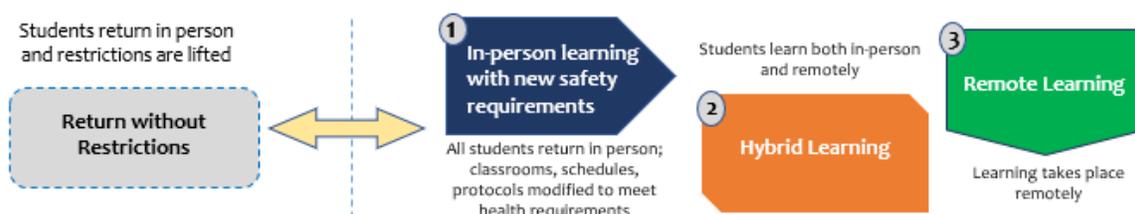
- **Hand sanitizing:** If handwashing is not feasible, hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent ethanol or at least 70 percent isopropanol content can be used. Hand sanitizer should be applied to all surfaces of the hands and in sufficient quantity that it takes 20 seconds of rubbing hands together for the sanitizer to dry. Hand sanitizer should be placed at key locations (e.g., building entrances, cafeteria, classrooms).

COVID-19 related isolation space: In order to minimize transmission of COVID-19, our schools will ensure we have an isolated space available for students displaying COVID-19 symptoms.

Our initial requirements and related guidance are as follows:

- **We are required to designate an isolation space that is separate from the nurse’s office.** A student who shows COVID-19 symptoms during the school day will be moved to the specific room pre-designated for medical-related isolation until they can be picked up by a family member.

Continuum of Fall reopening models



Components of district/school fall reopening plans

Below is an outline of the three scenarios New Bedford Public Schools will plan for to reopen safely in the fall (which includes serving special student populations across each of these models).

- 1) in-person learning with new safety requirements
- 2) a hybrid of in-person and remote learning
- 3) remote learning

In-person learning with new safety requirements aligned with DESE requirements:

- **Learning time:** NBPS will plan for an in-person return to school five days per week if feasible.
- **Utilizing alternative school spaces:** NBPS will consider creating flexible spaces by using libraries, cafeterias, auditoriums, and other appropriate available spaces to conduct additional classrooms and/or enable additional distancing while adhering to the health and safety guidelines.
- **Utilizing external facility spaces:** We have been engaging community partners to discuss the possibilities of accessing spaces outside the school building such as community centers to

have additional classrooms to accommodate more students, reduce class size, and/or enable additional distancing while adhering to the health and safety guidelines.

- **Staffing alternatives to consider for reducing class sizes:** If necessary all teachers, including specialists and other educators (e.g., instructional coaches, reading specialists, and others) who have appropriate certifications may be enlisted to support instructional needs in the classroom to reduce class sizes.
- **Reducing the mixing of student groups:** When in classrooms, all students will have assigned seating. At the elementary school level, students will be restricted to their grade level class to the greatest extent possible. At the middle school level, students will remain with their cohort throughout the day to the extent feasible.

High schools will also consider ways to cohort or cluster students, though this is more challenging at the high school level:

- **Placing students in cohorts.** When grouping students into cohorts, NBPS will consider ways to keep families/siblings together (e.g., grouping students alphabetically, while recognizing that some siblings may have different last names).
- **Limiting travel within a school.** High schools may try to group students into clusters in the school (a “school within a school”) to try to reduce interactions with other groups when students move to their next class.

Hybrid Learning Models:

When planning for a hybrid learning model, NBPS will use a cohort model that may isolate two distinct cohorts of students who attend school in-person on either different weeks, different days of the week, or half days each day. As an example, one group would attend school in-person from Monday – Friday of Week 1, while the other learns at home remotely. In Week 2, Group 2 would attend in-person school and Group 1 would engage in distance learning at home.

Additional recommendations for hybrid models include:

- **High-needs students will be prioritized for full-time in-person learning when feasible.** That is, even if most students are not in school each day, NBPS will consider setting up small programs that would run daily for one or more groups of high-needs students, including students with disabilities and English learners who are most in need of in-person services.
- **Students who do not have internet and/or computer access at home** should come into the school and/or to a local partner or community organization, with appropriate supervision, to complete their remote learning school days.

Our Distance Learning Plan is a fluid process and is continuously enhanced as needs arise. It is not individualized to each student or teacher, but rather it is a blueprint for all New Bedford Public

Schools. This plan considers that technology access varies for our students and we understand that students with diverse needs may require differentiated instructional approaches. The distance learning process will change the nature of how we engage with one another as technology is even more critical.

Full Distance Learning focuses on:

- **Providing opportunities** for students to demonstrate learning while not in the traditional classroom setting receiving direct instruction from a teacher.
- **Engaging students** with synchronous and asynchronous lessons and materials, including academic packets, books, online programs, video lessons.
- **Students spend at least four to five hours per day** engaged in distance learning. Structured daily routines will be in place.
- **The “school day”** will begin and end at the same time every day and students, with breaks for lunch and recess. Throughout the day, students will be doing teacher directed work as well as some self-guided work.

Planning for training:

- **Time will be built into the fall calendar for training sessions** for staff, students, and families. Training will include health and safety topics (such as the use of safety supplies/PPE, visual screening for symptoms, and health and hygiene practices) and educational topics (such as strengthening distance learning).
- **Special education:** NBPS will ensure additional training time for educators who will provide direct physical support to students with disabilities on the use of the additional protective supplies they will need, including disposable gowns, face shields, etc.

Initial Fall Special Education Guidance

Special education services will be provided differently during the 2020-2021 school year as compared to previous years. As stated in the U.S. Department of Education’s March 21, 2020 Supplemental Fact sheet, *“School districts must provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students.”* The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) will be providing further guidance to support our special education.

Staffing, Specialized Safety Supplies/PPE and Training

We will follow the directions for staffing, specialized safety supplies/PPE and training described in DESE’s Guidance on Summer 2020 Special Education Services as we prepare for this fall.

Considerations for Specific Populations of Students

Special considerations will be given for students with high risk medical conditions, students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and preschool age students. Additional directions can be found in DESE's Guidance on Summer 2020 Special Education Services.

Considerations for Preschool-Age Students

Preschool-age students with disabilities are particularly in need of in-person services so that they can develop the socialization, motor, and communication skills that are vitally important at this age. We will prioritize in-person instruction for our pre-kindergarten students and will be prepared to adjust to distance learning services if necessary.

Delivery of IEP Services

Students will receive all services pursuant to their IEPs through in-person or remote instruction, with an emphasis on providing in-person instruction to this particularly vulnerable population of students whenever possible. In particular, DESE recommends that we make additional provisions to provide as much in-person instruction as possible for students with moderate to severe disabilities. When providing remote services, we continue to follow the directions provided in DESE's Coronavirus/COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions for Schools and Districts Regarding Special Education (Updated May 15, 2020).

Monitoring Student Progress

Schools and districts will continue to issue Progress Reports at least as often as report cards or progress reports are provided for students without disabilities. Educators and service providers will collect data, whether in-person or remotely, and use the data to monitor each student's progress and develop Progress Reports.

Transition Services

Although in-person participation in community-based programs and inclusive concurrent enrollment programs at institutions of higher education may be limited at this time, we will make efforts to develop plans collaboratively with community-based providers, colleges, parents/guardians, and students so that students can access as much programming as possible.

Initial Evaluations, Reevaluations, and IEP Team Meetings

We will continue to follow the directions on meeting special education timelines as described in DESE's Implementation of Special Education Timelines During the COVID-19 State of Emergency.