

Portage Area School District

Reopening of School for the 2020-2021 School Year

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated Thursday, July 28, 2020

As the days of summer slowly wind down, thoughts of a new school year are in the minds of students, parents, staff, and community members. COVID-19 has impacted everyone's life in unimaginable ways. Education has been no exception. Since March, school officials have been diligently working to prepare for the start of the new school year using the latest guidance from the State and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. As part of this process, the school district has developed a Health and Safety Plan to address concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic. This plan is a living document, meaning it changes on a daily basis as new information becomes available. While the school district is doing everything possible to minimize the risk of COVID-19, no amount of action can guarantee someone will not be infected with COVID-19.

What is the Health and Safety Plan?

As part of the phased reopening of Pennsylvania, the Portage Area School District is mandated to develop a Health and Safety Plan for the reopening of the 20-21 school year as guidelines for all instructional and non-instructional activities. This plan includes actions the district will take to address 1) cleaning, sanitizing, disinfecting, and ventilation, 2) social distancing and other protocols, 3) monitoring student and staff health, and 4) other considerations for students and staff. Given the dynamic nature of this pandemic, this plan will be flexible and revised to adapt to changing conditions.

Where can I find the school district's Health and Safety Plan?

The latest board approved plan can be found at the school district's web site: www.portageareasd.org

Can the school district ensure students and staff will be protected from COVID-19?

No. All community members must be mindful that as long as COVID-19 remains a medical concern, there are no strategies that can completely eliminate transmission risk within a school population. The goal of the school district's Health and Safety Plan is to lower the risk to prevent the spread of COVID-19 while continuing school activities. However, there will be some risk to all students and staff in spite of the school district's best efforts.

Will there be school?

Yes. The school district is doing everything possible for students to return to traditional classrooms on August 27th. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be some modifications and adaptations to the daily schedule. However, in the event school buildings are forced to be closed, student education will transition to an on-line learning environment.

Why is it important to open schools for In-Person instruction?

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/prepare-safe-return.html>

According to the CDC, while opening schools – like opening any building or facility—does pose a risk for the spread of COVID-19, there are many reasons why opening schools in the fall of 2020 for in-person instruction is important.

Schools play a critical role in the wellbeing of communities. Schools are a fundamental part of the infrastructure of communities. Schools provide safe and supportive environments, structure, and routines for children, as well as other needed support services to children and families. Schools play a vital role in the economic health of communities by employing teachers and other staff and helping parents, guardians, and caregivers work.

Schools provide critical instruction and academic support that benefit students and communities in both the short- and long-term. The main role and priorities of K-12 educational institutions are to provide age-appropriate instruction and support students' academic development. Reopening schools will provide in-person instruction for students, facilitate increased communication between teachers and students, and provide students with critical academic services, including school-based tutoring, special education, and other specialized learning supports.

Studies show that students have experienced learning loss during the period of school closure and summer months. In-person instruction for students has advantages over virtual learning, particularly when virtual learning was not the planned format for instruction, and schools may not have the resources or capability to transition fully to virtual learning. In-person classroom instruction has the added benefit for many students of interpersonal interaction between the student and the teacher and the student and peers. Teachers are able to more actively participate in student learning, provide feedback as students encounter challenges, and promote active learning among students.

In-person instruction may be particularly beneficial for students with additional learning needs. Children with disabilities may not have access through virtual means to the specialized instruction, related services or additional supports required by their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or 504 Plans. Students may also not have access through virtual means to quality English Language Learning (ELL).

When schools are closed to in-person instruction, disparities in educational outcomes could become wider, as some families may not have capacity to fully participate in distance learning (e.g., computer and internet access issues, lack of parent, guardian, or caregiver support because of work schedules) and may rely on school-based services that support their child's academic success. The persistent achievement gaps that already existed prior to COVID-19 closures, such as disparities across income levels and racial and ethnic groups, could worsen and cause long-term effects on children's educational outcomes, health, and the economic wellbeing of families and communities.^{[35], [35]} While concern over higher rates of COVID-19 among certain racial/ethnic groups may amplify consideration of closing a school that educates primarily racial minority students, there should also be consideration that these may also be the schools most heavily relied upon for students to receive other services and support, like nutrition and support services.

Is the school district considering modifying the schedule to include some traditional schooling along with some on-line education?

No. While that is certainly a possibility that some school districts are considering, at this time, the Portage Area School District is not considering any type of alternative day/week schedule where students attend school some days and do on-line learning other days.

Will school start and end at the same time as in previous years?

No. The district will push back student arrival times to allow temperature screening to occur at each bus stop before a student boards the bus or enters the buildings. To allow time for this screening to occur, the school district is tentatively planning for the high school to begin classes at 8:10 and the elementary at 9:00. The exact time is subject to change during the first week of school to adjust for the time actually necessary to conduct the screenings. To make up for lost instructional time in the morning, the high school day will end at 3:00 followed by the elementary school at 3:30.

Is it possible the school district will transition to on-line learning at some point this school year?

Yes. If transmission rates of COVID-19 in the school community increase to a point the school district no longer feels capable of providing a safe and healthy environment, students and staff will transition to an on-line learning environment. This decision will rely on input from the Governor, PA Department of Health (DOH) and the County and Municipal Health Department (CMDH).

Is the school district taking steps to ensure the safety of students using school district transportation?

Yes. While recommendations call for school districts to limit the number of students on school buses to one student per seat and every other row, it is not possible for the Portage Area School District to follow that recommendation. Doing so would require each bus to make four runs to transport students, or, the transportation contractor would need to add 27 additional buses to its fleet. Neither of these options is practical.

Instead, the school district will require all students using district-provided transportation to undergo a temperature screening before boarding the bus. Students with temperatures in excess of 100.4 will not be permitted on the bus. Students will be seated from the back of the bus to the front with no more than two students per seat. Students from the same household will be placed in the same seat when possible. Students will also be required to wear a face covering while on the bus.

Each bus will be disinfected prior to running each route in both the mornings and afternoons.

Do I have to be at the bus stop with my elementary-aged child in the morning?

Yes. District guidelines require a parent/guardian be present at the bus stop for all elementary students in Grade 3 and below. The school district is strongly recommending parents of elementary-aged children have an adult present with their child for morning pickups. One of the biggest fears of the school district is a student who shows sign of a fever at a bus stop. The district doesn't want a student left alone at the bus stop but also doesn't want to potentially infect an entire bus load of students. The bus can't wait until someone can come for the child. All parents are encouraged to have someone available for their children in the event of illness at the bus stop and/or during the school day.

Can I transport my child to school instead of using district provided transportation?

Yes. The district will be implementing new traffic patterns to accommodate the additional number of cars we expect to see. At the high school, students drop off will be in the lower parking lot; at the elementary school, cars will be directed behind the building. At both locations, students' temperatures will be taken before they exit the vehicle.

What if my child has a fever or other symptoms of illness in the morning?

The first step in protecting the health and safety of students and staff of the Portage Area School District occurs each morning within the home. Everyone should self-monitor their own health for signs of illness. The most common signs and symptoms include fever greater than 100.4, cough, shortness of breath, headaches, fatigue, loss/altered sense of taste or smell, diarrhea, and runny nose/congestion. In the event a student or staff member shows signs or symptoms of illness, please stay home and/or seek medical attention. Normal attendance requirements will remain in effect.

With the later start time for students, will the school district provide working parents a safe environment for their children before the school day starts?

Yes. The school district expects to open the doors for elementary students at 7:45 where they will be able to sit in the auditorium while maintaining social distance until the actual start of the school day at 9:00. While not ideal, the school district recognizes the difficulty some parents may experience each morning.

Will the school district offer an after-school program this year?

No. At this time, the school district is no longer able to partner with Respective Solutions in offering an after-school program for elementary age students. With social distancing guidelines and concerns about grouping multiple-aged students in one place, the district is suspending this program until further notice.

What steps are in place to maintain social distancing?

Socialization is part of every child's education. Learning to interact with fellow students and staff is essential for the success of Portage Area students. Given the social distancing guidelines associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, students ability to socialize will be impacted. Whenever possible, the school district will prevent students coming into contact with each other. While the goal is to maintain six-foot distance between individuals, physical and financial concerns may place students closer. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a three-foot distance is associated with large reductions in infection via droplet spread of cough and sneezes. In those instances, where maintaining six-foot social distancing is unrealistic, students may be asked to practice enhanced personal hygiene and wear masks.

The school district is currently constructing "desk shields" to better isolate students in the classroom. Made of corrugated plastic, these L-shaped shields with clear "windows" along with desk spacing in the classroom will allow students to remove face coverings while seated in the classroom. Students may wear a face covering in addition to the desk shield if they so desire. Students who move from room to room will be issued a personal "desk shield" to use throughout the day. These personal desk shields may be appropriately personalized by the student. At the end of each day, these shields will be returned to the students' homeroom. Students in classrooms for an entire day will be seated at the same desk each

day, thereby using the same desk shield. All desk shields will be disinfected by the custodial staff before the start of the next day. Students will be required to use a face covering when moving through public areas or when working in close proximity of other students/staff.

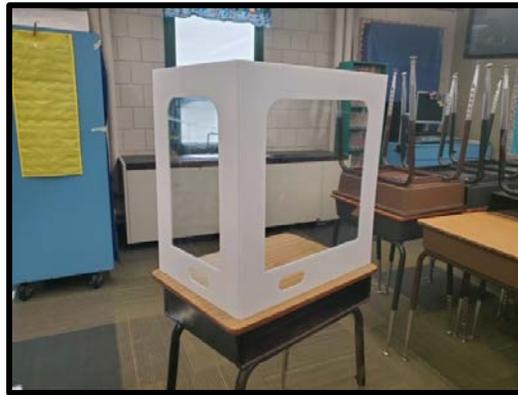


Figure 1 - ES Desk Shield Proto-type

The school district has instituted procedures for students/staff traversing the hallways and stairwells with social distancing in mind. The changing of classes will be modified to reduce student interactions as much as possible. As a safety precaution, students and staff will be required to wear face masks when moving from room to room.

Will students and staff be required to wear face coverings at school?

On July 1st, Governor Wolf and the Pennsylvania Department of Health Dr. Levine ordered mandating universal face coverings in public. This order applies to students and staff within school buildings. Details about this order can be found at: <https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/gov-wolf-sec-of-health-signs-expanded-mask-wearing-order/> The school district will abide by the regulations as set forth in this order.

Any student or staff member who cannot wear a mask or face shield due to a medical condition, including those with respiratory issues that impede breathing, a mental health condition, or disability, and students who would be unable to remove a mask without assistance are not required to wear face coverings. Individuals who are communicating or seeking to communicate with someone who is hearing impaired or who has another disability, where the ability to see the mouth is essential to communication, are not required to wear a mask; however, individuals should consider using another type of face covering such as a plastic face shield.

Will the school district provide students and staff with face coverings?

As the use of face coverings has been mandated in public for some time, the school district will not be providing face coverings to students or staff except in emergencies. The school district would prefer students and staff select a face covering they are comfortable wearing. Face coverings bearing inappropriate slogans, graphics, or pictures are to be avoided.

Are options available if I'm not comfortable sending my child to school?

Yes. The school district will offer several different on-line learning opportunities for students. Parents do not have to enroll their children in a charter cyber school for health and safety concerns to access an on-line learning environment. The school district will be using district developed on-line courses as well as some provided by the Intermediate Unit. Students opting for one of these alternatives can remain a "Mustang." More information is available by contacting the appropriate building principal.

If my child starts the school year in an on-line program, can they switch to traditional school at a later time?

Yes. The school district recommends any change occur at natural breaks in the school year, i.e. marking periods or after major holiday breaks.

Will the district provide students with an electronic device to access on-line coursework?

Yes. One bright spot of the COVID-19 pandemic will be the district's move to a 1:1 technology initiative with all students receiving a laptop computer. Using grant money, the district has ordered Chromebook laptops for each elementary student and a Windows-based laptop for each high school student. With consistency in the technology the students are using, students/staff can focus more on education and less on technology issues students might experience. The school district will utilize these devices both in the traditional classroom, and, a virtual setting if stay at home orders are put in place again. Policies and procedures are being developed for the 1:1 initiative.

Will the school district provide Internet access to students at home?

No. Internet access will be the responsibility of parents/guardians. Parents are encouraged to investigate "Internet Essentials from Comcast" which provides affordable internet for eligible households. Information on this program is available at <https://www.internetessentials.com/>

What learning platform will the school district use if forced to conduct on-line learning?

The district will rely on Microsoft TEAMS as part of instruction in both the traditional classroom and in an on-line learning environment in the event education must transition to a virtual setting. All students have access to Microsoft TEAMS and Office 365 software.

Will there be extra-curricular activities?

Yes. At this time, student athletes are permitted to participate in conditioning, practices and games. Athletes must wear a face covering, such as a mask, unless they fall under an exception listed in Section 3 of the Governor and Dept of Health July 1st order. Coaches and athletes must wear face coverings unless they are outdoors and can consistently maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet. Athletes are not required to wear face coverings while actively engaged in workouts and competition that prevent the wearing of face coverings, but must wear face coverings when on the sidelines, in the dugout, etc. and anytime 6 feet of social distancing is not possible. At this time, the issue of spectators is not known. Additional guidance for school districts from PDE and the PIAA is expected in mid-August.

What if my child or a staff member shows symptoms of COVID-19 during the school day?

Students and staff exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 during school hours should immediately put on a mask and report to the nurse's office. The nurse will assess the student/teacher, including a

temperature check and questions about any pre-existing conditions that may explain the symptoms. As necessary, the nurse will contact a parent/guardian to arrange for student transportation off-site. Individuals with temperatures above 100.4 will be required to leave the building regardless of the cause. Until parent/guardian personal transportation arrives, the student will be placed in quarantine. Students or staff members may return to school when medical clearance is granted

Where can I get tested for COVID-19

Through the work of a number of entities, testing is accessible for Pennsylvanians. As entities such as Rite Aid, CVS, Patient First and Walmart offer testing regardless of symptoms, more Pennsylvanians can get tested close to home.

While most COVID-19 tests are performed using a nasopharyngeal (NP) swab, many of the publicly accessible sites are using anterior nasal or nasal swabs that are less invasive. Where an NP swab is inserted deep enough to contact the nasopharynx at the back of the nasal cavity administered by a medical professional, a nasal swab is only inserted roughly 0.5 inches inside the nostril and can be self-administered. Both of these collection methods can be a bit uncomfortable, but neither should be painful.

Additional information on symptoms and testing can be found at:

<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Symptoms-Testing.aspx>

What if someone in my household gets COVID-19? Can my child go to school?

Students and staff exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 or living in a household with someone exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 should stay at home at least ten (10) days from the first sign of symptoms **AND** until no signs of fever without medication are present for at least three (3) days unless medically cleared otherwise. During periods of quarantine or isolation, students are expected to continue their education through the district's on-line learning portal.

Will I be notified if one of my child's classmates is diagnosed with COVID-19?

DOH or county and municipal health departments (CMHDs) staff will notify the school district immediately upon learning that a person with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 was present at the school or a school event while infectious. DOH or CMHD staff will assist the school with risk assessment, isolation and quarantine recommendations, and other infection control recommendations. Schools should take every measure to maintain the confidentiality of the affected individual.

It is the responsibility of DOH or CMHD staff to contact a student or staff person with COVID-19, inform close contacts of their possible exposure, and give instructions to those involved, including siblings and other household members, regarding self-quarantine and exclusions. The individual who tested positive will not be identified in communications from DOH or the CMHD to the school community at large but may need to be selectively identified for contact tracing by the DOH or CMHD staff.

The school district will contact local DOH or CMHD staff before acting in response to a known or suspected communicable disease. Call DOH at 1-877-PA Health (1-877-724-3258); a representative is on-call 24 hours a day. Pre-K to 12 schools located in a jurisdiction with a CMHD should call the CMHD. DOH and CMHDs will provide guidance to schools regarding disease information,

appropriate letters and communications, identification of high-risk individuals, appropriate action and treatment, and on-going support and assistance.

- If the person is present on school property when DOH or CMHD staff notify the school of the positive case information, the person should immediately, but discreetly, be taken to the COVID-19 related isolation space for pick up (if student) or asked to return home (if staff).
- Plan for transportation of sick individuals to their homes.
- Contact DOH or the CMHD for further guidance if a parent/guardian/caregiver notifies the school of potential exposure by a student, staff member, or school visitor.
- The entire building does not need to be evacuated.
- Wait at least 24 hours before cleaning and disinfecting. If not feasible, wait as long as possible. If seven days have passed since the sick individual was in the affected area, cleaning is not needed.
- Close off areas used by the sick person and do not use again before cleaning and disinfecting. Follow [CDC Guidance on Cleaning and Disinfecting](#) protocols.
- Create a communication system to self-report symptoms and for notifying staff and families of exposures and closures. Schools should, however, take every measure to maintain the confidentiality of the affected individual.

Contact Tracing

Robust surveillance, case investigation, contact tracing and isolation of positive cases or quarantine of close contacts can slow and stop the transmission of COVID-19. Pennsylvania's public health infrastructure of epidemiologists, community health nurses, and CMHD staff are the backbone of this work. More information on contact tracing and case investigation can be found in [DOH'S Contact Tracing Plan](#).

DOH and its CMHD partners have established procedures for timely communication with school districts when there is a probable or positive COVID-19 case. Local DOH staff or the CMHD will notify the school district and PDE immediately upon learning that someone who tested positive for COVID-19 was present at the school or school event while infectious. DOH or CMHD staff will assist the school district with risk assessment, isolation and quarantine recommendations, and other infection control recommendations.

DOH or CMHD staff will assist the school district with contact tracing and may request information regarding potential close school contacts from school nurses/health staff. Decisions to track additional health information (i.e., quarantine timeframes) will be made at the local school level.

Is the school district taking extra steps in cleaning and disinfecting the school?

Ensuring buildings and grounds are cleaned, sanitized and disinfected are a priority of the Portage Area School District. Routine cleaning and disinfecting are key to maintaining a safe environment for students and staff. Special equipment and cleaning supplies have been purchased to combat the spread of COVID-19 for the upcoming school year. Routines are in place to clean, sanitize and disinfect frequently used items and high-traffic areas throughout the day to help prevent the spread of the virus. Shared materials/resources and communal areas will be cleaned, sanitized, and disinfected between uses. Movement within the buildings will be reduced as much as possible.

Has the school district adjusted graduation requirements due to COVID-19?

Yes. In order to protect students, the school district will suspend the community service hour requirement for the 20-21 school year. Additionally, the independent reading requirement will also be suspended for the 20-21 school year given students' access to library resources.

Will students be able to use the library and check out books?

Unknown. The school district is currently investigating the ramifications of students/staff handling library materials. The American Library Association has recommended libraries limit access to electronic resources or "curbside" service. In the event materials are able to be distributed, the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) recommends returned materials undergo a minimum 3-day quarantine as the most effective way to disinfect them after handling by staff and patrons.

For those with concerns about the transmission of COVID-19 through textbooks or other printed materials, NEDCC indicates the use of liquid disinfectants and powdered cleaners is damaging to paper materials and is not recommended. UV ray exposure as a means of sterilization is also not recommended. Placing materials in a microwave oven is not recommended and may result in fire. Additionally, the use of fogging disinfectants of any kind in spaces with collections is not recommended.

If the school district is forced to close buildings, how will the district handle components of a student's IEP plan?

The district is currently working on contingency plans for IEP for on-line education.

Will students be able to attend Admiral Peary Vocational Technical School?

Yes. In the event school buildings are closed by the State, APVTS will provide on-line instruction for our vocational students.

Will students participate in special classes such as music, gym, art, family consumer science, and technology education?

Yes. The school district will clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces between classes. Students and staff will be required to handwash upon entering and exiting those areas. Hand sanitizer will also be available.

How will the district serve meals to students?

A particularly vulnerable area for the spread of the virus is in the cafeteria settings. Grab-n-Go breakfast will be served to all students in homerooms each morning. The school district will be instituting additional lunch periods and modifying seating to maintain as large of space between students as possible. As a safety precaution, students and staff will be required to wear face masks while in the serving line.

Will there be procedures in place to limit the number of visitors to the school buildings?

To protect students and staff, visitors and volunteers to the buildings will be on an "only as-necessary" basis with protocols in place. Whenever possible, the school district will rely on phone calls, e-mail, or videoconferencing to conduct business with visitors. In those instances where a face-to-face meeting must occur, the school district will monitor individuals for signs of illness prior to entry into the building. This will include a temperature scan. Those individuals with temperatures in excess of 100.4 or showing

other signs of illness will be denied entry. As a safety precaution, all visitors will be required to wear a face mask while in the buildings

Will students and staff have the ability to regularly wash hands?

According to the CDC, the best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to the COVID-19 virus. After use of a face covering, the next best preventive measure is hand washing with soap and water for at least twenty (20) seconds after having been in a public place or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing. It is especially important to wash hands in school:

- Before eating or preparing food
- Before touching the face
- After using the restroom
- After leaving a public space
- After blowing nose, coughing, or sneezing
- After handling a cloth face mask

If soap and water are not readily available, use of a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol is recommended. Hand sanitizer dispensers are available in all classrooms and common areas within the buildings.

What if a student or staff member visits an area where there are high amounts of COVID-19 cases?

According to the PA Department of Health, if you have traveled, or plan to travel, to an area where there are high amounts of COVID-19 cases, it is recommended that you stay at home for 14 days upon return to Pennsylvania. If you travel to one of the states identified by the PA Department of Health as experiencing high amounts of COVID-19, it is recommended that you quarantine for 14 days upon return.

The current list of identified states can be found at:

<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Travelers.aspx> This list as well as additional travel information is updated on a regular basis.

While awaiting additional guidance as this order relates to students and staff from the PA Department of Health and PA Department of Education, for the safety of all students and staff, the school district recommends anyone traveling to these areas quarantine for 14 days OR seek medical clearance before attending school. This clearance could be a physician's note or negative COVID-19 test result.

Can elements of the school district's Health and Safety Plan change?

Yes. This plan is a living document, meaning it changes on a daily basis as new information becomes available. Please visit www.portageareasd.org for the latest draft of the plan and responses to FAQ.

What if I have a question on the reopening of school?

Please feel free to share your question by emailing superintendent Eric Zelanko at supt@mustangmail.org or completing the [Microsoft Form](#) found on the district's web site.